

Start'Em Early: Confessional Culture in US Undergraduate Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate leadership programs at US universities often stress the importance of self-reflection, self-assessment, and self-discovery for developing individual student capabilities. Such programs employ ice breakers, group exercises, coaching, reflective journals and other techniques, often loosely grounded in positive and pop-psychology, to encourage young people to share personal and emotional insights as the necessary prerequisite for becoming leaders. We explore the extent to which these quasi-therapeutic practices, often the intellectual property of commercial vendors, normalize a confessional culture of leadership development, a system of neoliberal governmentality that positions the self as an object in need of scrutiny, assessment, quantification, and improvement. Such an insistently individual and internal focus can function to limit students' understanding of themselves as social agents, we argue, and ultimately to prepare students to submit themselves to workplace regimes that employ even more intense forms of pseudo-psychological quantification and neoliberal surveillance. We conclude by highlighting alternative approaches to leadership development that can better engage students as co-designers of their own development experiences, and as collaborators in multi-stakeholder processes of collective action and of group, shared, or distributed leadership.

Mainstream, individualized, leader-centric leadership theories continue to insist that self-awareness is the foundation of effective leadership. No surprise then that a central strategy of the leadership industries mobilizes practices and discourses derived from the psychological sciences and self-help culture to champion and to administer any number of assessments, personality quizzes, questionnaires and surveys ostensibly intended to help leadership development participants and subjects to identify their 'true' self or unique leadership style. These self-reporting measures induce individuals to select the description that most closely resembles who they think they are or how they act from a pre-set and limited range of often predictable choices. The responses are then compiled and synthesized to produce a personal identity profile that supposedly reveals to the person their specific strengths, weaknesses, behaviors, or leadership style. Many of the assessment tools seen today in leadership derive loosely from psychodynamic approaches developed in the 1930s, from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test, and from the pervasive discourse of positivity in American leadership discourse (Collinson, 2012).

Leadership development programs for university students impose a variety of these assessments, including The Student Leadership Practices Inventory, created by Kouzes and Posner (Kouzes & Posner, 2006), or the Leadership Identity Development Model by Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, and Osteen (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006). Though not originally designed for *student* leadership development, university student affairs practitioners also like to use Wiley's DISC Profile (Sugerman, Scullard, & Wilhelm, 2011) and Gallup's *StrengthsFinder* assessment (Rath, 2007). Indeed, thousands of student affairs departments at

US universities have entered into strategic partnerships with Gallup to deliver the *StrengthsFinder* and *StrengthsQuest* assessment products to undergraduate students, often spending significant amounts of their (often public) budgets to pay this private company to train staff as “Strengths Coaches.” In 2016, a prominent US state university where one of the co-authors worked spent \$3,150 for every staff person they sent to Strengths Coach training—for a total investment of \$91,350.

Originally developed by one of the founders of the positive psychology movement, Donald Clifton, the *StrengthsFinder* leadership assessment requires individuals to identify themselves along the spectrum of 177 paired statements. After the assessment, each individual is assigned five leadership strengths from a total of 34 different possible strengths. Like so many contemporary leadership assessment tools, Gallup insists that *StrengthsFinder* should be considered “a starting point for self-discovery”. However, unlike leadership or self-development literature that looks to help improve individuals in their relative areas of weakness, the Strengths theory argues that individuals need to focus on improving what is already strong within them (what one is naturally skilled at). They state that “those who strive to be competent in all areas become the least effective leaders overall” (Rath & Conchie, 2008: 7). Strengths Coaches are trained to analyze the results of an individual’s *StrengthsFinder* report and to provide the individual with guidance on how to achieve personal or organizational success based on their strengths.

The self-contradictory nature of these leadership development practices derives from the way they often promote self-responsibility and choice at the same time that they take away self-determination and prerogative. Young undergraduates in particular seem to have no choice but to submit to such invasive psychological testing if they ever hope to become “leaders” as defined by student affairs professionals and the leadership industry products they promote. While these self-making measures may appear to grant individuals more freedom and self-control, in fact they reduce any agency students may be able to enact to a range of preset choices, turning them into followers of the leadership industries as well as future compliant employees of organizations that will also employ these assessment methods to rank their worthiness as leaders. We draw on critical research on leadership development, governmentality, identity regulation and identity undoing to develop a critique of these widespread practices (Gagnon, 2008; Gagnon & Collinson, 2014; Nicholson, 2011; Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006).

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