

– CHAPTER THREE –



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Leadership Education

Leadership in the Liberal Arts—Community and Culture

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In the past two decades, higher education has experienced dramatic programmatic changes greatly influenced by the evolution of technology and a changing world society. At the focal point of these changes has been the quality of leadership on the local, state, national, and international levels. While the study of leadership is not new, the questions about quality leadership have sparked a resurgence of discussions and publications addressing various theories of leadership. Robert Greenleaf's book on servant leadership, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, gave birth to leadership studies that focused on his theory that one must serve first and then lead. This spurred the publication of numerous books and the development of academic programs on college campuses. This concept provided the natural development from an emphasis on students serving the community to the development of academic programs that focused on leadership. In the 1980s, the academic discipline of leadership became more apparent in graduate programs at universities and for the past two decades has been integrated into the curricula of many liberal arts colleges.

The primary goal of a liberal arts curriculum is to teach students to think critically and analyze problems from the perspectives of various disciplines. This, in essence, is what a leader must do.

In the late 1980s, I assumed the presidency of Austin Peay State University, which had been designated as the liberal arts university in the Board of Regents System of Tennessee. As I interacted with the community, many constituents asked about the relationship of the liberal arts to the community. In essence, constituents asked, “How can a liberal arts university produce graduates who can be of benefit to the business community?” This question generated reflection on the liberal arts curriculum and the manner that it interfaced with the community. “Leadership” became the key word in analyzing this connection. The question related to the quality of leadership and how the university prepared individuals to be leaders in a community. This dialogue with faculty and the community evolved into a program called “The Emerging Leaders Program.” This was a mixture of an experiential and academic approach to leadership education focused on the purpose of introducing a select group of students to the concept of community leadership.

The program’s 20 entering freshmen participated in a variety of community-related experiential activities and attended academic courses that interfaced with the concept of leadership. These activities included a series of presentations by community leaders concerning their role in shaping the community. The presentations addressed a number of questions, such as how an organization such as the Chamber of Commerce can provide leadership in a diverse economic setting. As students interacted with the executive director or president of the Chamber of Commerce and visited agencies sponsored by the United Way, it became quite evident to these students that **individuals must provide the initiative and the focus so these types of organizations can effectively serve the community.**

In order to gain an understanding of individual leadership, each student was assigned a mentor from the community for one semester during his or her first two years of college. These students also made a commitment to take a series of courses related to leadership values and skills. All the students were required to take a “Leadership Studies” introductory course that provided them with an overview of leadership theory. Additionally, the students were expected to take courses such as “Ethics and Leadership” and “Logic,” as well as courses in communication arts. This program was a mixture of liberal arts courses and experiential activities that helped students observe leadership in the community and gain a better understanding of the importance of the individual as a leader. Through this program, a link to the community evolved that helped community leaders understand the importance of the liberal arts in preparing individuals to become critical thinkers and effective leaders.

In assuming the role of president of Austin College, I became aware that the graduates of this historic institution were providing leadership at a variety of levels throughout the world. Historically, Austin College had focused on service, and it was one of the first colleges in the nation to send students to participate in *Crossroads Africa*. Furthermore, its strong emphasis on premedical studies and a prelaw curriculum produced individuals who were providing leadership in the healthcare industry, as well as in many political arenas. It became evident that a strong liberal arts education was the basis on which a leadership program should be built. The primary goal of a liberal arts curriculum is to teach students to think critically and analyze problems from the perspectives of various disciplines. This, in essence, is what a leader must do; therefore, the liberal arts college was a logical place to develop a leadership institute.

The two elements of the curriculum provided students with an understanding of the key elements of leadership are a part of a well-established liberal arts curriculum: the “Communication/Inquiry” (C/I) course (required of all freshmen) and a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary studies that affects all students. In the C/I course, the primary emphasis was on problem solving or critical thinking within the faculty member’s discipline. The second element of interdisciplinary studies helped the student understand the linkages among disciplines and pointed to the focus on a key element of leadership: recognizing the interrelationships of ideas.

To formalize the Leadership Institute, a four-year program was built on these existing elements of the curriculum. The program evolved into the Posey Leadership Institute at Austin College with four basic principles that integrated the liberal arts concepts into the study of leadership. It was determined that 15 freshmen would be admitted to this program each year, with the opportunity for five rising sophomores to join the leadership class in the second year. Ultimately, 70 students became involved in the Leadership Institute. The goal was to integrate the concept of liberal arts courses into a program of practical application where the students could have experiences that would introduce them to various leaders. The program was designed to allow students to observe various leadership skills.

The structure of the program was built on four key principles:

- Participation in service activities
- The individual as a leader
- The organization as a leader
- The global culture—leadership in different cultures

The structure of the program integrates six key areas:

- Three leadership courses are required—leadership theory during the first semester of the freshman year, the study of “leaders” during the January term of the freshman year, and a senior level capstone course.
- Students are asked to take a course in ethics and courses relating to other cultures.
- Since service is key to the initial concept of leadership education, all students are required to participate in service activities for four years.
- Mentoring is the way students are introduced to individual leaders, so they can gain an understanding of how an individual leads in the community. At the end of the freshman year, each student is assigned to a community mentor who maintains an association with the student for three years and introduces the student to the concept of individual leadership.
- An internship with an organization is required to introduce students to the concept of how an organization provides leadership in the community.
- Finally, students are required to participate in an international experience in order to gain a better understanding of leadership in a different culture.

With these guidelines in mind, the Leadership Institute began to evolve at Austin College. While it has been an institute that claims to provide all the academic courses that a leadership major or minor would require, it has evolved into an interdisciplinary concept that helps students integrate various disciplines into the overall theories of leadership. Looking at leadership from the perspectives of various disciplines and societies prepares students for the process of developing leadership skills that may result in significant leadership experiences in their future.

An additional aspect of the Leadership Institute plays a vital role in the life of the student. Each year, the college brings a world leader to campus to interact with the students on a personal basis and share with the students his or her perspective of leadership in the world. The first individual to hold the Chair of Excellence in International Leadership was President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica. President Arias came to campus on three occasions to speak and interact with the students. He was followed by Secretaries of State Colin Powell, James Baker, Madeleine Albright, and Peter Bogdanovich; The Honorable Kim Campbell; President George H. W. Bush; and Cokie and Steve Roberts. These speakers represent not only the political culture, but also the fields of communication, service, and the arts. They serve as role models for students and provide them with the opportunity to explore the background of a world leader and the impact that an individual can have on his or her culture. The Austin College Leadership Award grew out of the Posey Leadership Institute, and in each of the past three years, Austin College has given a major stipend to a rising leader. The honoree speaks on campus and becomes a role model for our students. The three recipients of the award so far are Geoffrey Canada, Dr. Paul Farmer, and Wendy Kopp.

The experience of developing a leadership education program within the context of the liberal arts denotes the importance of relationship of the liberal arts to leadership. In the context of the global society, it is critical that young leaders understand the importance of the individual, organization, and world community. The latter point became a critical feature of the Posey Leadership Institute, as each student must participate in a study abroad program in order to observe leadership in a different culture. The choice of cultures in which to study depends on each student's academic goals and should be based on the academic experiences that could contribute to a better understanding of that culture. Integrated into the concept of leadership is an understanding of language and culture through the development of a language house that incorporates the study of five languages in an immersion experience. The Jordan Family Language House at Austin College provides each student an opportunity to understand the culture of a country and the rudimentary concepts of the language.

In essence, developing a community leadership program at a state university focused on the liberal arts and a more comprehensive leadership experience at an independent liberal arts college have both been successful. When implementing such programs, it is important to ensure that leadership is not being discussed in a vacuum. Instead, a strong leadership program should provide evidence of the integration of all disciplines into the understanding of this important concept. The strength of such programs will be evident in the student's breadth of knowledge, critical thinking skills, and a thorough understanding of service to others. To understand leadership, a student must complete the cycle of mastering the academics, finding solutions to issues, and effectively serving people within his or her community.

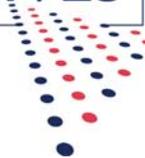


About the Author

Dr. Oscar C. Page has served as President of Austin College in Sherman, Texas, since 1994. He was President of Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee, the previous six years, and he was at Lander College in South Carolina for 10 years, where he was Provost and Vice President for academic affairs and was appointed as acting President for a term. He also served as Dean of the College at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia and was a member of the history faculties of the Universities of Georgia and Western Kentucky. He received his B.A. from Western Kentucky University and his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Kentucky.

President Page has served on the boards of directors of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, the Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities, the Institute for the International Education of Students, the Association of Texas Colleges and Universities, and the Independent Colleges and Universities of Texas. He is past president of the Southern Collegiate Athletic Commission. He has chaired the Criteria and Review Committee as a member of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

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