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Real Leadership Doesn't Develop in Classrooms



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By Pablo Eisenberg

Nonprofits, colleges, business groups and associations are all in the “leadership” business these days.

The growth is particularly noticeable at colleges and universities, which must find the programs a big draw for students anxious to become leaders of nonprofits, government agencies, and businesses. The proliferation in these cost-conscious times is also a sign the programs are not just popular but also moneymakers.

Textbooks and articles on leadership are rolling off the presses without stop. Professors of leadership are beginning to dot the academic countryside. It is hard to find any universities or colleges that don't offer at least one course on leadership development.

A quick Internet search finds some 959 graduate programs in leadership development, 487 graduate programs in organizational leadership, and at least 65 university programs on women's leadership development. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

With all this activity, one might expect the rise of a large new cadre of effective and visionary leaders. Yet that is not the case, as many experts in government and business have noted. On the contrary, the country has a serious leadership gap.

Students in leadership programs are often led to believe that a few courses or seminars will make them effective leaders or enlightened followers. They may learn the attributes of leadership in their readings and case studies—and if they are fortunate, they may actually meet and hear from guest speakers who have been successful leaders. But that isn't leadership development; it is merely a hint of what leadership might be.

Real leadership development occurs when individuals are placed in programs, organizations, or situations in which, over time, they must continually face management problems, meet organizational challenges, make tough decisions, take risks, and establish working relationships with colleagues and constituents.

The Peace Corps and Vista, and more recently Ashoka and Teach for America, are among the programs that have provided intensive experiences that prepare many of their members for a life of leadership. Their graduates have learned by doing, often with the aid of mentors who remain important influences on their lives.

The antipoverty programs of the Johnson administration in the 1960s were the largest and most effective leadership-development efforts in American history. They gave hundreds of thousands of poor people and minorities the opportunity to succeed or fail, to get jobs and exercise authority previously denied to them. These programs produced countless mayors, government officials, superintendents of schools, judges, health specialists, nonprofit directors, and professionals of all stripes—people who subsequently played important leadership roles in our society. These were on-the-job training programs that nothing since has surpassed.

Because so few serious evaluations of academic leadership-development programs have been conducted, it's hard to tell if they make a difference. No longitudinal evaluations trace the effectiveness of leadership programs over the course of a decade or two.

To be fair, scholars can point to some positive short-term results among the students who have taken academic courses or seminars. They cite an improvement in critical skills, a broadened vision of their field, or a new sense of confidence. Those achievements, they say, are signs of a growing capacity for leadership. But are these indicators of developed leadership?

Some graduate programs like those at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Policy at the University of Texas at Austin provide leadership courses or executive seminars to already experienced government personnel, nonprofit executives, and academic officials. The LBJ School's outside evaluation of its leadership course found that it had made a big difference in the leadership activities of the top students.

Such executive programs, of course, pose an evaluation conundrum. Since their graduates tend to be savvy individuals who already are on a successful path to leadership, it is difficult to assess whether the courses made a significant difference in their growth.

Although these courses and seminars are unlikely to produce the strong and courageous leaders we need, they may open students' minds to societal problems, the importance of responsible leadership, and the development of key leadership attributes like vision, morality, and courage. Unless very poorly taught, they can do no harm and possibly can do a little good. Where they include guest speakers who have been successful leaders or are taught by such leaders, they can inspire students to embrace more ambitious goals and public service.

But the evidence so far doesn't support the notion that the growing network of academic leadership-development courses is doing much, if anything to contribute to whatever new leadership is emerging in this country.

Their limited impact doesn't justify the huge amount of money colleges and universities, as well as their students, are spending on leadership-development courses and programs. A greater expenditure, both public and private, on long-term experiential programs like Vista, the Peace Corps, Teach for America, or Ashoka would bring much greater returns on investment.

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