An equity-minded research agenda for leadership learning and development in higher education

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Introduction

Leadership researchers and practitioners reading this book have likely felt overwhelmed with how best to research the complexities of leadership given the vast array of definitions and approaches. The challenge for leadership education researchers is to identify useful ways to study how leadership is learned and developed, what experiences promote that learning, and for whom. This challenge provides a great opportunity, which is the purpose and focus of this book.

Leadership education research, as with any educational research, must be examined in a social context (Patel, 2016). As the editors of this book, we have come to understand that the leadership story most often told reflects a dominant narrative characterized by patriarchy, classism, and whiteness typical of a Western context (Collinson, 2019; Dugan, 2017). This hegemonic perspective is evident in the evolution of leadership theories, beginning with “great men” theories and moving from what Rost (1991) called an industrial management model to a post-industrial model of leadership, largely omitting the stories of the evolution of leadership among women, racial groups, and in culturally diverse communities. How leadership theories are reified or inscribed as canon is interwoven with larger systems of power and domination. Thus, context must shape researchers’ engagement with the past, present, and be considerably broadened in future leadership scholarship.

Context considers the historic, cultural, economic, educational, relational, and other factors that inform and influence those engaged in leadership to accomplish specific goals (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016; Hurtado et al., 2012), particularly regarding the distribution of power. Whether in the context of
a classroom, organization, or entire campus, compositional diversity is central to how leadership can or should be taught and developed (see Chapter 3; Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). Addressing race is one crucial example of this importance. Ospina and Foldy (2009) observed:

attending to race brings an understanding of power not only as a resource for individuals, but also as a web of institutionalized inequities that systematically, and at the expense of others, provides privilege to some communities and some perspectives. At the same time, examining leadership—since leadership is fundamentally about agency—helps us understand how individuals and collectives have resisted, and in some cases transformed, these inequities—creating spaces where marginalized voices become powerful. (p. 877)

Leadership education research must examine how power is embedded in all contexts to inform leadership educators, as well as campus faculty, administrators, and policy makers, of how to create more liberatory leadership learning environments.

**Understanding leadership studies, development, and education**

Scholarship has evolved toward more complex conceptualizations of leadership; explored how leadership is learned and developed by individuals, groups, organizations, and communities; and identified what pedagogies facilitate that learning and development. Thus, the scholarly literature on leadership, writ large, encompasses multiple terms and categories. Below, we briefly summarize basic categories to help scholars situate the foci of their interests.

**Leadership studies**

*Leadership studies* is the focused approach of exploring, defining, and understanding the phenomena of leadership. Although there is a myriad of definitions of leadership, there is some agreement that leadership is a process of influence among people (e.g., leaders and followers/collaborators) working together to accomplish an outcome in a specific context (Kellerman, 2018). Many 21st-century definitions assert that positive change is a preferred leadership outcome. From his review of the evolution of the field, Riggio (2011) concludes that leadership studies is an emerging and integrative discipline. Diverse ontological views of leadership are evident in a range of disciplines (e.g., business, psychology, sociology). This book does not directly explore leadership studies but acknowledges that theoretical approaches shape leader-
ship research. Researchers should increasingly be clear about the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of the approaches to leadership they are studying.

Leadership development

*Development* is the process of becoming increasingly complex in some domain, typically through a process of differentiation and integration (Day & Lance, 2004). Day et al.’s (2014) review of 25 years of leadership research and theory described the intrapersonal development of an individual leader as *leader* development and the interpersonal relational capacity of people in a group as *leadership* development (p.63). As used in this book, *leadership development* refers specifically to the multilevel leadership development of an individual, group/team, organization, and/or community. This approach recognizes that each of these multilevel entities grows, learns, changes, and becomes more complex. A corollary term, *leadership learning*, notes the process of how an entity (e.g., person, persons in groups, organizations) integrates experience and knowledge to develop leadership capacity (see Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009; Roberts, 2007).

Leadership education

*Leadership education* is the process of teaching and learning that occurs in spaces and platforms designed for learners to acquire new, or to enhance existing, leadership perspectives or capacities. Leadership education encompasses the ways educators intentionally implement or facilitate leadership learning and development (see Brungardt, 1996; Komives, 2011; Roberts, 2007). These approaches often include experiences, coaching or mentoring, readings, dialogue, group projects, and reflections, and may be presented as retreats, courses, academic majors or minors, or certificate programs (Jenkins, 2020).

Research on leadership studies, development, and education

Scholars have examined over a century of leadership research and constructed useful overviews (Bryman, 2011; Conners & Swan, 2006; Day et al., 2014; Hiller et al., 2011; Lowe & Gardner, 2001; Parry et al., 2014; Reyes et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2020). Lord and colleagues’ (2017) comprehensive review of 100 years of leadership research reflects the dominant narrative of their historical times. They present three waves of leadership research: (a) the first wave, from 1948 to 1961, focusing on behavioral styles and identifying the importance of the two dimensions of emphasis on tasks and people; (b) the second wave, from 1969 to 1989, moving into examining gender, social cognition, situational the-
ories, and early transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978); and (c) the third wave, from 1999 to 2007, including several meta-analyses, especially those on leader member exchange, teams, trust, and revisiting traits and styles related to transformational leadership. Owen (2020) suggests a fourth wave of leadership drawing on concepts from critical theory to invite “conversations about ideology, hegemony, social location, power, and agency in leadership development” (p. 21), and interrogating “existing theories to examine whose voices have been omitted and where Indigenous voices and collectivist approaches to leadership have been co-opted by privileged Western scholars” (p. 22).

Approaches to research are evolving

Common leadership research methods reflect dominant constructions of “good” research over time. For example, Lowe and Gardner’s (2001) review of the first ten years of The Leadership Quarterly found that two-thirds of all studies relied on questionnaire methodologies employing quantitative analysis. These approaches were useful but left major limitations in whose voices/experiences were included or excluded and are reductionist by nature. Qualitative methods challenge positivist ways of knowing and enrich understanding of the leadership phenomena in context (Denzin, 2015). However, even qualitative methodologies may have roots in colonizing research practices, such as traditional ethnographies which interpreted cultural practices through a lens of whiteness and, therefore, have limitations in their application.

Critical research moves beyond merely seeking to understand or interpret phenomena, to examining how power and influence may shape meaning. The intention of critical research is to draw attention to and act on the injustice, subjugation, and power structures that shape the world. Critical scholarship may be anchored in theoretical perspectives, such as critical race theory, feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial approaches, which can include Indigenous approaches that examine the effects of imperialism (Kincheloe et al., 2011).

Challenging the dominant narrative

An important critique of the body of scholarship and research on leadership studies, development, and education is that it has been based on dominant culture, values, approaches, and perspectives—typically white, Western, and male—and is not inclusive of those marginalized from that context. The emergence of critical leadership studies (see Collinson, 2011, 2019; Dugan, 2017) highlights “the interrelated significance of situated power relations, multiple
identity constructions, and their various interactions and tensions” and how “leadership dynamics are typically enacted, frequently rationalized, sometimes resisted, and occasionally transformed” (Collinson, 2019, pp. 260–261).

Other critical theorists (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Dugan, 2017) echo Collinson (2011) in placing concepts of power and identity at the center of leadership dynamics in contemporary organizations and societies. These approaches call for a recognition of the importance of all group members. These approaches presume structural inequality, disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions, call for agency, and advance social change (Dugan, 2017).

Dugan (2017) reminds researchers that the dominant narrative “serve[s] as a powerful reminder that when left unquestioned the concept of leadership can default to serving as a tool for ideology and hegemony versus a vehicle for social change and democratic principles” (p. 58). To fully understand leadership, development, and education, contemporary scholarship should critically interrogate the canon of existing work and deconstruct and reconstruct its meaning to illuminate more inclusive, just, and equitable approaches.

**Leadership learning and development**

Leadership in and of itself is not an end goal—it is a pathway to another set of desired outcomes. One question that persists in the context of leadership learning and development in higher education is “leadership for what purpose?” How one answers this question is informed by a person’s epistemological or ontological orientation, disciplinary training, and positionality in the academy, including one’s political, philosophical, and spiritual orientations. These aspects of context must be considered by every leadership researcher and educator.

The predominant individualistic entity perspective

People have viewed leadership as a vehicle for career growth and economic mobility, for coalescing power to influence desired outcomes, and perhaps for intrapersonal reasons related to status achievement, goal attainment, service, and the desire to build personal capacity. These approaches represent an entity or individual perspective where leadership is framed from a dominant positivistic tradition (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Educational institutions focus on teaching and learning in individuals, so as a logical extension, leadership development/education has largely been entity-focused (see Chapter
5). For example, Seemiller (2013; Seemiller & Murray, 2013) has identified 60 individual leadership competencies from several sources, including required outcomes from disciplinary-based accrediting associations.

Guiding documents like the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education’s “Standards for Leadership Education and Development” (2023) are constructed in this entity tradition and offer clear roadmaps to answering the “leadership for what?” question for the individual. The standards list student competencies that leadership education and development “must advance” (p. 7). Additional documents aiming to enhance intentionality in leadership education include the International Leadership Association’s (2009) “Guiding Questions: Guidelines for Leadership Education Programs” and the revised “General Principles for Leadership Education Programs” (International Leadership Association, 2021), which both consist of five sections of principles that are thought to be essential for curriculum development, instructional effectiveness, and quality enhancement through assessment—for individuals.

Individuals are an essential focus in leadership development. We concur that, whether in the role of leader or follower, everyone can expand their capacity to be effective when leading with others. Most research in leadership development involves studying individuals; fewer studies examine the process of leadership among people. Yet the view of leadership as a process among people—that is, individuals working together—is a crucial and underexamined unit of analysis (see Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; see also Chapter 6).

Critical and constructionist perspectives

Recent supports for adding criticality into leadership research and practice can be found in the second iteration of the National Leadership Education Research Agenda (Andenoro & Skendall, 2020), reviewed in Chapter 2 of this volume and in the Inter-Association Leadership Education Collaborative’s (2018) second edition of the document “Collaborative Priorities and Critical Considerations for Leadership Education.” Critical approaches to leadership learning interrogate predominant perspectives by asking questions like: How do unequal power structures influence social outcomes to the advantage of some and the detriment of others? What discourses and practices sustain or disrupt existing power structures? How can we interrogate/deconstruct dominant narratives of leadership? Whose voices are missing/silenced? How is leadership an unequal enterprise? (adapted from: Brookfield, 2005; Collinson, 2019; Dugan, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).
Critical and social constructionist approaches to leadership assume that meaning only evolves as one’s own subjectivities encounter others’ subjectivities in ongoing social dynamics. Thus, a critical constructionist response to the “leadership for what?” question is often dialectical and may take an interrogatory form. It may also include conversations about how leadership can build cultural community wealth (Yosso, 2005), or how other forms of social capital can buffer against different forms of stereotype threat (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016), or be a vehicle for the creation of more just and equitable organizations.

Theoretical approaches

Whether a leadership educator adopts an entity or constructionist perspective, leadership theory plays an essential role in leadership learning. Many educators also rely heavily on informal or implicit theories (Dugan, 2017) to guide their approaches to leadership learning. Parker (1977) defines informal theory as “the body of common knowledge that allows us to make implicit connections among events and persons in our environment upon which we act in everyday life” (p. 420). There are benefits and challenges of using both approaches. Informal theory not undergirded by knowledge generated through trustworthy processes can do harm. Formal theories that ignore the social and political forces that shape leadership experiences can be myopic. The goal of research should be to influence practice through findings informed by the social and political context. The challenge set forth to the contributors in this volume was to summarize, build on, and interrogate existing scholarship related to leadership learning and development in higher education. Through this process, leadership scholarship becomes the operational bridge to turn critical theories into action.

Contexts for leadership learning and development

Intentional leadership development occurs in such diverse contexts as business and industry, nonprofit agencies, community youth programs, religious programs, the military, and on college campuses. All these contexts have been challenged by remarkable events in recent times, including higher education.

Contemporary times as context

The remarkably traumatic experiences of the early 21st century, particularly the 2020s, brought an intense focus on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity in institutional settings. The COVID-19 pandemic caused
immense devastation and continues to transform communities and institutions across the globe. Terrorism, gun violence, and efforts to undermine democratic institutions increased. Pervasive systemic racism against Asian and Native/Indigenous communities, anti-Semitic violence, and continuing police violence against Black people increased in visibility. Movements such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #BlackLivesMatter coalesced many, including women, LGBTQ activists, Black people, and their allies to demand equity and social justice. Institutions turned to hiring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion officers to lead institutional change. Students and faculty moved to hold their colleges and universities accountable for their racist and sexist pasts, and demanded they reform and transform their practices, including how leadership is envisioned, enacted, and developed. As we write this book, the United States is caught in a paradox of growing movements and legislation intended to discredit and ban anti-racist strategies, critical scholarship, and life-affirming practices for LGBTQ+ people, at a time when these resources are needed most. Contemporary times call for an urgent examination of the leadership needed to address these issues in this context.

Higher education as a context

Higher education institutions have historically been expected to develop leaders and citizens for a complex world, and have implicitly, if not explicitly, included developing leadership as part of their mission. Although only 16 percent of contemporary United States institutions of higher education in the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (i.e., 842 programs) contain specific references to “leader” or “leadership” in their mission statements (Devies & Guthrie, 2022), academic and co-curricular leadership programs are known to exist in some form in nearly all higher education institutions (Seemiller & Murray, 2013; Sowcik & Komives, 2020). A major review of all college student research in the 2010 decade concluded, “Institutional mission plays an important role in fostering citizenship values and behaviors” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p.265). Higher education is invested in leadership development and yet an extensive reexamination of equity in the design and delivery of these programs is needed.

Higher education is a huge and complex sector in United States culture. Understanding and reframing the complexity of the higher education context is essential to work toward an equity-minded approach to leadership education and related research.
Diversity in institutional type

Taxonomies of institutional types like those of the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education are used by such entities as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to track student enrollment by sex, race, disability, and other student characteristics, and offer salient data for leadership scholarship. The National Center for Education Statistics reports nearly 7,000 United States institutions eligible for Title IV (student financial aid) funding (US Department of Education, 2019). Of those, nearly 4,000 are degree-granting institutions that enroll 19 million students. Of those institutions, 2,300 are four-year bachelor’s degree or higher in the public or private sectors, and 1,300 are two-year institutions, typically community colleges, offering associate degrees or various certificate programs (including nonprofit and for-profit). In Fall 2018, 3 million students enrolled in graduate degree programs.

Of the 4,000 institutions enrolling 19 million students, 101 are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) enrolling 290,000 students, of which 76.5 percent identify as Black or of African heritage. In 2018, there were 539 eligible Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) enrolling nearly 3 million students, nearly double the number of Hispanic students since the previous decade. There are only 36 women’s colleges remaining. The 32 tribal colleges enroll 14,000 students. Of the 281 Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions (AANAPISI), fewer than 30 received funding in this category (US Department of Education, 2019). Unequal funding continues as a stark reminder of the inequity that influences student experiences (Harris, 2021; Mayhew et al., 2016), including opportunities for leadership development.

Combined with other characteristics like location, size, control (public or private), or selectivity, each institution within any given type also has its own story—its own context, mission, history, and embedded values that shape the leadership being modeled and taught. Contemporary, equity-minded models of leadership education emphasize the importance of the history of an institution in its context (see Chapter 3).

The historical context of higher education

Many leadership education researchers have expertise in their academic discipline but not in the study of the history of higher education. Researchers need a basic and nuanced understanding of the variety of types of higher education institutions and the historical context of these institutions to design needed
research addressing equity and social justice in leadership education. The history of higher education in the United States demonstrates how power, ideology, and privilege undergird leadership where the very words “leader” and “leadership” have been culturally framed to “equate effective leadership with authoritarian control imposed by those at the apex of a hierarchy” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 2). Drawing on themes from critical social theory, the following brief review elucidates how colonization, segregation, racialization, and erasure cast shadows on leadership learning and development in higher education.

Colonization, segregation, and emergence of minority-serving institutions

Historically, leadership development in higher education was accidental, incidental, atheoretical, and typically available only to the elite or to those who already held leadership positions, if at all (Komives, 2011). Non-Indigenous higher education in the United States traces its long history to the founding of Harvard in 1636. Colonists sought to transmit their English culture through denominational colleges to educate the young white men (typically adolescent boys) in the religious traditions and classic curricula modeled after their fathers’ own experiences at Oxford and Cambridge. These institutions perpetuated the culture, mores, and expectations of white men with social standing, to the exclusion of others.

By the early 19th century, the exclusion of women, Black students, and poor or working-class students soon led to the parallel development of institutions designed for those marginalized populations. Although some early institutions did enroll women as well as Black or Indigenous students (e.g., Oberlin College), the curriculum and other experiences at these institutions were substantially separate and different from what was offered to their white male students (Renn & Reason, 2021). Leadership was a byproduct of elitism and mainly the purview of those holding privileged identities.

In the early 1800s, military academies (i.e., West Point) and public universities (e.g., University of Georgia) emerged still only enrolling white men as students. Most public universities were founded as single-sex institutions; for example, the University of Virginia did not admit women until 1970. Many women’s schools proliferated, particularly in the South (e.g., Wesleyan Female Academy), and sometimes as coordinate colleges to nearby men’s institutions (e.g., Radcliffe and Harvard). The first HBCUs were founded in the pre-Civil War era (e.g., Cheney University in 1837). HBCUs proliferated in the post-Civil War era as open admission institutions and accepted women very early in their establishment. HBCUs and women’s colleges were both an
example of agency and educational advancement but were often controlled by white male board members and administrators, ensuring the continuation of the gender and racial hierarchy in leadership.

In 1862, the Morrill Act provided “federal” land to states to be used or sold to raise funds to establish agricultural and mechanical (A&M) colleges in the newly established western states, bringing a college education to working-class citizens. This federal land had predominantly been taken through settler colonization processes of seizure or treaty from Indigenous tribes (Lee & Ahtone, 2020; Nash, 2019; Patel, 2016; see also Tuck & Yang, 2012). Most of these new institutions were open only to white students. In 1890 the second Morrill Act prohibited race-based admissions unless an additional, separate institution was provided for students of color leading to the establishment of 19 public Black colleges in states that did not integrate their public university. Subsequently, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case before the Supreme Court in 1898 affirmed the racial segregation of institutions and established a “separate but equal” doctrine that stood in numerous United States contexts (e.g., education) until legally struck down by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. The inequity promoted by this doctrine resulted in inadequate resources for the education and development of Black students and reinforced a devaluing of the worth and dignity of people of color in all sectors of American life (Harris, 2021). In higher education, the reality was that segregation continued largely until the Higher Education Act of 1965, and its vestiges persist today.

A major distinction of higher education in the United States was the creation of the two-year or junior college. Beginning with the first junior college in Joliet, Illinois, in 1901, which was designed as a pipeline for students to the University of Chicago, junior colleges eventually became community colleges and were often tied to the local tax base to provide a transferable general education curriculum as well as trade programs and certifications meeting the needs of the local context. Public community college programs expanded exponentially after World War II and again in the late 1970s, becoming open-enrollment systems seeking to be accessible to all citizens of the state (Thelin, 2011). It is notable that community colleges now enroll over 40 percent of all college students, including large percentages of low-income, adult, and students of color (US Department of Education, 2019). Leadership programs at community colleges have grown exponentially yet face unique challenges.

Higher education that focused on other marginalized populations emerged in the late 20th century (see MacDonald et al., 2007). It took a long time for the federal government to support Indigenous people seeking higher education. A major step toward that goal was the establishment of tribally controlled
colleges, with the first being Navajo Community College in 1968. Increased United States’ population growth led to the designation of HSIs in 1992 for institutions with 25 percent Latinx students. The landscape of higher education continues to evolve into the 21st century. In 2007, a federal designation of being an AANAPISI was established. HSIs and AANAPISI universities are continually challenged to address the needs, transform policies and practices, and provide focused programs, including leadership development, for enrolled students (Garcia, 2023; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2021). Most colleges and universities in the United States are now more integrated across race, class, gender, and cultural or ethnic diversity, though significant barriers and disparities persist. Historically white universities still have relatively low levels of compositional diversity.

Racialization and erasure

Presidents of early institutions frequently were slave owners, and campuses were built with the labor of enslaved Black people and Native Americans. At the turn of the 19th century in the United States, there arose an awakening that “exposed the moral conflict between . . . declarations of individual and group freedom and their continued reliance upon the enslavement and dispossession of other peoples” (Wilder, 2013, p. 242). Wilder described how the awakening in this era “forced intellectual engagement with these social injustices” (p. 242). Race was the common language of the era and was embedded in political and social discourse. Abolitionist students and faculty across many institutions formed anti-slavery organizations and pressed for campus reforms (Wilder, 2013), while other institutions asserted their support for slavery and educated students as citizens to support Southern interests (Dorn, 2017).

Wilder (2013) observed an emergent erasure of the proslavery dimensions of institutions’ histories over time. Erasure (Patel, 2016) leads to replacement by new narratives that become further embedded in the institution’s history and culture while leaving the impact of the original story unaddressed. The embedded dimensions of each institution’s story continue to this day and became evident in recent years with challenges to who is honored by named buildings, portrait galleries, and campus statuary. “Honoring” those who took part in perpetuating slavery and segregation is a troubling act of symbolic leadership as it reminds many students that institutions were not created to welcome or educate them.
Institutional context shapes leadership practice

Without critical engagement of context, leadership education programs may promote inequity and oppression while professing to facilitate leadership learning for all. Researchers and practitioners should interrogate dominant leadership narratives to reveal the perspectives and practices that perpetuate marginalization and inequity. These narratives are so deeply embedded that they are often invisible, particularly to those with privileged identities who may benefit from their impact. It is evident that comprehensive revisions are needed in leadership education to counteract implicit bias and to focus on equity, inclusion, and social justice (see Wiborg, 2018).

This may best be illustrated with key reflective questions:

- What aspects of the institution’s history have gone unexamined or unaddressed and continue to shape the context for learning?
- How is the institution’s history reflected in the approaches to leadership modeled or taught to students?
- Whose voices/perspectives are included or excluded by those approaches?
- What dominant-culture leadership values are upheld as virtues and rewarded through campus recognition programs? For example, do student organizations have to file a hierarchical list of positional leaders as the only approach used in organizational recognition?
- Are varied approaches to research used to understand the range of students’ world views?
- Are competencies, skills, or espoused values reflective of the multitude of identities represented in the composition of the student body?
- Is there resistance to identity-based leadership programs, the development of inclusive and decolonized curricula, and liberatory methods of teaching?

These and other questions evidence Stein’s (2021) observation that “higher education is both rooted in and contributes to the reproduction of a fundamentally harmful and unsustainable system” (p. 388). Leadership can be viewed as both the cause of, and partial solution to, these issues.

Research on the effects of college on student leadership development

Research examining the effects of various types of institutions on student learning and experiences has proliferated since the mid-20th century (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969), including the impressive three volumes of How College
Affects Students (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) vast research review demonstrated that “students improve their leadership skills during the college years” (p. 226), and that these changes occurred “in ways not attributable to a battery of pre-college characteristics including students’ initial evaluations of their leadership skills and their academic abilities, race-ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other relevant factors” (p. 231). Moreover, Astin’s (1993) earlier research ruled out simple maturation as a driver of these changes in leadership.

Historically, institutional type and control (i.e., public or private) appear to be too distal to show many direct effects on the learning outcomes studied. In more recent research, Mayhew et al. (2016) observed conflicting evidence in numerous studies and “difficulties with disentangling type and control from other between-college attributes”; therefore, they could not draw many conclusions on the effects of institutional type on such outcomes as “cognitive gains, attitudes and values, moral development,” and other post-college gains (p. 536). Of particular note is the entanglement that over one-third of all students transfer between institutions, confounding findings of the effect of institutional type.

College environment and sense of belonging

Previous volumes of How College Affects Students speculated that college environments may be the “mechanism through which more distal institutional attributes, such as selectivity or type might directly influence college outcomes. . . . [They concluded] that studying these characteristics may be more fruitful for understanding between-college effects than exploring structural characteristics” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 540). A more recent “surge of studies of between-college effects is a welcome addition to the literature” in the 2000s (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 115).

Interactional diversity

Indeed, the third volume of How College Affects Students reports a large number of significant relationships connecting dimensions of the college environment with psychosocial outcomes, attitudes, and values. For example, “the racial/ethnic diversity of the undergraduate student body led to more frequent intergroup interactions on campus as well as a greater multicultural orientation on campus, which then led to improved academic and social self-concepts” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 540). In addition, “institutional emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism, peer environments, and student beliefs about the sociopolitical attitudes of the faculty were associated with increases
in numerous civic attitudes and behaviors” (p. 541). However, it is crucial to note that “[a] compositionally diverse student body does not indicate if students experience frequent and meaningful interaction with diverse others” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 41).

Two between-college effects with application to leadership development are the institution’s “emphasis on interactional diversity” as well as “perceptions of a supportive campus environment” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 191). Findings from the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership consistently find that engaging in socio-cultural issues discussions with others contributes to leadership capacity and leadership efficacy (Dugan & Komives, 2010). Mayhew et al. (2016) conclude that “the more students engage diversity, the better prepared they are as leaders” (p. 209).

Campus climate and sense of belonging

Recent research has extended the concept of college environment to examine campus climate, including both racial and gender climate, and the related effect of that climate on students’ sense of belonging. For example, “environments relatively free of prejudice and discrimination were particularly effective in fostering learning among African American students” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, as cited in Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 35).

Importance of student engagement

Interest in the influence of college on student outcomes led Kuh (2005) to conclude that student engagement may be more powerful than institutional characteristics; that is, the activities in which a student engages matter more than what institutions they attend (Kuh, 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016). Few studies report findings for underrepresented students attending predominantly white institutions. Those that do (e.g., the Wabash studies of liberal arts) showed enhanced outcome effects for students of color who were engaged in high-impact practices (HIPs), such as service learning and internships, among others, and that involvement mattered more to those students’ development and growth than to that of the white students involved (Kuh, 2005).

Many institutions are implementing evidence-based practices to enhance the success of underrepresented and underserved populations, such as requiring student participation in HIPs that support overall higher rates of persistence and academic success among these groups (Finley & McNair, 2013; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Kuh, 2008; Kuh & O’Donnell, 2013). However, recent research reveals that while institutions are broadly supporting HIPs,
they are not disaggregating participation within these programs to examine questions of equity (McNair et al., 2020). So, although institutions may put resources toward proliferating HIPs, many are not making sure the programs are accessible to or designed for the very populations they are trying to serve.

Future research

Future scholarship should continue to examine the relationship between campus climate as well as dimensions of institutional type—and thus, historically embedded culture—on student leadership education and development. Taken as a whole, most of the quantitative studies of an institution’s structural or organizational characteristics suggest that campus climate and student experiences are more powerful predictors of leadership development than institutional type (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Within-college effects, along with students’ capacity for socially responsible leadership, are much more powerful drivers of leadership identity and skill development than institution-level effects (Dugan et al., 2012; Dugan & Komives, 2010). However, campus climate and a sense of belonging are undoubtedly embedded in campus history and culture, playing a substantial role in the development and experience of historically marginalized students (Quaye & Harper, 2014).

There is an underlying tension in research related to leadership learning in higher education; we have yet to determine the true effects of a hostile campus climate on student leadership learning and development. Achieving equitable access does not necessarily result in equitable outcomes. As Patton et al. (2019) note, policy-based approaches to enhancing equity, diversity, and inclusion often fail to address the root causes of oppression.

Centering social justice in research on leadership education

The theme we have been presenting should be loud and clear by this point in the chapter. Higher education and leadership education must center social justice to facilitate equitable student learning and development and to redress historical and contemporary harm, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. In their book *Shifting the Mindset: Socially Just Leadership Education*, Guthrie and Chunoo (2021) issue a call to action for all leadership educators: “Deconstructing current ways of leadership education is critical to interrupting the hitherto unchallenged forces of oppression and whiteness that plague leadership development programs in higher education. It is time to take action,
engage, and change how some have been excluded from leadership education, specifically those from historically marginalized groups” (p.272). The same sentiment should be applied to research on leadership learning and development. A focus on context in higher education and leadership education can help researchers address structural oppression, remove barriers, and contribute to more just, equitable, and inclusive leadership learning.

**Conclusion**

Describing research on leadership and leadership development as “still relatively immature” in their extensive 25-year review, Day et al. (2014) encouraged researchers to find hope in the numerous opportunities to advance the field: “Looking ahead to the ensuing 25 years, it seems certain that if scholars answer the call, the field will continue to progress to a less primitive state. This will stimulate better leadership and, consequently, foster better organizations, communities, and societies” (p.80). The processes of leadership research and practice never feel finished. This book urges scholars and practitioners to reject the “epistemology of ignorance” (Sholock, 2012) in which scholars ignore critical and contextual factors that shape leadership learning and development in higher education.

Emphasizing context challenges researchers to realize they are a part of that very context by the mere process of studying it. The researcher should be asking Patel’s (2016) questions of “Why this? Why me? Why now?” which recognize the centrality of learning, knowledge, and context (p.57), and identifying the researcher’s positionality in the research endeavor. As editors of this book, we too addressed these questions and were compelled by the “Why now?” question of contemporary times to say that this work must proceed in earnest to center future work of leadership education and research, particularly in the United States—how can it not? We intend that this book stimulates new thinking to push the boundaries of leadership education research in its arc of being more equitable and just, so its application to practice can truly develop leadership capacity in the individuals and groups who come together to make this a better world.
References


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