Leveraging Brokers and Social Learning to Support Leadership Learning in a Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent responses affected students of all ages academically, mentally, and emotionally. As leadership educators, we felt compelled to respond by adjusting our programming and pedagogy for a post-pandemic era. This study aimed to explore the experiences of the thirty college of agricultural science students who engaged in an intentional community of practice about leadership. We used a case study approach and a social learning theory to specifically investigate how a social learning environment and the use of brokers contributed to student leadership trajectories. We found that student leadership trajectories shifted because of engaging in a caring community with the aid of candid and connected brokers. A small class size, multiple connections with an industry professional, and a course centered on student voice resulted in new confidence and plans to pursue future leadership opportunities.

Keywords: leadership learning, post-pandemic, social learning theory, brokering

In early 2020, the world of higher education changed dramatically with the introduction of COVID-19 and the subsequent global pandemic. Higher education institutions are educating the first waves of students who experienced major learning disruptions in high school. The effects of the pandemic, including quarantine and isolation requirements, have promoted social isolation, loneliness, and a lack of motivation in college students (Birmingham et al., 2023; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021). Post-pandemic students struggle with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide (Richtel & Flanagan, 2022), especially among black, female, and sexual minority students (Fruehwirth et al., 2021; NSSE, 2021).

When we, as faculty in higher education, explore the impacts of COVID-19 and COVID-19 restrictions, it does not appear very encouraging and can feel overwhelming. However, as faculty, we are tasked with modifying our content and courses in a way that ensures relevance and continues to meet student needs. The role of relationships is critical, and Birmingham et al. (2023) highlighted the substantial evidence supporting the role of social support and social networks in coping with stress, decreasing adverse mental health, and adjusting to future stress. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2021) called explicitly for interventions by colleges and universities that are targeted to improve mental health, encourage student ability to focus, foster social connections, alleviate academic distress, and help students overcome missed experiences and opportunities.

As leadership educators within a college of agricultural sciences, it is not our job to solve the aforementioned ills plaguing young people today. However, we would only be doing our students and programs justice if we addressed how our students have changed because of the pandemic. Leadership development programs are uniquely positioned

to help students thrive in college, especially in the early years of their college experience (Stephens & Beatty, 2015). Extant research highlights how leadership education can offer a critical context from which postsecondary students can improve their leadership skills (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Posner, 2009; Rosch & Stephens, 2017) leadership capacity (Keating et al., 2014) and help students "develop resilience, become more adaptable, and prepare them for a world in which they will be expected to be agile and innovative" (Deal & Yarborough, 2020, p. 4).

Colleges of agriculture are uniquely positioned to look at our work through fresh eyes, considering that post-pandemic students have changed and have unique needs (Richtel & Flanagan, 2022). With this in mind, we developed a unique leadership learning experience to support mental health, foster growth in an academically low-stakes environment, introduce students to college-wide opportunities, and connect students with agriculture industry professionals. This case study explored the experiences of students who engaged in a newly developed leadership program that was crafted with post-pandemic students in mind.

The Leadership Launch Course

To foster engagement in leadership education within the College of Agricultural Sciences as Oregon State University and build a community of belonging, we developed a low-stakes, foundational, two-credit course titled Leadership Launch, explicitly designed for freshman and transfer students. Our intention was to introduce students to leadership concepts, create a pipeline for continued leadership education, connect them with our college, introduce them to agriculture industry professionals, encourage belonging, and enhance the retention and support of diverse learners. We adopted a teaching approach and pedagogy that encouraged interaction and connection by incorporating icebreakers, personal check-ins, name tents, experiential learning application activities, reflective questions, small- and whole-group discussions, and refreshments.

We utilized the Kouzes and Posner Student Leadership Challenge (2018) and companion student workbook as course texts as they center leadership behaviors and actions instead of more generalized concepts or theories (Rosch & Jenkins, 2020). This text provided an introductory, application-based, and relevant connection for students as they began exploring leadership. Course assignments were reflective, application-based, metacognitive, and intended to support a relationship-oriented and inclusive community. Throughout the 10-week term, students participated in five two-hour workshops centered around the five practices and ten commitments from The Student Leadership Challenge (Kouzes & Posner, 2018).

Multiple and varied interactions between students and industry professionals and campus leaders was a foundational component of the program design. This included one opportunity fair, two panel discussions, and three 50-minute sessions where an industry mentor met with a small group of students. During the opportunities fair, representatives from various offices on campus (e.g.,

undergraduate research, adventure leadership program) shared about their organizations and how students could get involved. We hosted two panel discussions each term, one of which was a group of leaders across the College of Agricultural Sciences and the other leaders across Oregon State University. During each panel, students were encouraged to ask panelists about their leadership experiences, specifically regarding the five practices of exemplary leadership (model the way, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, challenge the process, encourage the heart) (Kouzes & Posner, 2018). Folks from the college and university included student organization leaders, the university chief officer of DEI, department chairs, and the director of Greek Life, to name a few.

Three sessions were dedicated for small groups of three to four students to meet with an agriculture industry mentor. Industry mentors were invited to participate based on their connection to the student's major (e.g., a veterinarian was paired with three pre-vet students), their interest in coaching and mentoring young people, and their company's culture around connecting with college students at Oregon State University. Industry mentors visited the course via Zoom for three 50-minute sessions throughout the term. Each connection was unstructured; we provided two to three questions related to the day's topic for each visit to initiate the conversation. Then, we encouraged students to learn about the industry mentor, ask questions about their leadership journey, and solicit advice on navigating college and career transitions and opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

Given the unique context of college students navigating the post-pandemic landscape, we found it advantageous to adopt a social learning theory. Specifically, we employed Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice and Wenger-Trayner et al.'s (2015) Landscape of Practice as lenses through which to explore student learning and experiences in Leadership Launch. Wenger (1988) postulated that learning is a social endeavor through which individuals construct their identities, seek belonging, and negotiate meaning as they actively participate in the practices of various communities of practices. Communities of practice are groups of individuals congregating via mutual engagement and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1988). Participation and reification within a given community yield a social history of learning. This history develops a regime of competence or a particular set of criteria defining legitimacy and competency within a given community (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). Identity development and trajectory are thus shaped within and across communities (Wenger, 1998).

The difficult work of learning, developing identity, and navigating regimes of competence associated with multiple communities of practice can be aided by the help of brokers. Brokers can make connections across multiple communities of practices, enable coordination of practices, and facilitate "new possibilities for meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 109). Wenger (1998) states, "Brokering is a complex job. It involves the process of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives" (p. 109). Brokering

is more than just making connections; it requires trust and legitimacy, involves emotional management and supporting the learning experience, and mobilizes resources from various communities (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). We positioned the Leadership Launch course as a community of practice and the professors, industry mentors, and guest panelists as brokers who facilitated and guided student learning and articulated regimes of competence associated with college, career, and leadership.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore the experiences of students who completed Leadership Launch in 2022 at Oregon State University, paying particular attention to how a social learning environment and brokers contributed to student learning and meaning making. The questions that guided our inquiry were: 1) How does social learning influence student leadership trajectories? and 2) How can brokers guide students in their leadership learning?

Methods

This study aimed to understand the phenomena of brokering and social learning regarding how they influence leadership trajectories and learning after engagement in a particular program. Therefore, a Merriam (1998) approach to qualitative case study was our choice of method as a constructivist approach aligns both with our and our chosen theorists' epistemologies. A case study is "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). Merriam (1998) defines a case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 27). Case studies lend themselves to exploring an issue or phenomenon within the context, allowing the researcher to be in the field with her participants (Merriam, 2009) and draw from multiple sources of data to explore the phenomena under investigation (Yazan, 2015).

Situating Ourselves

It is essential to recognize and acknowledge the influence of our professional identities on this research. Two of us served as lead instructors for each course, and the third member was the graduate teaching assistant. One member of our research team is an Assistant Professor in Leadership Education. She oversees the Oregon State University Leadership Minor and teaches graduate and undergraduate leadership courses. The second member of our team is a Ph.D. candidate on a teaching assistantship through the Department of Agricultural Education and Agricultural Sciences in the College of Agricultural Sciences. Her teaching assignment includes teaching and co-teaching leadership courses. The third member is a Professor and Department Head in the Department of Agricultural Education and Agricultural Sciences who teaches graduate and undergraduate leadership courses. Epistemologically, we align with constructivism and Merriam's (1998) stance that multiple interpretations of realities exist, and that qualitative research allows us to understand how people construct meaning from their realities. This stance aligns with those of the theorists and theories we operationalized in this study (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015).

Participants

Two course replicates were offered in 2022, the first during spring and the second during fall. The total enrollment number from both pilot courses was 30, with 15 students in each class. Together, the students predominantly identified as White (66.7%), followed by Hispanic or Latino (20.0%), African American (3.3%), Middle Eastern (3.3%), Pacific Islander (3.3%), and Native/Indigenous (3.3%) and of the total sample, participants' year in school consisted of mostly freshmen (56.7%), followed by seniors (16.7%), sophomores (13.3%), and juniors (13.3%). Participants identified as primarily female (76.7%), followed by male (16.7%) and non-binary (6.7%).

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval and informed consent from participants, we collected data from multiple sources. Data sources for this study included pre- and post-course surveys, reflective journal entries, a culminating student project, and focus group interviews. The surveys assessed demographics, student satisfaction with the course, and key learning moments. Examples of open-ended questions on the post-course survey included: What specific leadership behaviors are you able to utilize now that you have taken this course? and, What part(s) of the course content was more important in supporting your learning and why? Three journal entries provided by each student throughout the term served as a reflection tool for students to describe their learning throughout the course. The journal entries also provided data on students' perceptions of leadership and utilization of course content. Students were asked questions like, how are things going in the class for you?, how is the industry mentor experience going?, what are two-three big "ah-has" from the course thus far? and, is there anything we can do to support you in the class?

The leadership launch plan served as the final project and asked students to consider how they will apply what they learned in the course. Finally, focus group interviews were administered to understand their engagement in the course, their experiences with industry mentors and panelists, and whether their learning and leadership trajectories had shifted throughout the term. Specifically, students were asked if their perceptions of leadership changed because of this course, how they felt during the course, and how they envision themselves applying the course content to their lives now and in the future.

Data Analysis

We began with initial analysis and coding, where two of us individually read each data source through analytic eyes, paying particular attention to the focus group transcripts transcribed verbatim by Otter.ai© services (Otter.ai, 2023). Our individual analysis involved line-by-line reading, identifying patterns, making comparisons, and staying open to discoveries and understandings (Emerson et al., 2011). Our initial codes allowed us to see the data in discrete parts and examine its nuances prior to sharing them with

the rest of the team (Saldana, 2009). We then convened to share our initial codes. This was followed by a round of memos where the lead researcher captured her analytic thoughts and insights and began making sense of the data, considering the theoretical framework. The second coding cycle included iterative rounds of focused coding, where, together, we used the initial codes to determine salient categories and emergent themes (Saldana, 2009).

We took several measures to enhance the quality of our study. Throughout the academic term, we collected multiple sources of data and used those to triangulate our findings, thus enhancing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Merriam, 2009). To ensure transferability, we used thick descriptions in our findings by grounding our claims with illustrative quotes, thus enhancing the reader's ability to determine if the findings may be transferred to a different research context (Geertz, 2008; Stake, 2010). We, as researchers, hold positions of power in this study as we assign student grades, hold advanced degrees, and have more life experiences, which may have influenced the results. In recognition of the power dynamics, the teaching assistant conducted the focus group interviews after the conclusion of the course, as several focus group questions asked for evaluations of the instructors. Additionally, we remained transparent about the research study with the participants throughout the process and ensured students that their responses would remain anonymous. To build credibility and dependability, we engaged in collaborative analysis and peer review with co-authors to reduce bias during the coding process and theme generation (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

Findings

Our data analysis resulted in three overarching themes: 1) A Caring Community, 2) Candid Connectors, and 3) Confident, Committed, Called. We explain each theme and offer illustrative quotes to give voice to participants and credibility to our claims. Following each quote is a code indicating the participant number and data source. Codes "post," "JE," "LLP" and "FG" are abbreviations for "post-course survey," "journal entry," "Leadership Launch Plan," and "focus group," respectively.

Theme: A Caring Community

Students found the learning environment to be welcoming and inclusive. Students consistently described the class as safe, welcoming, connected, joyful, relationship-oriented, and inclusive. This commenced as students were asked about their engagement in the course in the three reflective journals and in the post-course survey and focus group interviews. Students responded with phrases like, "I feel very safe and welcomed within our class atmosphere" (JE- Participant 7), "I feel really supported in this class. Everyone is genuine and we have a great atmosphere in the classroom" (JE- Participant 19), and "Everyone gets along great, and I have been making more friends because of this class" (JE- Participant 5).

Students were eager to engage and comfortable participating in the learning process. These ideas were often connected to the emotions they felt during the class. Participants used words such as confident, ease, inspired, and excited when reflecting on their course engagement. One student commented, "I felt challenged yet supported in the task of personal development. The course inspired critical thinking without making anyone feel criticized. If I had to select one emotion: inspired" (Post-Participant 12). Many students specifically connected their participation to the environment of the class. For example, one student wrote, "I feel fully confident in my ability to attend class and participate freely because the environment is very welcoming to sharing and others in the class are very good at listening and being respectful" (JE- Participant 22). Another commented, "It is very easy for me to participate and share because the environment is always welcoming. I am excited to take all the knowledge that I've gained and use it in my future" (JE- Participant 2).

Unlike other classes, students felt comfortable speaking to the class and supported when sharing their thoughts and stories aloud. Many students mentioned how this was a novel experience for them. Two students commented, "I feel extremely welcomed in the class, and it is the safest environment out of all of my classes" (JE- Participant 22) and "I have no worries about sharing and discussing my experiences with the class and participating in group discussions, no one has made me feel excluded" (JE- Participant 1). Other students wrote, "I felt very included and valued in this class, whenever I had something to share, I believed that what I said mattered and I was never afraid to say what I was thinking" (Post- Participant 25) and, "I am definitely talking more than I did before and opening up in class and it does feel relieving" (JE- Participant 8). An environment absent of fear, nervousness, or judgment prompted free participation. One student captured this with the following reflection, "This is one of the first classes that I felt comfortable enough to actually get involved with class discussions instead of just sitting there" (JE- Participant 14).

The freedom to participate without fear or judgment was strengthened by the mutual respect given by peers in the course. It became evident that peer interaction was significant in cultivating a welcoming and inclusive environment. Students enjoyed learning from their peers and found the class to be an environment where they cared about each other and pushed each other to learn and grow in their leadership. This emerged as students shared comments such as, "I felt like people cared about my learning as well as their own, which is very encouraging in a classroom setting" (Post- Participant 11). Perhaps the most powerful quote came from Participant 29 who commented, "I am strengthening my relationships with my classmates and feel very listened to–this is a pretty incredible group of authentic, present, willing-to-learn humans that challenge me to share and participate at my fullest potential" (JE-Participant 29).

Participants also attributed the inclusive environment to the small class size and the intentional care of the instructors. The "small class vibe" enabled "one-on-one conversation with other people" (JE- Participant 3), "time to get to know

everyone, which in turn makes everyone feel welcome" (JE-Participant 7), and a space where "opinions are wanted and that my well-being is cared for" (JE- Participant 6). Students noted the ways the instructors facilitated the opportunities for sharing with comments like, "You give great opportunities to share what we are thinking and allow us to participate a great deal during the class, and I really appreciate that" (JE-Participant 13) and "I think that the instructors and other students do a good job of making sure that everyone's voice is heard and if we want to say something that we can say it" (JE- Participant 3). Participants also felt cared for and valued by the instructors. Perhaps the most surprising comment came from Participant 7, who shared,

> This is the only class that I have had so far since starting college where all the teachers in this class actually took the time to know my name and me, by actively asking about my week and it is very comforting to know that they are there for me.

Further, students noted the connection between instructor care and learning, "I feel as though all of you professors are doing a phenomenal job making sure everyone feels included, especially in discussions, and are very understanding, and are genuinely pushing us to be the best leaders we can be" (JE- Participant 7).

Theme 2: Candid Connectors

The mentors and guest panelists were important in brokering student learning throughout the course. Having "real human beings share their personal experiences'" (Post-Participant 2) and "having a human connection with what we're learning" (Post-Participant 27) in real-time allowed students to imagine themselves as leaders, gain advice and form new perspectives while connecting with campus and industry professionals. Participants appreciated how the mentors and panelists brought the content to life. This unfolded as students discussed the importance of communicating hypothetical concepts through stories of their lived experiences. Students were quick to attribute this technique to their learning with comments like, "I feel like the experiences and the stuff that they went through helped us connect to them in regards to where we are now" (FG-Participant 8) and "The mentor meetings were a great way to hear about and learn what leadership practices look like in real life, and in a job setting" (Post- Participant 6). Another student commented, "I think that [applying the content] gives you an idea of how you would use these principles in the real world and puts them into the frame of mind for utilization" (FG- Participant 15).

Not only did mentors and panelists bring the content to life, but their willingness to take time out of their day to interact with students was also appreciated and helpful. Students were grateful and found value in hearing from diverse perspectives. One student commented, "those personal connections with them…how they took the time to share that stuff with us and really help us" (FG- Participant 2). Another shared, "I was finding more and more similarities with how she handled things that I could also take from that.

It was actually really cool to see a different perspective even though we're from completely different backgrounds" (FG-Participant 14).

The approach through which perspectives were gained, and content was brought to life was amplified through candid conversations, vulnerability, and stories that illuminated moments of challenge and failure. For example, one student reflected, "I feel like having that whole panel says that failing is okay…that was like the biggest lesson that I learned. The panelists described this as failing forward" (FG- Participant 18). Another student wrote, "It was helpful to see real people and their real-life experiences and knowing that they have truly failed and seeing where they are today is truly inspiring" (JE- Participant 2). When students spoke about the learning moments from the industry mentors and panelists, they consistently commended them for their honesty, candor, vulnerability, and "being real with us" (FG-Participant 23). One student wrote, "I really appreciated my mentor's honesty. She didn't just like tell us all the good stuff about her job, but she also told us about stuff that like is harder…instead of just like sugarcoating everything" (FG-Participant 23). A few students explicitly shared how this approach benefited their learning and conceptualizations of leadership. One student wrote, "I am taking with me how encouraged and inspired I was by guest speakers because I realized that hard work comes a long way and that we are all humans learning so, therefore, mistakes are what help us grow" (Post- Participant 1).

Theme 3: Confident, Committed, Called

Student conceptualizations of leadership significantly shifted throughout the ten-week term. What began as an association of leadership with power, position, and authority shifted to one centered on caring for people and working together to achieve a common goal. Leadership is not for a select few; leadership is for everyone. Students were quickly able to articulate this shift in perspective as they reflected on their time in the course and captured this with phrases such as, "it certainly has shifted to really understanding that leadership is not so much about the position that you are in and like the position of power one holds, but it is more about one's roles in a team" (FG- Participant 10) and, "I'd say my current understanding of leadership is that it is something that anyone can do. It is about having a vision and being able to share it with others and getting people together to solve a problem" (FG- Participant 27).

These paradigm shifts extended to the opportunities for leadership to be multifaceted and situational. Participant 8 shared, "after taking the course, I saw that you can be a leader in almost every aspect of your life. It can be the simple things, like planning a dinner with your friends or organizing an event and stuff like that" (FG- Participant 8). Another shared, "I found it as something anyone can do, no matter what position they're in, it's more of how they handle a situation than actually being in that position of power" (FG- Participant 14). Further, students learned that "there is a process to becoming a better leader" (Post- Participant 9), and "it is a skill to be nurtured" (Post- Participant 3). One student captured this by writing, "I now understand that

leadership is learned; it's not something you're born with but something you actively choose to do" (Post-Participant 16).

The paradigm shifts, concrete practices from the course content, and guidance from mentors and panelists enabled students to see themselves as leaders in a new way and act accordingly. Many students began implementing their new learning during the term. For example, one student shared, "while I was taking this course, I was also a leader for a pretty big group project and using some of the skills that we learned in this course and then applying them in that project" (FG- Participant 27). This student connected this application to future leadership pursuits, "it gave me a lot of confidence in my ability to be able to do that again in the future" (FG- Participant 27).

Along with paradigm shifts, students also found confidence in their abilities to lead after completing the course. When asked how they felt about leading in the future during the focus group interviews, nearly every student commented with "confident" or "somewhat confident". They attributed this to the stories from the textbook, the way the content was organized into big ideas and specific strategies and learning from the mentors and panelists. Newly minted confidence accompanied a desire to grow and learn in their leadership. One student succinctly captured this by saying, "I'm very confident in not only leading people but also just taking the opportunities to grow and evaluate where I am as a leader" (FG- Participant 9). After stating their newly acquired confidence, one student shared, "I'm excited for my next leadership role to be able to apply some of that stuff towards leading other people" (FG- Participant 4). Another student attributed a growth mindset to a trait of a leader, "As a leader, I don't think you ever stop growing…you should want to continue to take opportunities and challenge your skills and abilities to be able to continue to learn, gain knowledge from all kinds of perspectives and grow" (FG- Participant 2).

Finally, it became clear that students were enthusiastic about pursuing leadership opportunities in the future by becoming involved in university clubs, organizations, and leadership programs. For several, this was discussed as an opportunity to "explore many paths of involvement" (LLP-Participant 4) in the hopes of discovering opportunities that align with their values. Several students had already acted on this pursuit by joining a club, seeking a leadership position in a club, or applying for a leadership program. Students shared these commitments with feelings of excitement and pride. For example, one student shared, "After applying for Leadership Academy, I can proudly say that I will be in the cohort for the upcoming year" (LLP- Participant 12).

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This case study explored how students in the College of Agricultural Sciences learned leadership and developed leadership trajectories in a small, low-stakes leadership course that leveraged social learning and intentional brokering. Set against the background of our chosen theoretical lens, students in this study found the Leadership Launch community of practice to be one in which learning, participation, and social engagement congregate to form new modes of thinking, learning, and meaning (Wenger, 1998). Such a community helps form social networks and supports Birmingham et al.'s (2023) recommendation that college programs work to help students cope with stress and mental health challenges. Further, students found this community of practice to be a place where they mattered and were cared for. Their names were remembered and spoken, their well-being was inquired about, and their opinion was solicited. This offers evidence that spaces like these may be just what our post-pandemic students need as they grapple with mental health challenges (Richel & Flanagan, 2022). Still, while class size, instructor care, curricular design, and pedagogical moves were attributed to the welcoming and participatory nature of the course, there is room to explore precisely how the caring community was created. What specific mechanisms encouraged participation? What do students mean by the term "welcoming"? Were specific strategies more effective than others at building community? Future research, perhaps ethnographic, should take a more nuanced view to explore these and similar questions.

As members of a community participate, develop identities, and make meaning, their journeys are aided by brokers. In our study, brokers (instructors, industry mentors, panelists) built connections for students, guided their thinking, and opened doors for new possibilities. Wenger (1998) reminds us that the complex job of brokering must be recognized as it "involves the process of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives'" (p. 109). Brokers, specifically the industry mentors and panelists, revealed their journeys through the landscape by candidly sharing stories of challenge and failure. This inspired students and allowed them to imagine themselves as leaders (Wenger, 1998). Participants also appreciated how the industry professionals and panelists brought the content to life by communicating hypothetical concepts through stories of their lived experiences. Given our framework, we saw the translation, coordination, and alignment process as brokers articulated regimes of competence (those of college and career) across landscapes (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). As a result, their brokering built student confidence and shaped their leadership trajectories. The theoretical concept of brokering adds a new perspective to the existing scholarship on mentoring within postsecondary leadership education. While we do not claim the individuals in this study served as true mentors (Hastings & Kane, 2018), we conclude that their engagement with students was a powerful mechanism to broker novel access to various communities of practices (e.g., career).

Participants in our study also appreciated the brokers' willingness to take time out of their day to interact with students. They attributed their modes of interacting through candid conversations, vulnerability, and storytelling as pivotal in their learning and leadership identities. This finding is interesting given Wenger-Trayner et al.'s (2015) explanation that brokering requires trust and legitimacy; it includes support of the learning experience and emotional intelligence. Because the brokers in these courses were pivotal players in the student experience, it makes us wonder how we can leverage them in new and different ways. Specifically, we are curious as to why stories of failure were so impactful for students; additional research could examine this phenomenon in-depth. Additionally, research incorporating the voices and perspectives of the brokers themselves would lend insight into how they can best guide student learning trajectories.

Student conceptualizations of leadership significantly shifted throughout the ten-week term. What began as an association of leadership with power, position, and authority shifted to one centered on caring for people and working together to achieve a common goal. Wenger (2009) described identity as "a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities" (p. 211). Paradigm shifts, a caring classroom environment, concrete practices from the course content, and guidance from industry professionals and panelists enabled students to "become" in new and divergent ways. Namely, they identified as leaders, felt confident to enact leadership behaviors in multiple settings, and became committed to engaging in future leadership opportunities. Student leadership trajectories shifted because of participation and engagement in the Leadership Launch course. These findings are especially interesting when set against the backdrop of a post-pandemic world. Most of our participants were women, and, as we saw above, the pandemic has disproportionately adverse effects on women's mental health (Fruehwirth et al., 2021; NSSE, 2021). Could courses like this play a pivotal role in guiding young women starting college by reducing anxiety and providing the support they would not otherwise receive as a freshman? In what ways does learning leadership and feeling empowered through a community of practice specifically support the development of young women? Also, approximately 43% of participants were sophomores, juniors, and seniors. We do wonder how our results may be different had 100% been first-year students.

Conclusions from a case study that adopted a social learning lens also position themselves to practical recommendations. We encourage class sizes to be small enough to allow students to get to know each other and allow for ample discussion opportunities in which each student has multiple and consistent chances to share their voice. Learning student names is no new suggestion; however, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of this practice, as evidenced by the quote from the student who mentioned we were the only professors who knew (and used) her name. Additionally, building time to connect and inquire about student well-being is essential. We also advocate making this a norm for the class, as it is crucial not only for the instructor to check in with students but also for students to check in with each other. Finally, brokers played a pivotal role in students learning leadership and shifting their leadership trajectories. Leveraging brokers willing to be candid and vulnerable, especially if they hold power and status in the landscape, may result in powerful impacts in leadership and non-leadership courses.

If there is one thing the pandemic taught us, it is that we are not meant to live in isolation. Our college students are no different. Considering the entire study, it becomes clear that a central thread was the importance of human connection. Human connection as a prerequisite for learning, human connection as a powerful tool for brokers, human connection as pedagogy, and human connection as a means to develop a leadership identity. As we continue to navigate the post-pandemic era, modify existing leadership programming, and (re)learn how to support our students, we encourage our peers to be intentional about participation, engagement, and well-being and consistent with establishing moments of connection.

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