Capstone Thesis

Student Leaders' in Higher Education Defining Leadership

Kolton Pierson

Southern Utah University

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Thesis and Capstone Chair:
Kevin Stein, PhD

Kolton Pierson

Southern Utah University

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Abstract

This research sought to discern how student leaders define leadership. There is much research done on the subject of leadership, but very little of it focuses on the younger population (15 to 24) and even less is focused on students in higher education. In this study, 15 students were selected and interviewed to determine their thoughts about what characterizes an outstanding leader. These students were selected from seven distinct clubs/organizations that are common across college campuses (Florea, 2021). The content of these interviews was then categorized as established by Tamkin, Hirsh, Pearson, and Constable (2010). The different leadership categories are as follows: thinking systematically an acting long-term, bringing meaning to life, applying the spirit not the letter of the law, self-aware and authentic leadership first, their own needs second, giving time and space to others, growing people through performance, putting 'we' before 'me', taking deeper breaths and holding them longer. This research identifies where student leaders from distinct areas of leadership across a college campus stand in regards to outstanding leadership as well as provides insight as to what administrators at higher education institutions could do to further develop these ambitious students to build stronger leaders across the board.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this master's degree was very much a team effort. I have been fortunate to receive much help and guidance along the way in this program from professors and staff throughout the communication department. Kevin Stein, who was so willing to chair my research, deserves so much credit for the time that he has put into me to improve my research and writing skills. I also received enlightening guidance from Jonathan Holiman, who pushed me to find new and innovative ways to approach research. The communication department here at Southern Utah University has taken the time to invest in me as an aspiring professional, and I am forever grateful for that.

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My time here at Southern Utah University will always be treasured. Life has taught me many lessons as I have gone through the last five years of my education here at this wonderful institution. The SUU phrase, learning lives forever, will always be burned in my heart as I continue to find new and exciting ways to improve myself and the world around me. Thank you.

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Introduction

There is a crisis in the world of higher education. Students are continuing to go to college, but they are not progressing towards their main goal of obtaining a meaningful career. This doesn't have to do with the lack of available jobs, but rather that college graduates do not have the necessary skills that employers are looking for. According to the National Association of College and Employers (NACE) there are eight core competencies that college students should have after they graduate, and they are lacking in seven of these eight competencies. One of the skills with the greatest discrepancies is leadership. This discrepancy comes in large part because the majority of college students think that they are proficient in this area, while the employers do not think so. Over 70% of college graduates feel they are proficient in this area, while only 33% of employers would say that these students are proficient (NACE Staff, 2018). This is almost a 40% difference which makes this issue difficult to navigate.

There are hundreds of articles written about leadership, but they are rarely targeted towards college students, and even less often are they targeted to student development. There are opportunities to get involved in areas of leadership on every college campus across the nation (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). These programs are not being used to their fullness, because employers are in agreement that college graduates are still not ready to enter leadership in their careers- despite all of these opportunities. These student leaders are getting involved, but they aren't receiving a full training on the diverse areas of leadership.

This research centered around discovering how students define leadership to discover what areas are being taught and what areas are being left out in the development of outstanding leaders. These nine categories of outstanding leadership have been established by the Work Foundation at Lancaster University (2021) one of the top think tanks in the world for improving

work, increasing the labor market, and benefiting the wider economy for over a hundred years.

These nine categories have been tried and tested in the labor market, and they have been found

effective (Tamkin, Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable, 2010). However, they have never been studied

in their application to college students. Through a thorough qualitative study, 15 college students

across seven distinct clubs were interviewed and reviewed for their strengths and weaknesses in

regards to these proven categories of outstanding leadership. Higher education institutions will

be able to take this information and develop more established and prepared leaders to carry the

labor market forward into the future.

Literature Review

This literature review covers the most important topics within the progression of college

students including leadership development, youth leadership, leadership development in higher

education, and outstanding leadership.

Leadership Development

Ever since the first accounts of humans inhabiting earth, there has been a need for

leadership. This leadership varies in its style and application, but it will always be a necessary

part of functional societies. There have been countless studies conducted to try and solidify the

definition of leadership, but it still remains elusive (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2006). It

is a concept that has always been around and continues to change, but it is not a cut and dry term.

The natural phenomenon that is leadership does have varying levels of application as Tamkin,

Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable (2010) mentioned when defining the difference between good and

outstanding leaders. Leadership often looks a little different for every person. However, there has

to be some kind of process of how this leadership is obtained.

Brungardt (1996) explained that leadership is developed in stages throughout the lifespan, including early childhood and adolescence experiences, formal education experiences, on-the-job experiences, and specialized leadership education. Leadership is learned and practiced over a lifetime as individuals learn, apply, and adapt different lessons that they learn from mentors, experiences, and research.

This is further explained by Komives, Mainella, Longerbeam, Osteen, and Owen (2006), who broke down the development of leadership identity into six stages. These stages include awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identified, leadership differentiated, generativity, and integration/synthesis. Good leaders create habits over time through a variety of patterns and actions, and this needs to be encouraged by others early on in their development (Kouzes & Posner, 1988). Leadership can start to be understood very early in the lifespan as children begin to observe how their parents interact with others and with each other. Throughout the development process, youth begin to develop self-authorship as they construct their own realities and understand their interdependent part in the lives of others (Kegan, 1994). These individuals start to understand where they fit into the grand scheme of things, and become leaders of their own lives, rather than simply followers of what happens in the world around them. This is followed by other stages of psychosocial and cognitive development stages that are critical to developing leadership identity (Komives, Mainella, Longerbeam, Osteen & Owen, 2006). Individuals must be at a certain level of brain development in order to start intentionally displaying characteristics of leadership. As people are exposed to different forms of leadership during their development, it will be more foundational for them as they begin to really understand and deliberately display different aspects of leadership.

As individuals continue to develop throughout their adolescence, they continue to understand the importance of obtaining and displaying leadership. This will happen as they continue to make sense of the world around them through seven sense-making characteristics: identity, retrospect enactment, social cues, ongoing cues, extracted cues, and plausibility (Weick, 1995). This development of mind allows for more complex thinking which leads people to see how they fit into the cog with everyone around them. This ability to think about how people interrelate is known as 'collective mind,' and it influences the ability to understand leadership (Weick & Roberts, 1993). Leadership, at its core, is a social experience and can only be done as long as there are people around to influence. McCauley-Smith, Williams, Gillon, and Braganza (2015) wrote about the importance of sense making in our lives by defining it as "a social process of collective interactions through which people interpret and understand leadership" (pg. 312). This ability to make sense of how people are influencing and interrelating with each other allows one to be able to interpret and apply leadership principles that they deem appropriate for their situation.

As individuals begin to see their place in the larger society, they begin to recognize that different problems require different solutions. Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002) stated that leadership is contextual. People need to understand that they need to be adaptive and flexible as they are put in various positions that they need to lead. This is noted clearly by Hersey and Blanchard (1969) through situational leadership theory. This states that effective leadership needs to be adapted to the situation, the problem, and the people that are learning. The leadership style needs to fit the situation, and the needs of others. This original model only included telling (high directive, low supportive), selling (high-directive, high supportive), participating (low directive, high supportive), and delegating (low directive, low supportive). Now there are many

leadership styles that include transformational leadership - constant innovation and

improvement, transactional leadership - a rigid chain of command and supervision, autocratic

leadership - control is given to one person with little input from others, democratic leadership -

encourages group participation, laissez-faire leadership - also known as delegative leadership to

manage intrinsically motivated individuals, and many more (Maryville, 2020). There are many

different ways to lead others, and it is up to the leader to have the wherewithal to be able to adapt

his/her leadership as they deem fit to best suit the needs of those they oversee. The leader needs

to be able to "continuously monitor and acclimatize their leadership behavior to each follower's

task maturity" (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014, pg. 167). This allows for both leader and follower

to grow in their effectiveness and capacity as they take on new tasks, receiving guidance through

the process. The many different leadership styles allow for more efficiency in unique situations,

and will allow the leader to continue developing themselves over time.

Youth Leadership

If leaders are to reach new heights and implement innovative solutions, they need to be

taught early on in their lives. As students develop and progress through their secondary

education, they are in a prime position to grow as their minds mold and make sense of the world

around them. This ideal position is defined by the World Health Organization as the 'youth'

group ages 15-24 (WHO, 2020). This is a very vulnerable time for these individuals as they are

exposed to many objects and topics that they never knew existed. Teaching these youth

leadership skills can help to lower drug use, violence, teen pregnancy, and much more (Klau,

2006). In his efforts to help these young, aspiring leaders to develop, Klaue noted a study found

from the Carnegie Foundation that examined 120 youth-based organizations across the United

States. This study found that there is a huge disconnect between what these organizations are

teaching these youth and what they really need. Heifetz (1994) sought to solve the disconnect with adaptive leadership, which seeks to differentiate between authority and leadership. Many youth believe that one must first obtain a title or a position before they can be a leader, but this is not the case. These youth can display leadership characteristics no matter their situation. Many of these individuals are already displaying leadership through their responsibilities as babysitters, employees, volunteer work, involvement at the school or in the community, etc. However, there isn't anyone there helping them to conceptualize their efforts, and showing them how to connect the dots on what they are doing as it relates to leadership (Van Linden & Fertman, 1998). These youth have the desire and the capacity to learn leadership as they clearly demonstrate through their actions and their efforts, however they need to be guided and directed to understand what leadership really means.

There is great value in allowing these youth to get involved from an early age. There are many opportunities to get involved with youth leadership councils and initiatives, but they are not always being promoted as those that supervise them often have other priorities (Greiman & Addington, 2008). There are many opportunities for these students and individuals to learn and grow while at school and with their peers, but we often don't take the necessary time to teach them. It is also important that mentors do more than simply teach the principles as outlined in a book. These individuals will learn better as they are engrossed in a hands-on experience where they are able to practice what they are learning, and understand the best ways for each concept to be employed (DesMarais, J., Yang, T., & Farzanehkia, F., 2000). These youth need intentional leaders who are going to help them have leadership experiences that will allow them to expand their leadership potential. Those who are leading them need to prioritize their opportunities for growth and deliberately coach them through the experiences. Greiman and Addington (2008)

emphasized the importance of supporting these students and encouraging youth development

alongside youth leadership in order to encompass a holistic process of growth that occurs during

these important years. These students are learning much in the classroom, but it is important to

take the time needed in order to allow them to grow into leaders that can create an innovative and

productive future for everyone.

Leadership Development in Higher Education

No matter where one attends college, there are programs designed to help students get

involved. These programs can be used to intentionally teach students valuable leadership skills

that will help them as they progress in their careers and in their communities (Riggio, Ciulla, &

Sorenson, 2003). These programs can use leadership development more often to increase in

effectiveness.

Organizations that facilitate education and learning, play an integral role in developing

leadership. Ever since the establishment of Harvard College in 1636 one of their main goals has

been to develop leaders (Brubacher, & Rudy, 1976). This mission still has not changed despite

almost four centuries of time passing. However, as time goes on, there are less and less potential

leaders being developed in the educational sector (Gronn, 2007; MacBeath, 2006). Students are

becoming less interested in leadership as there is less access to available mentors and resources

to help them understand how to develop positive leadership abilities. This inaccessibility to

mentors and student programming intended to develop student leaders is leaving a huge gap in

the amount of students who are developing leadership as an asset to bring into their future

careers. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), leadership is

one of the top eight skills and characteristics that college graduates should have. However, only

33.0% of employers believe that students are proficient in leadership upon graduation (NACE

Staff, 2018). This deficit is leaving many students unable to locate jobs, and is leaving many employers without competent leaders. This is also forcing businesses to spend billions of dollars on leadership development because their employees are not learning necessary leadership skills during their college experiences (Allen & Hartman, 2008). Businesses and organizations need young leaders who understand what it takes to influence and persuade individuals in order to progress their companies forward.

This lack of leadership development in higher education is causing negative repercussions in all parts of society. Some of these major impacts include less civic participation at a local, state, and federal level as well as less religious and cultural participation (Gannon, 2001). These talented young students have no desire to participate in these areas because they have never had programs or mentors to help them cultivate their skills and desires to become leaders. McKinsey and Company (as cited in Michaels, Kartford-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001) stated that there is a growing shortage of interest in leadership that, in a corporate world report they even referred to it as a 'war' that is being fought to find leadership talent. There are not many college students taking the time to learn about leadership, and much of this comes from the faculty and administration. As these students graduate, they are becoming less and less willing to take on the essential leadership roles in the organizations they choose to work for (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007). These companies are calling for innovative leaders to continue taking them to the next level, and that is what they are hoping to get out of these young college graduates. However, in the world of education the pool of potential leaders has declined over the last several years (Gronn, 2007; MacBeath, 2006). This is not just a problem in education, but in all aspects of business, communities, non-profit organizations, healthcare, etc.

Higher education plays such an important role in helping these students to develop as leaders. There are many changes occurring in students' lives, and they need to be mentored in order to develop crucial leadership skills (Astin & Astin, 2000). There is not as much talent for leadership as there used to be, and student affairs professionals as well as other faculty and staff need to take responsibility for the training and development of these leaders. Thompson (2006) discovered that the greatest contributing college resource that helps students believe they can be leaders and understand leadership is the impact of campus-wide interactions, especially with faculty, administrators, and peers. The more time devoted to advising students in more than just their class schedule, the more desire these students have to develop leadership abilities. As Jenkins (2013) mentioned, there needs to be more dedicated effort into instructing faculty and staff about student trends in order to help them be more targeted in their interactions with students to help them develop a sense of leadership.

There are many ideas and models exploring the most effective way to develop undergraduate leaders. One of the most common comes from Conger (1992). He suggested four main areas to focus in with leadership development: personal growth, conceptual understanding, feedback, and skill building. Allen and Hartman (2009) attempted to build off of this theory for student leadership development by asking how students feel they would like to learn leadership, discovering that most students had an affinity for developmental activities that focused primarily on personal growth and skill building. They also discovered that students want to focus on their own goals and how they can be accomplished through personal growth and skill building. These students need help from mentors to show them how their interests and talents will help them grow as leaders through self-development opportunities. This was even further examined by Jenkins (2013), who focused on approaches based around skill building, personal growth,

conceptual understanding and feedback, traditional assessment, research/observation conceptual understanding, interactive conceptual understanding, and class discussion. He suggested that to foster this personal growth a variety of activities should be included in leadership instruction including reflective journaling, service learning, ice breakers, individual leadership plans, and short writing. All of these practices encourage student leaders to ponder on the lessons they are being taught in their various programs.This collaborative approach is attempting to modernize some of Conger's original methods.

Other methods have been used to measure and develop student programs. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI; Kouzes & Posner, 1988) is a leadership assessment tool used by many respected organizations that attempts to identify specific actions and behaviors that managers are implementing when they feel they are at their best. These behaviors have been labeled as Challenging the Process, Inspiring a Shared Vision, Enabling Others to Act, Modeling the Way, and Encouraging the Heart. This tool has been taken from its original form, and implemented to students. This Student-LPI, developed by Posner and Brodsky (1992) included 30 scripted statements that students could rank on a Likert-scale of 1 to 5 (1 being rare or not frequently and 5 representing almost always or very frequently). Posner (2012) then attempted to apply all of his findings to the various student leadership opportunities from student government, admissions, athletics, Greeks, community service centers, etc. Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt (2000) also attempted to find the most effective student leadership development programs (SLDPs), and they encourage administrators to be aware of the specific context that these students find themselves in. They suggest that the most successful SLDPs apply common best practice elements into their curriculum through self-assessment and reflection, skill-building, intercultural issues, and experiential learning activities. The Leadership Attitudes and Beliefs Scale III (LABS-III),

contains a scale representing Hierarchical Thinking and Systemic Thinking. This scale was developed by Wielkiewicz (2000) to measure what college students thought about their leadership skills. This allows students to self-evaluate where they feel their strengths are, and focus their efforts on where they personally feel they can improve.

As shown above, there are many different approaches to measure and develop student leaders. However, in order to apply any of this to undergraduate students to better prepare them for the grand plans that lie ahead, researchers need to understand what these students actually believe about leadership, specifically what makes a great leader. From here, tools and programs can be implemented to take students from their current mindset on leadership to more developed and honed characteristics that will help propel the future of business, healthcare, non-profit organizations, schooling, etc.

Outstanding Leadership

The description of outstanding leadership is derived from Kouzes and Posner's (1988) research about the LPI that attempted to define the characteristics and attributes that managers practiced while at their highest performance. This inventory helps explain the most important leadership qualities from individuals who are practicing them daily. This research was then related to undergraduate students through the work of Posner and Brodsky (1992) as they attempted to develop a tool that would help test college students, and assess them on the leadership abilities that they possessed as well as their capacity to grow. The students who participated in this study represented a diverse group of student leaders from various organizations across campus (e.g. student government, clubs, public service, etc.). Posner (2012) then took this information, and narrowed it down into five key leadership practices that student leaders deem as important. These five practices are:

1. Model the Way: Find your voice and affirm shared ideals; set the example by aligning actions and values.

2. Inspire a Shared Vision: Envision the future, and help the team to see how to get there.

3. Challenge the Process: Search for opportunities through innovation and initiative; take risks and experiment; celebrate the small victories

4. Enable Others to Act: Empower other individuals to grow and develop through collaborative effort.

5. Encourage the Heart: Show gratitude towards individuals, and create a community that believes in and supports one another.

Posner provided information that has helped narrow down what student leaders deem to be important in their experience.

This is taken one step further by taking the aforementioned important skills and attributes that students believe to be important, and applying them to a professional organization as students work to obtain careers upon graduation. These ideas are taken from the Work Foundation through Lancaster University (2021) as one of the leading think tanks for improving work, the labor market, and the wider economy for over a hundred years. As higher education administrators work with employers to bridge the proficiency gap on leadership development of undergraduate students, these characteristics will help these students close that gap and be exceptionally more prepared for the workplace. These outstanding characteristics researched by Tamkin, Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable (2010) took the concepts from the Student-LPI, and clearly defined them in an attainable way for students to work toward. These nine themes of outstanding leadership are:

1. Think systematically and act long-term - Acting for the long-term benefit of the organization, and recognizing the interconnected nature all facets therein.

2. Bring meaning to life - Focus on a strong, shared sense of purpose across the organization. Perpetuates passion and connection.

3. Apply the spirit not the letter of the law - Focus on processes and systems that provide clarity, give structure, provide feedback, and allow for discussion. Flexibility and humanity are at the forefront of their process.

4. Self-aware and authentic to leadership first, their own needs second - Unite a deep understanding of others, and are aware of their ability to impact others as a role model

5. Understand that talk is work - Awareness that outstanding leadership is developed through long-term trusting and positive relationships. Take time to understand what motivates others, and how they can support.

6. Give time and space to others - Give ample amount of time to all that you work with, and give them the creative freedom and influence over the specific tasks.

7. Grow people through performance - Invest in their people, and use the daily challenges to encourage growth, learning, and engagement.

8. Put 'we' before 'me' - Work hard on issues of team spirit, shared decision making, and collaboration. Encourage others to get involved, and develop a strong bond within and between teams.

9. Take deeper breaths and hold them longer - Act with consistency by delivering on promises to enable other people to trust them, take risks, innovate, and go above and beyond in their responsibilities.

These are the nine essential categories that undergraduate students need to learn in order to be ready for their futures in leadership. This gap can only be closed through the intentional evaluation and teaching of these characteristics which can only be fulfilled once an understanding of university students' current perspectives on leadership is attained.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How do student leaders at Southern Utah University currently define leadership?

RQ 2: How do student leaders from varying groups define leadership?

RQ 3: What is lacking from students' definition of leadership, and how can it be improved?

Research Method

To further explore the qualities of leadership necessary to help students excel in their college experience and stand out as they apply for careers and graduate schools, a qualitative study was conducted. There is a wealth of information and research done regarding what student leaders need to learn and develop, as mentioned in the literature review. The goal of student leadership programs should be to help students obtain the necessary job competencies to acquire advanced leadership positions in their respective fields as well as increase their marketability for graduate schools (Garza, 2000; as cited in Posner, 2009). With the goal of most students being long-term careers and/or graduate school, it is essential to know exactly what employers and graduate school admission committees are looking for.

This link between what employers are looking for, and what students need to develop is brought to us by NACE, as mentioned in the literature review. This national industry noted that only 33.0% of employers feel that students are developed enough as leaders to begin working in their desired fields (NACE Staff, 2018). This deficit denotes an urgency to gather more

information from these professional industries to determine what leadership traits and characteristics these undergraduate students should be developing.

As employers continue to seek more developed leaders upon graduation, there are many administrators and companies looking to fill this gap. One of the most renowned is The Work Foundation at Lancaster University which is one of the leading think tanks in the world for increasing the development of those entering the labor market to improve the overall economy (2021). These researchers have gone to considerable lengths to ensure that the needs of employers are being met in regards to what they view are outstanding leaders. Tamkin, Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable (2010) conducted 262 in-depth interviews with some well-known and enduring organizations. These interviews led to nine characteristics that these companies deemed as outstanding characteristics of leadership that they look for in any applicant. These nine characteristics have been defined by the researchers, and the definitions were used as presented in the literature review above.

In order to accumulate an accurate sample of undergraduate students and their thoughts on leadership, fifteen individual interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. These students were selected from what Florea (2021) deemed as the most common types of US college student organizations. These seven distinct organizations are: academic and educational organizations, community service organizations, media and publication organizations, political or multicultural organizations, recreation and sports organizations, student government organizations, and religious or spiritual organizations. Students at Southern Utah University were selected from each of these groups with more representation being given to groups that have a greater number of students involved in the organizations. This allowed for greater ability to take the information gathered from this study, and apply it to other universities

as they have similar types of organizations, and need similar types of leadership development within them.

A qualitative study is the most appropriate method for understanding the raw thoughts and emotions that students currently have which is why interviews were conducted. The 15 interview participants were sought after from each of the seven organizations listed above. These students participated willingly in the interviews, and were asked the same five questions with slight variation on follow-up questions depending on personal experience. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to code and analyze the data configured from the students. For this research, identities remained anonymous by keeping the organizations broad, only utilizing the titles given by Florea (2021). The students will simply be referred to as 'the student from a religious and spiritual organization' unless there are multiple students within one category in which circumstance the students will be assigned a letter as well such as 'student B from a student government organization. This allowed for the research to be evaluated more specifically based on each type of organization while keeping the identity of the specific club or opportunity anonymous. Participants are referred to using the gender-neutral terms they/them/theirs in order to further promote anonymity.

The interviews conducted were organized to better understand where students' thoughts on leadership were in conjunction with what Tamkin, Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable (2010) researched employers seek after. The interview questions which can be found in Appendix I, and the analysis were based around the nine characteristics mentioned above in order to develop an applicable plan that university staff and administrators can utilize to enhance their SLDPs.

IRB approval was obtained in order to conduct these interviews to ensure that guidelines on anonymity, confidentiality, and participant safety were being followed. The recorded

interviews were transcribed and kept confidential to protect the identities of those involved while raking the information for patterns and trends. The data has been kept confidential and secure since its collection.

In this qualitative research study, I conducted fifteen unique interviews to analyze the top 7 types of clubs that exist at universities across the country. Florea (2021) deems these the most common clubs across university campuses: academic and educational organizations, community service organizations, media and publication organizations, political or multicultural organizations, recreation and sports organizations, student government organizations, and religious or spiritual organizations. At least two members from each area were interviewed with an additional member of academic and educational organizations as this is one of the most prevalent groups across college campuses. This will allow for greater replication of the designed outline.

Analysis

The interviews were analyzed through an open-coding strategy to determine each individual's take on leadership. Throughout all of the interviews there were 359 different statements that related one of the nine categories of outstanding leadership which Tamkin, Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable (2010) defined. These categories are referenced in the literature review and encompass most of the statements that were presented by the student leaders who participated. In this research, there are several frequencies reported. However, they are not reported in an attempt to generalize the data, but rather to help the reader more clearly understand the patterns and prevalence of the presented themes. The most commonly referred to category was *talk is work* which accounted for 20.8% of the statements. The second and third most common categories were very close in frequency. *Self-aware and authentic leadership*

accounted for 15.8% followed by *take deeper breaths* which accounted for 15.5% of statements.

These were followed by *bringing meaning to life* which accounted for 10.5%, *thinking*

systematically, and *putting 'we' before 'me'* which both accounted for 9.7% of the statements.

Next, was *growing people through performance* which accounted for 6.4% of the statements, and

the least commonly referred to were *applying the spirit of the law*, and *giving time and space*

which only accounted for 5.8% of the total statements. (See chart 1.1)

This data provided for some interesting insight into the kinds of leadership that are

present at Southern Utah University. This research answered the question regarding how students

at this university define leadership and gives insight into what is lacking from their definition.

All of the nine categories were present in these interviews, but there are clear distinctions

between the amount used for each category.

There are also differences in the categories used by each type of club/organization on

campus. *Talk is work* was the highest category for several different clubs, including

religious/spiritual organizations (34.4% of their total), recreation and sport organizations (33.9%

of their total), and academic and educational organizations (15.1% of their total). Political and

Multicultural organizations were the only group to have *take deeper breaths and hold them*

longer as their highest category (26.6% of total). Both student government organizations (20.4%

of total) and community service organizations (20.8% of total) had *self-aware and authentic*

leadership first, their own needs second as their highest category. The highest category for media

and publication organizations was *bringing meaning to life* (22.5% of their total). Each

organization had different frequencies in each category in the different interviews which gives

insight into what these student leaders have experienced in terms of leadership as well as what

they are lacking (See charts 2.2 - 2.8).

Chart 2.1 Overall

Amount

Think Systematically
9.7%

Bring Meaning to Life
10.5%

Apply the Spirit of th...
5.8%

Self-aware and Auth...
15.8%

Take Deeper Breaths
15.5%

Put 'We' Before 'Me'
9.7%

Grow People throug...
6.4%

Give Time and space
5.8%

Talk is Work
20.8%
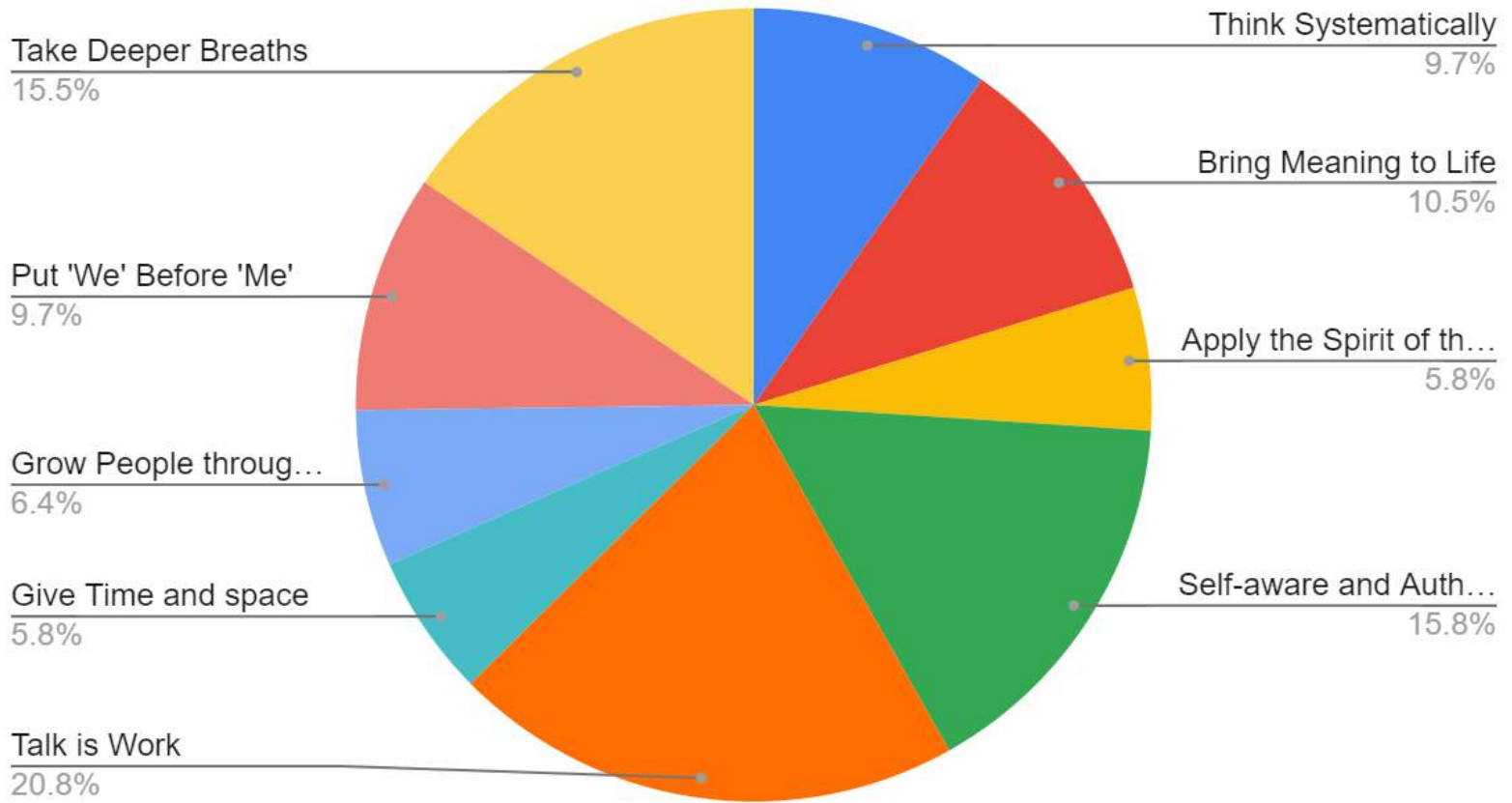
Chart 2.2 Academic and Educational Organizations

Amount

Think Systematically
7.6%

Take Deeper Breaths
13.6%

Bring Meaning to Life
9.1%

Put 'We' Before 'Me'
9.1%

Apply the Spirit of th...
7.6%

Grow People throug...
12.1%

Self-aware and Auth...
12.1%

Give Time and space
13.6%

Talk is Work
15.2%
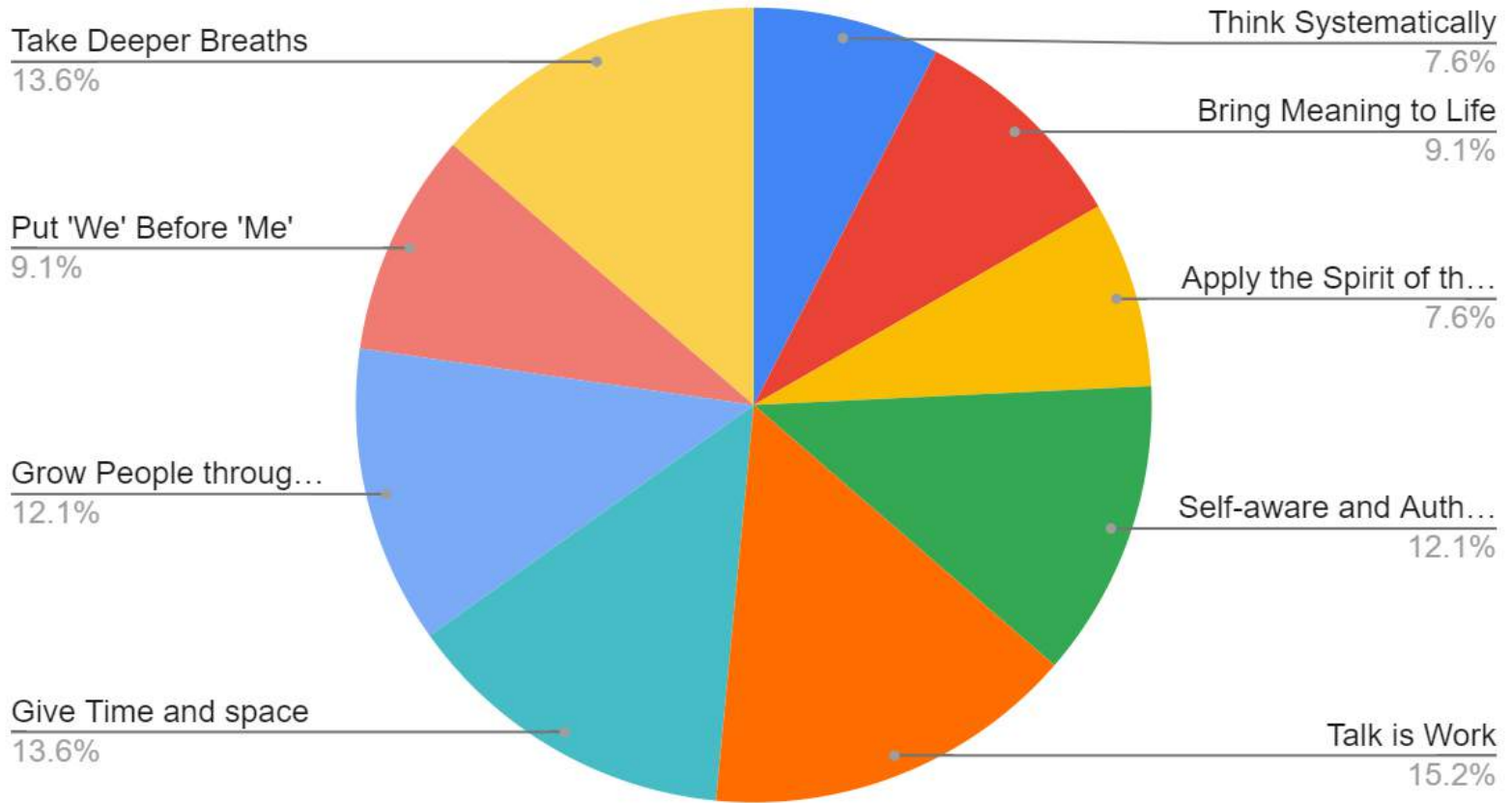
Chart 2.3 Community Service Organizations

Amount

Think Systematically
4.2%

Bring Meaning to Life
12.5%

Apply the Spirit of th…
14.6%

Self-aware and Auth…
20.8%

Talk is Work
18.8%

Grow People throug…
2.1%

Put 'We' Before 'Me'
10.4%

Take Deeper Breaths
16.7%
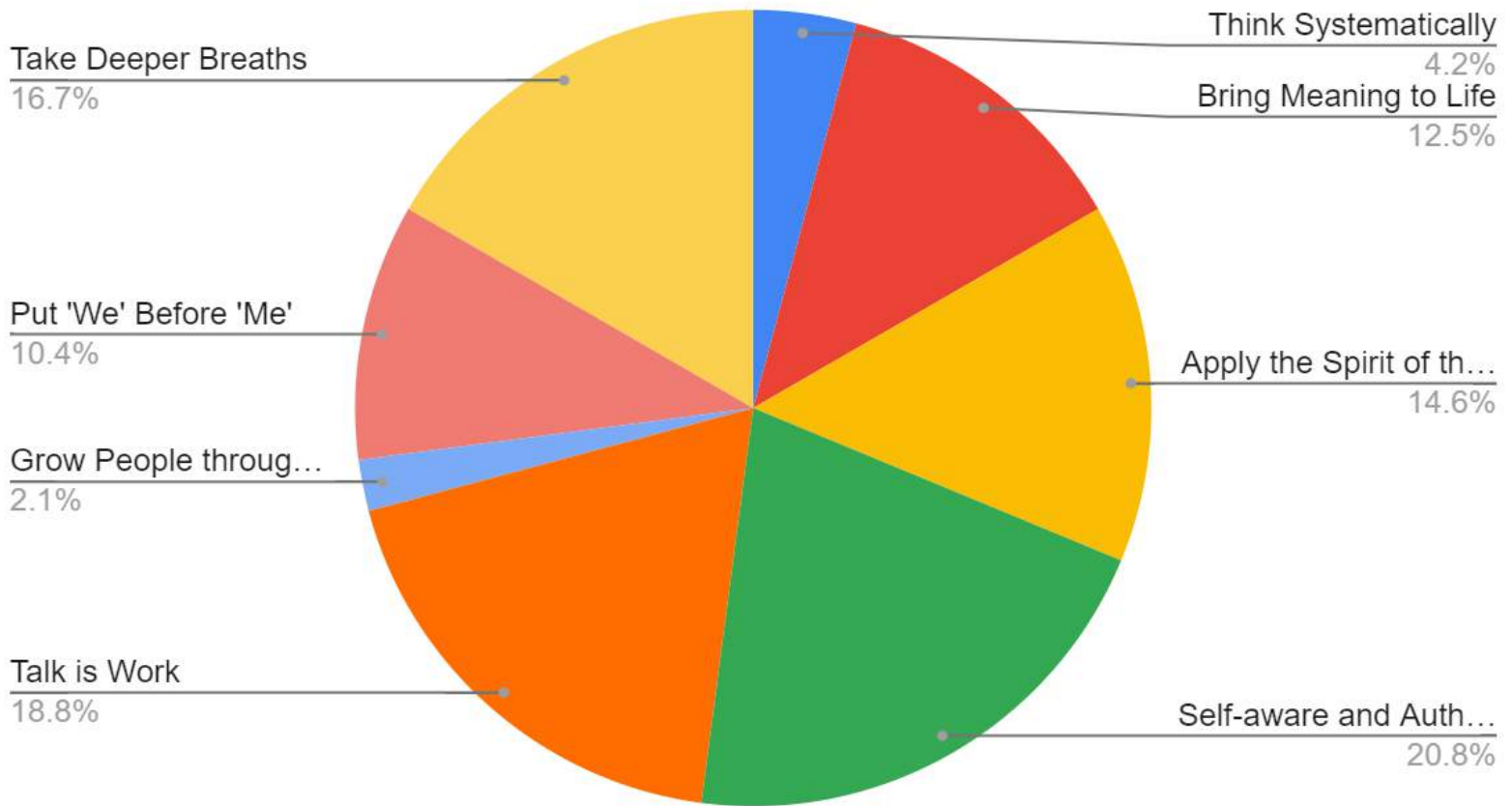
Chart 2.4 Media and Public Organizations

Amount

Take Deeper Breaths
5.0%

Put 'We' Before 'Me'
2.5%

Grow People throug…
12.5%

Give Time and space
5.0%

Talk is Work
17.5%

Think Systematically
12.5%

Bring Meaning to Life
22.5%

Apply the Spirit of th…
5.0%

Self-aware and Auth…
17.5%
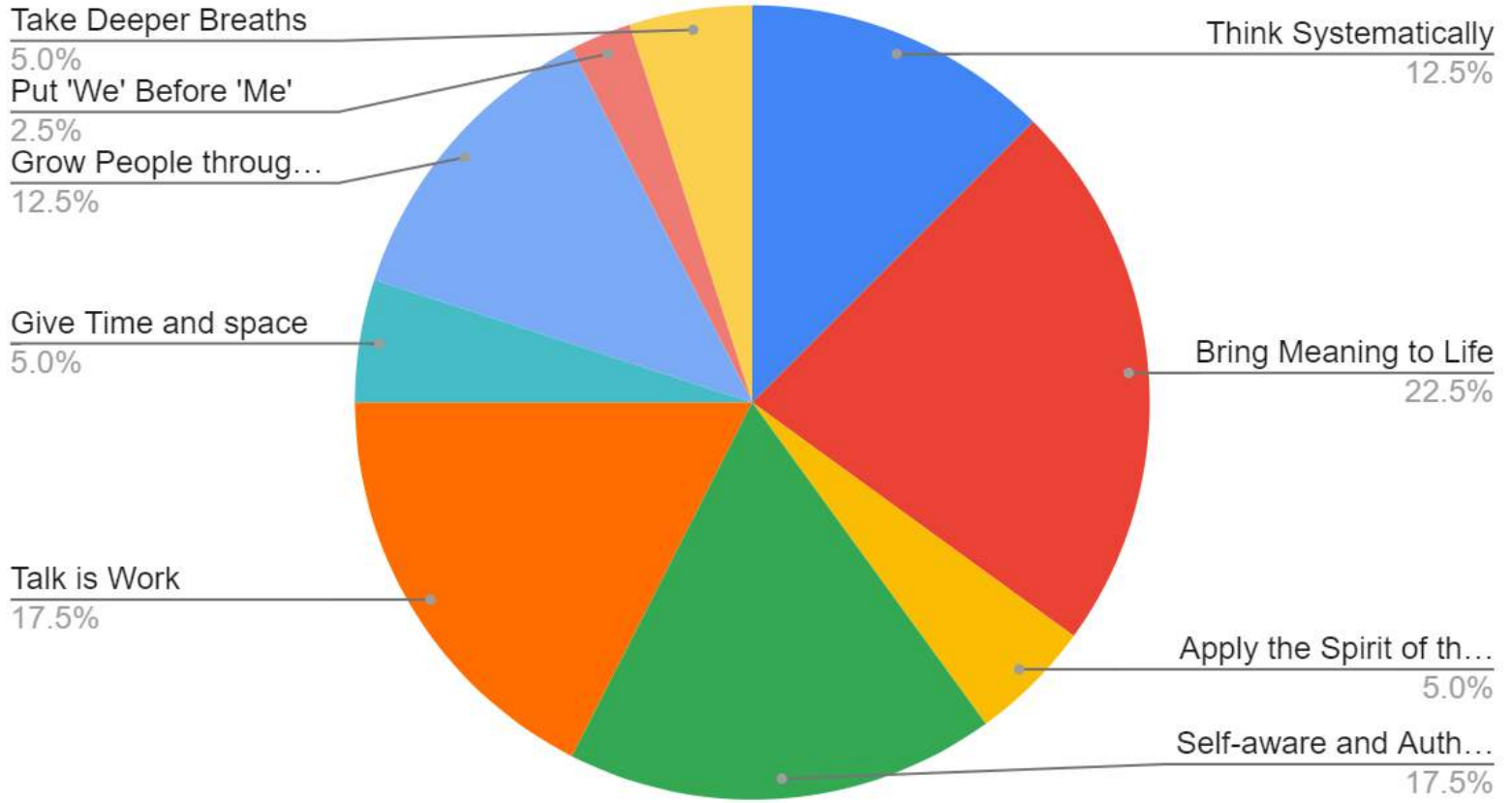
Chart 2.5 Political or Multicultural Organizations

Amount

Think Systematically
15.6%

Bring Meaning to Life
7.8%

Apply the Spirit of th…
1.6%

Self-aware and Auth…
18.8%

Take Deeper Breaths
26.6%

Put 'We' Before 'Me'
9.4%

Grow People throug…
1.6%

Give Time and space
3.1%

Talk is Work
15.6%
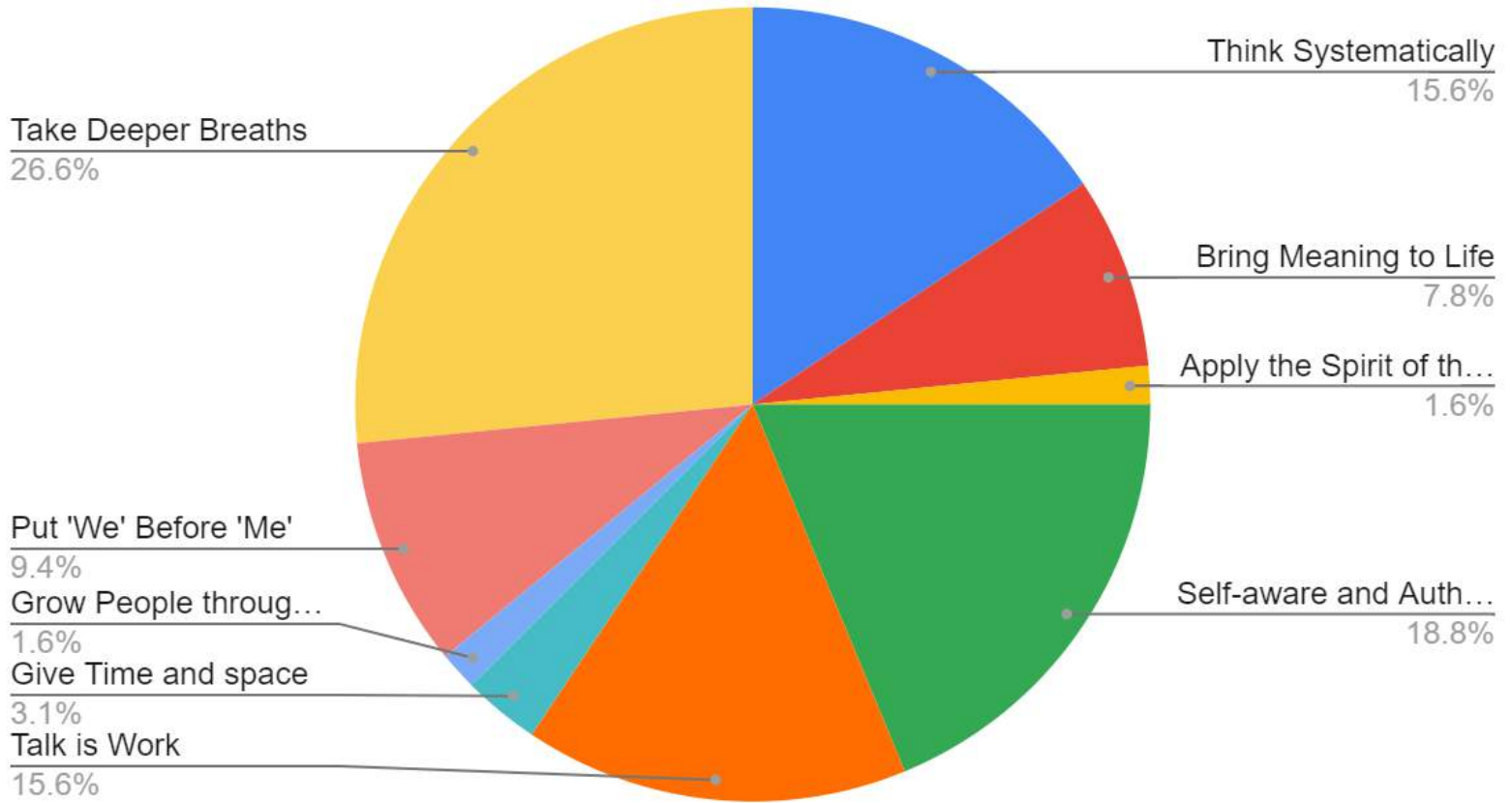
Chart 2.6 Recreation and Sports Organizations

Amount

Take Deeper Breaths
12.9%

Put 'We' Before 'Me'
9.7%

Grow People throug…
8.1%

Give Time and space
4.8%

Think Systematically
3.2%

Bring Meaning to Life
8.1%

Apply the Spirit of th…
4.8%

Self-aware and Auth…
14.5%

Talk is Work
33.9%
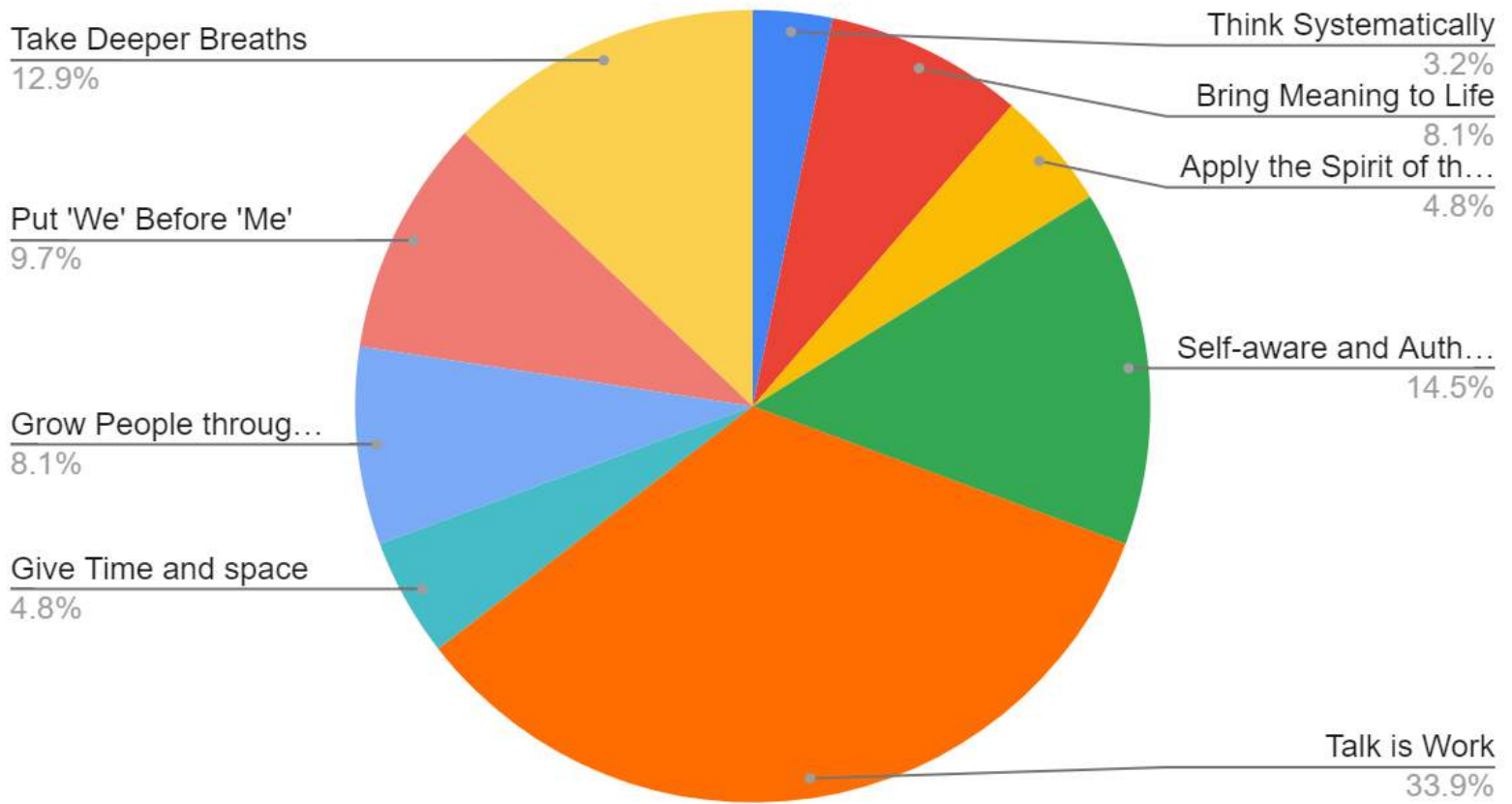
Chart 2.7 Student Government Organizations

Amount

Take Deeper Breaths
14.3%

Put 'We' Before 'Me'
14.3%

Grow People throug…
4.1%

Give Time and space
4.1%

Talk is Work
14.3%

Think Systematically
18.4%

Bring Meaning to Life
10.2%

Self-aware and Auth…
20.4%
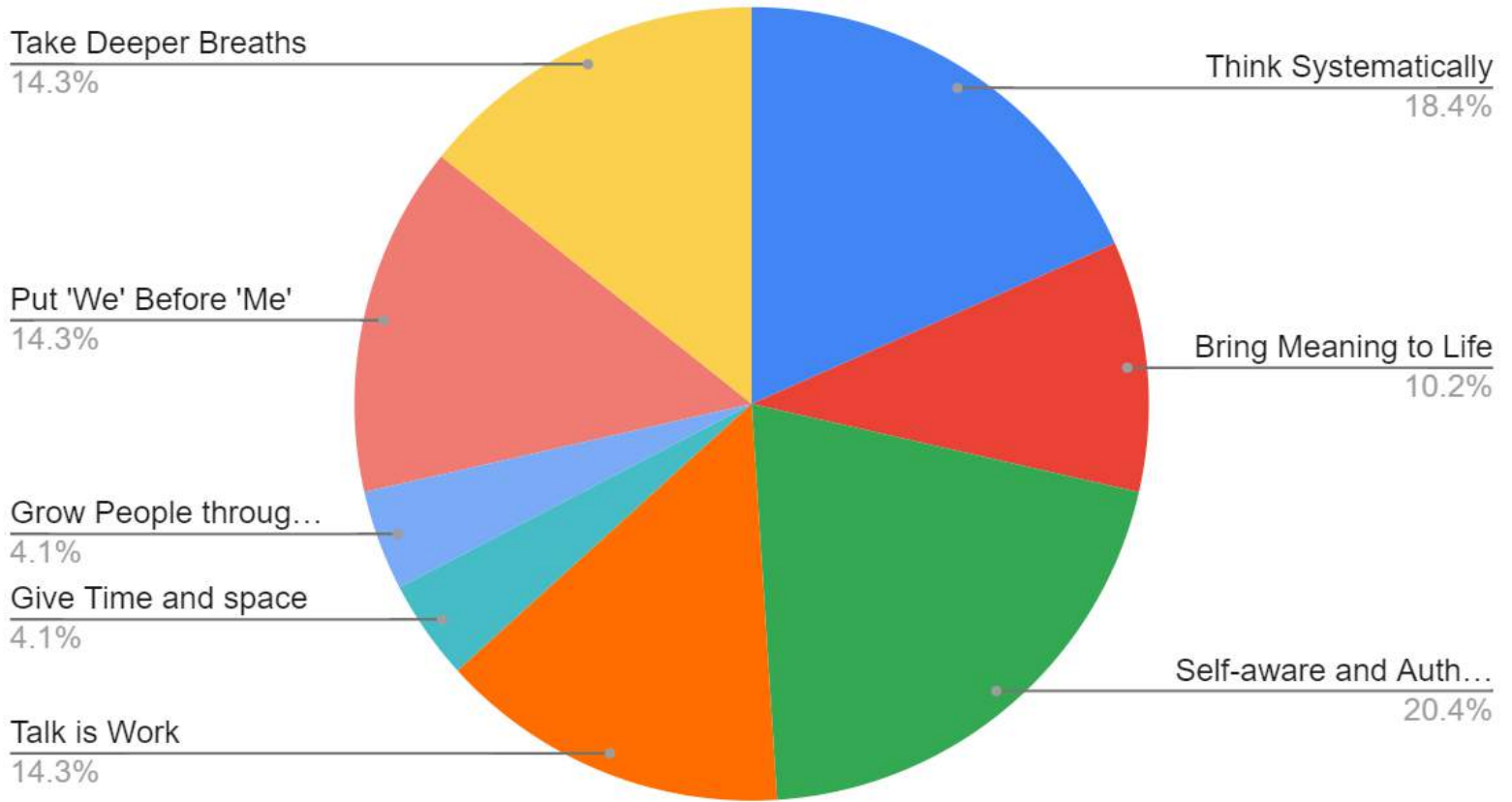
Chart 2.8 Religious/Spiritual Organizations

Amount

- Take Deeper Breaths — 15.6%
- Think Systematically — 6.3%
- Bring Meaning to Life — 6.3%
- Apply the Spirit of th… — 9.4%
- Self-aware and Auth… — 3.1%
- Put 'We' Before 'Me' — 12.5%
- Grow People throug… — 3.1%
- Give Time and space — 9.4%
- Talk is Work — 34.4%
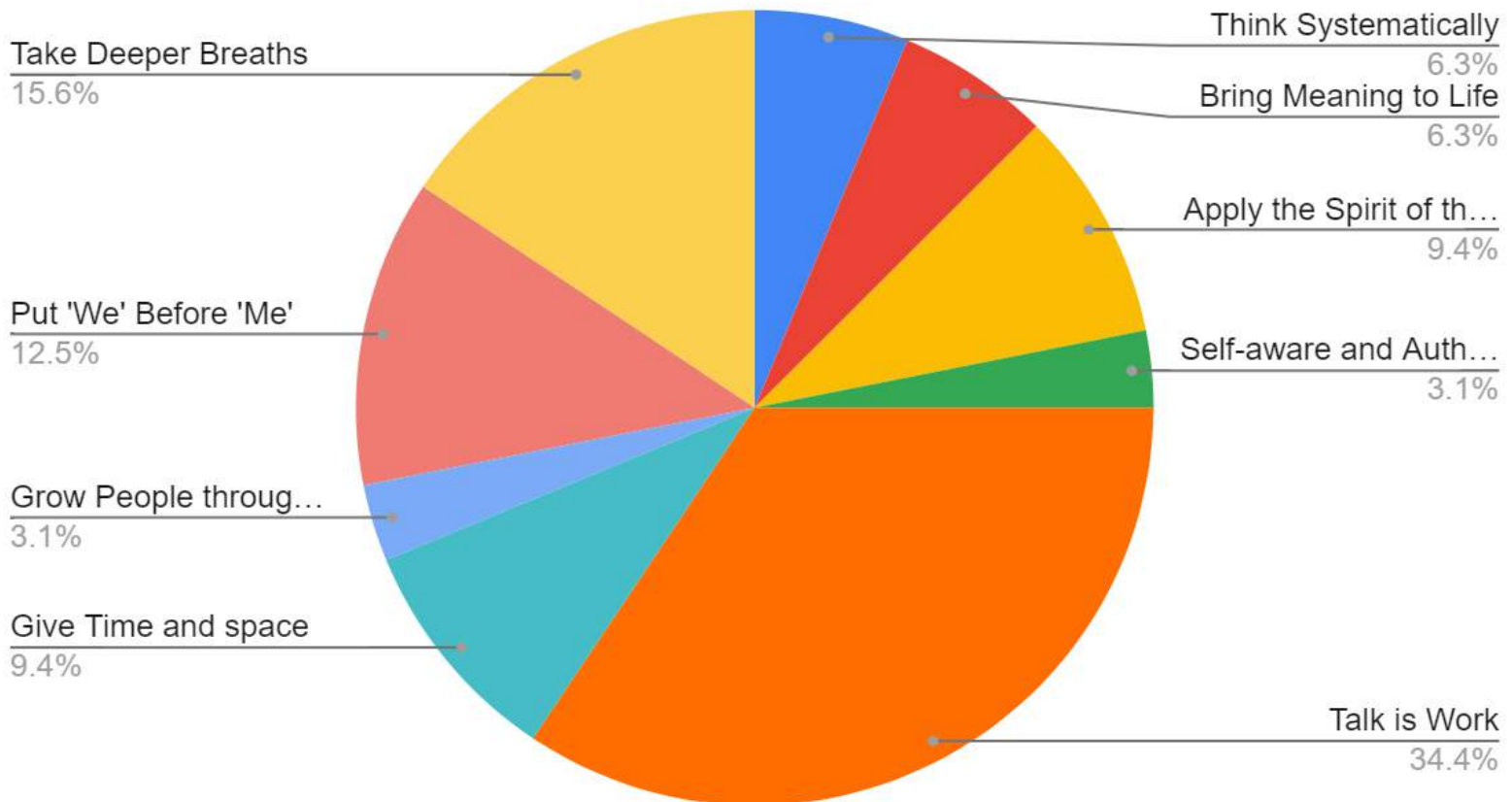
The distinct clubs had tendencies as they describe their definitions of outstanding leadership. Some clubs left out one category completely, i.e. student government organizations did not mention *applying the spirit of the law,* and community service organizations didn't mention *giving time and space*. On the other hand, there are some clubs that relied heavily on one category of leadership. For example, both recreation and sports organizations and religious/spiritual organizations related over one-third of their responses to *talk is work*. There is greater detail presented in the discussion section as to why this may be the case.

All nine of the categories appeared repeatedly throughout these in-depth interviews. They

often presented themselves in different forms, but these nine categories developed by Tamkin,

Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable (2010) covered almost every aspect of leadership mentioned by

the interviewees. The only additional category that emerged from these interviews that is

identified in the following paragraphs is *holistic mentorship*. This is defined as developing

genuine interest in the lives of others, including advice and support in areas outside of work, and

an authentic relationship outside of the office. This category, along with the nine others that have

been defined in the literature review, were heavily prevalent in the student leader interviews.

Think Systematically and Act Long-Term

Thinking systematically and acting long term accounted for 9.7% of all categories

presented in the interviews. This frequency matched *putting we before me* (9.7%), and was

slightly lower than *bringing meaning to life* (10.5%). This category is showcased in leaders that

are focused on the future, and how their efforts now will affect the future of their organizations.

This is an interesting point, especially for student leaders who often switch in their roles on a

yearly basis.

This category was the most salient amongst two particular organizations:

political/multicultural organizations (15.6% of their total), and student government organizations

(18.4% of their total). These are traditionally organizations that have long-term goals and clear

missions and visions for student leaders to follow as they enter into their positions.

Many of the student leaders included a vision towards the future in their comments.

Student J noted that sometimes leaders have to do and delegate difficult tasks, but it is ultimately

for the success of the individual and the organization. They state, "[A good leader] is looking

towards the future, and they know that although what I'm making you do now is hard and sucks,

this is where I want you to be." These leaders know what steps they need to take in order to get themselves and their teams to the next level.

These student leaders expressed the need to evaluate the current processes, and brainstorm ways to improve them. Student H stated, "[A good leader is] focused on what you need to change and what needs to get better as a leader, and what you can do to make everything more effective." They understand that though a leader may be in their position for a short time, they have a responsibility to be diligent during their time in that position, and make it better for those coming after them.

Bring Meaning to Life

Bringing meaning to life fell in the middle of the categories for usage in the various interviews, accounting for 10.5% of the total phrases. The organization that used this category most frequently was media and publication organizations, which accounted for 22.5% of their overall phrases. This category is represented by phrases that show leaders developing a shared purpose, and taking ideas from an idea to a tangible medium.

Leaders are responsible for many people, and they need to help the team be on the same page. Student L stated that, "Everyone needs to be able to work together, not necessarily as one, but you need to be able to bring different ideas and different traits to the table." An outstanding leader is going to be able to take the best of everyone, and piece it together into a working mechanism to fulfill goals and cement ideas. This is further elaborated on by student K who mentioned, "[Great leaders] have the ability to inspire people, to make people want to be united and work together." These leaders need to have the ability to help people see that each person contributes something incredibly valuable, but, more importantly, see how their valuable assets will be best utilized in helping the team achieve their shared purpose.

Applying the Spirit, Not the Letter of the Law

———This was one of the least commonly commented categories during these interviews, totaling only 5.8%. The other category that was this infrequent was *giving time and space to other*s. The phrases present for this topic included words and actions about the importance of key systems and processes that enable for feedback and discussion, without being overly strict or micromanaging. There wasn't an area that had this as their most frequent phrases, but community service organizations used these phrases for 14.6% of their responses.

These student leaders were showing that feedback and focus on the goal is more important than how each individual item is done. Student M states that, "[A good leader is] open-minded. By doing so it's not only being open to the world around us - we have different views and opinions of the world, and also people and how we handle situations." These leadership situations allow for people to show they care much more about the work getting done, rather than having things done their way.

This spirit of the law, and open time for discussion and feedback leads for a welcome environment. Student I notes that, [one of the greatest traits of a leader is] probably inclusivity. People who feel like they are welcome and that their ideas are valued and their comments are valued are much more likely to make better team members, which improves the whole atmosphere." Leaders that utilize this category are very open to others and want them to explore their creativity in completing tasks.

Self-Aware and Authentic Leadership First, Their Own Needs Second

Self-aware and authentic leadership first was the second most commonly used phrase amongst student leaders at 15.8% of the total. The only other phrase that accounted for more was talk is work at 20.8%. Student leaders recognize that someone who wants to influence others

needs to be a role model, and needs to try and understand others. They also need to be aware of what they are doing, because they may never know who is watching.

Leaders must be able to practice what they preach if they are going to be role models. Student D notes this when they say, "I know that I never grow if I don't push myself out of those comfort zones." They also mention that they need to help other people grow, but before they can do this they must be aware of their own habits which includes self-care, another important part of Student D's comments. This student also mentions the importance of self-development, and that if they don't change in their role it would be 'defeating.'

These comments are followed closely by Student C's comments about being someone others want to follow. They say, "I want to be one of those people that sticks out in someone's mind as a good example of a leader, and as someone they want to be like." This really emphasizes the importance of being aware of the influence they have, and opportunity to be a role model.

Understand that Talk is Work

This was the most common category used by student leaders at 20.8% of the total phrases. Recreation and sport organizations used this phrase significantly more than any other organization with 21 accounts, totaling 33.9% of their phrases. Religious/Spiritual organizations also utilized this category 11 times, accounting for 33.4% of their total. These organizations, and all of the most common clubs and student organizations on college campuses rely on this category heavily as it deals with building positive, lasting relationships to boost the enthusiasm of others.

This is captured greatly in a story told by Student A.

> "There was one point in time where after a day in sales I was super frustrated, and
> I just wasn't getting anything right. We got home at 11 pm that night. [My leader]
> could see that I was frustrated. He was dealing with 20 other employees so his
> mind as a leader was scrambled between so many other employees. But that night
> when I was frustrated, we talked for about 30 minutes about what I could do
> personally. So, he set specific time for me so he made me feel important as an
> individual."

These kinds of stories enveloped much of what the student leaders recounted in their experience with outstanding leaders. They are looking for genuine, and authentic people that truly care about them.

Alongside this story, Student O comments, "[A great leader] isn't preaching to everyone. They are making those connections. They're trying to connect people to other people. If you bring someone to an event for the first time, they're introducing them to everybody." Later on they also comment that, "[Leaders make] a ton of effort and a ton of progress in developing those interpersonal relationships." Outstanding leaders create real relationships with those under their influence which helps them develop a greater desire to improve themselves and the cause they are pushing forward.

Give Time and Space to Others

This was one of the least commonly used categories by student leaders, alongside *applying the spirit of the law*. This category accounted for only 5.8% of the total phrases from the interviews. The only group that used a substantial number of this category, used

only nine times, was academic and educational organizations. These organizations

accounted for 13.6% of their total phrases.

Student leaders referenced this leadership quality in phrases like the following

from Student N. They stated, "[Leaders] should be focused on making sure the people

around them know what they need to do." This quality of leadership focuses heavily on

making sure that your team knows what they are doing, as well as making sure to give

them the resources they need to be successful. Student K also mentioned that they had a

leader who taught them how important it is they take time for their team. "He took the

time to train us, and then he took the time to get to know us and learn how to trust his

team and their abilities." This student also referenced several times the importance of

empowering your team and giving them the tools to be successful, which is the

foundation of this characteristic.

Grow People Through Performance

Another less frequently used category was *growing people through performance*.

This was mentioned slightly more than *giving time and space,* with 6.4% of the total

phrases. Leaders that use this quality strive to find opportunities to help their people grow

through experiences that stretch their abilities and their limits. Academic and educational

organizations were the only organizations to use this leadership quality often in their

interviews, accounting for 12.1% of their total phrases.

This is not always a simple quality to understand and appreciate as a young

leader. Student J recounted the story of some leaders they admire, and how they helped

them to appreciate this quality. "Knowing that these guys are yelling at me everyday, and

making me do all of these super hard things, but I know that they have my best interest in

mind. They're looking towards the future, and they know that although what I'm making

you do now is hard and sucks, this is where I want you to be." These challenges are to

help those that you influence reach their potential. Student G also noted the importance of

delegation within this quality. They stated, "It's not that you just delegate your way to

doing nothing, rather you spearhead the operation, and you're invested in it and then you

delegate to other individuals to give them experience." Those that follow can only

become better as they are presented with challenges and opportunities to do so, which can

not be accomplished when the leader does everything themselves.

Put 'We' Before 'Me'

This category was used by all seven of the leadership organizations interviewed for this

study. It is defined as working hard to develop and maintain team spirit and shared decision

making while encouraging others to find their voice and become involved in decisions. In the

overall interviews, it was used as frequently as *thinking systematically* at 9.7% of the total.

Student government leaders are the ones who used this category of leadership most frequently, at

14.3% of their total phrases. Media and publication organizations used this phrase the least,

making up only 2.5% of their total phrases used.

This category was often used when discussing how to lead a team of diverse individuals.

Student G stated that as a leader "you include everyone and make sure everyone has an

assignment and is given an opportunity to work or to grow - an opportunity to contribute."

Furthering this point, student F discussed how capitalizing on this quality can be used to make a

team more effective. When speaking of a leader's main priority they said, "If [the] leader is able

to capitalize on all of those good qualities his/her team has, then they're going to be most

effective." This provides insight into why a leader should focus on this category, and how it can play out in real leadership roles.

Take deeper breaths and hold them longer was one of the more prevalent categories amongst these student leaders. It made up 15.5% of the total phrases, coming just under *self-aware and authentic leadership* (15.8%). These leaders used this phrase to comment on the importance of building trust with others, delivering on promises being one of the greatest ways to do this. It also deals with acting consistently, so that the team knows what to expect, and what the leader will do. Political and Multicultural organizations used this phrase for the grand majority of their phrases, totalling 26.6% of their phrases. On the other hand, media and publication organizations used this phrase the least, totalling only 5.0% of their phrases. There was a large discrepancy between the organizations in regard to this category of outstanding leadership qualities.

With this category, it is important to always be giving your best. Followers need to know they can count on their leaders, and consistency is the key to promoting their trust. Student B noted this as they discussed what they hoped people would remember about their leadership- "I really hope people would say that [I] did the best that [I] could, and [I] did it 110%. As long as you do it right, and you do it well, and you try, then I think that's all that matters." Leaders need to make sure they are always there for the teams they preside over, as this will present security which will in turn increase the effectiveness of those in the organization. Student E continued emphasizing this point as he stated, "Leaders should definitely have the ability to do what they say. [They should] follow through, and be able to make promises happen. This trust allows

people to follow, knowing they will be protected, and that they are heading in a positive direction.

Discussion

This qualitative study of 15 undergraduate student leaders that belong to seven different common clubs across university campuses had some insightful themes. First, the relevance and importance that student leaders put on forming relationships; second, the unique emphasis that each different club/organization places on the various qualities of outstanding leadership; and third, student leaders across all types of clubs/organizations place a large emphasis on mentorship which is not included in the nine qualities of outstanding leaders as written by the Work Foundation (2021).

There are two qualities of outstanding leadership that focus most directly on the importance of building and maintaining relationships: *take deeper breaths and hold them longer* and *talk is work*. *Talk is work* was the largest total number of phrases across the board at 20.8% of the total phrases used. *Take deeper breaths and hold them longer* (15.5%) came in just below *self-aware and authentic leadership* (15.8%) as the third most commonly used phrase by student leaders to describe outstanding leadership. This leads to some insightful discussion and analysis about what student leaders view as important. They want to follow and become leaders that form authentic relationships with those that they oversee, and those that oversee them. This focus on the individual is a key function for this upcoming generation of leaders as they want to be seen and heard as individuals.

These types of phrases were seen repeatedly throughout the interviews, and are seen frequently across college campuses. These up and coming leaders reflected most on the leaders that took the time to get to know them personally. There is something about this that helps

individuals feel cared for, and motivates them to try harder. Many of these leaders mentioned the importance of getting to know their teams names and what's important to them in order to motivate them to accomplish greater tasks.

The main problem that was solicited through this large emphasis on building relationships and talking with those you lead, was the lack of focus on creating larger goals for the team, helping them to buy in, developing the team through playing to their strengths and giving them new challenges. These areas of leadership fall under the categories *applying the spirit not the letter of the law* which accounted for 5.8% of the total phrases, and *growing people through performance* which was 6.4% of the total phrases. These student leaders have a grasp on the importance of making sure that your team feels cared for and appreciated, but if there is no direction or development of the team these relationships will be mostly for naught. There is a difference between simply being a friend, and being a caring leader. This balance can be very difficult as leaders have to think through their main vision, and figure out how to get the most out of their team in order to fulfill this vision. This is extremely difficult, but it is essential for the success of the team, and for the building of a team that can break barriers. There seems to be some understanding of this, as *bringing meaning to life* did come up in many of the interviews, (10.5% of total). However, there wasn't enough emphasis placed on this to create a focus on this side of leadership.

The second theme to come out of this research was the unique emphasis that each student leadership organization placed on different leadership categories, while collectively including the elements of outstanding leadership. Most of the categories included all 9 of the outstanding leadership categories with the exception of Community Service Organizations (no reference to *giving time and space to others*) and student government organizations (no reference to *applying*

the spirit not the letter of the law). These student leaders have had mentorship and experience

with each of these categories, and they see how it helps a team to succeed and a leader to be

respected. However, the categories are stressed differently for the different organizations/clubs.

This needs to be the case as each unique club/organization has goals and needs specific to that

cause.

This can be seen by looking at what each type of student leadership club/organization

emphasized most frequently. Student leaders belonging to religious/spiritual organizations

emphasized *talk is work* far more than any other area. These organizations are centered around

the well-being of others in all ways, and they find success in being able to provide for it.

Recreation and sport organizations also put a large emphasis on *talk is work,* which could be in

large part due to the nature of teamwork, and being able to have relationships with one another to

build a cohesive team. Academic and Educational Organizations also used this with the most

frequency, but they were much closer in other categories, as they serve a wide range of

populations. Their goals are to teach and educate, which comes in a holistic form requiring all of

the categories. Student government organizations place a great focus on *self-aware and*

authentic leadership, due to them spending a majority of their time in front of people and are

looked to by so many. They need to be a role model for those they serve. Community Service

Organizations also placed the greatest emphasis on this category, but it may be for an entirely

different reason. This aspect of outstanding leadership focuses on the needs of those on the team

first, as well as requires an appreciation for the position that one is in. This type of leadership

focuses on personal needs long after the team has been taken care of, and this person knows that

they will be a great influence to others and need to be acting in the best interest of their team.

Political/Multicultural organizations focused heavily on *taking deeper breaths and holding them*

longer. This seems to be the case as those involved in policy and representation need to be able to follow through on what they say. This has been a controversy in politics since it began, as people often say one thing and do another. These leaders recognize the importance of doing what they say. They may not have seen it in the leaders they have worked under and want to give it to those that follow them. Media and Publication Organizations focused on *bringing meaning to life,* which fits very well with their goals as they often emphasize taking an idea and making it happen. The best leaders in this field know how to take their idea and help a team see it and accomplish it.

Student leaders have had several experiences and mentors that have helped them to see the kinds of leaders they want to become, as well as the qualities that they would like to avoid. These leaders are beginning to get an idea of how to be successful in the fields they are choosing, however this often comes at the expense of other qualities that are also necessary in helping their teams to thrive.

The final theme that is worth mentioning is the overwhelming emphasis that the majority of these student leaders placed on receiving mentorship. Many students mentioned stories similar to Student A, who explained that they were able to be taught a life lesson by one of their role model leaders. Sometimes their stories were more similar to Student O, who talked about making yourself "super available" as a leader. Someone that others can go to at any time with any problem. The qualities of outstanding leadership that are mentioned by Tamkin, Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable (2010) are focused on getting the most out of people to bring forward the goals of an organization. This is extremely valuable because as a company there are goals that need to be fulfilled.

However, with all of the attempts to market to and entice this upcoming generation, there seems to be a lack of authenticity and genuineness. There have been too many poor examples of people acting interested in others only to bring forth their selfish desires. People want to be cared for as humans and not simply as employees or followers. These student leaders frequently mentioned the importance of a leader caring about them outside of the workplace and teaching them lessons. These lessons go further than new skills on a spreadsheet or more effective processes to increase productivity. These leaders took much time to explain the importance of holistic mentorship as a leader, and how that is one of the most effective ways to get the most out of a team. These leaders note that others are much more willing to give it their all for the team when leaders give it their all for them, and take the time for them, especially in areas outside of the office.

Practical Applications of Research

This research has led to several additions to the area of student leadership. Themes have been solicited that note how student leaders in various categories define leadership as well as how the experiences they have and the leaders they follow help to build these foundational concepts of leadership that they deem important. Most of the characteristics mentioned by students fall within the nine categories noted by Tamkin, Pearson, Hirsh, and Constable (2010). These additions are important, but college and university staff and administrators need to be able to take these findings and implement them into their practice of student leadership development.

In order to provide for the clearest and most simple form of implementation, here are my three greatest suggestions taken from this research that university staff and administrators can use to improve the development and training of their student leaders.

The first implementation is to place a variety of leaders in front of these students early on in their experience. Administrators cannot control the exposure that students have to leadership before they come to campus, but they must be able to take advantage of the time that these students have on campus. These students need to see leaders who are strong in all nine of the categories mentioned above, and also employ different concepts that will help these students grow. From their interviews, these students demonstrated that the greatest way they notice leadership concepts is through watching it in action. We need to present all of these different leadership categories to them in a strong, positive way early on in their college careers.

The second concept I deem most important, is to give these student leaders more time to reflect on their leadership styles and to challenge them on the content. Many of these students were partial to certain categories of leadership, which leads to a gap in their organizations and in their abilities. If a student is solely focused on 'talk is work' they may be very friendly, but if they can't turn a vision into a reality it is going to be hard for them to have a lasting influence on others. There needs to be time for these leaders to think about how they view leadership,and time for staff and administrators to challenge their views and help them see a more well-rounded picture of outstanding leadership.

The third and final concept is to give these student leaders responsibilities that are going to help them develop in the areas they lack. Too often staff and administrators take leaders where they are at and play off of their strengths to contribute to the overall organization. These individuals that oversee student leaders need to look at their weaknesses as well as their strengths and give them opportunities to grow and develop in the areas that they are lacking. It is clear these students are learning through mentorship and experience, and we need to be intentional

about the experiences we give them to help them to become an outstanding leader in all areas,

rather than just developing one area that they have a predisposition for pursuing.

Conclusion

There is a call in the world for greater leadership development among young people.

Businesses and organizations are slowing or halting altogether, because the level of leadership of

the new generation of leaders isn't as strong. This does not need to be the case, as there are

countless resources available to help develop these young leaders, especially during their years in

college. There are countless organizations and clubs that allow for leadership experience. Staff

and administrators at these institutions, as well as mentors everywhere, need to be able to discern

how the college-aged students they oversee understand leadership in order to help them develop

into outstanding leaders in all categories. This research provides but a small glimpse into the

minds of student leaders in distinct clubs and organizations on a college campus, but there is so

much more that can be done. This research was limited in its size and representation across all

college campuses, but it provides a basis that other research and application can refer to.

Through this qualitative study, it is apparent that there are students striving for leadership.

There is an opportunity to develop an outstanding group of young leaders through intentional

mentorship and experiences pertaining to the nine principles of leadership in this research, as

well as the many other leadership categories that students must be able to develop.

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Appendix

This appendix includes the questions used during the 15 unique interviews.

1. From your perspective, what makes an outstanding leader?

2. What behaviors and characteristics make someone an effective leader?

3. What should be a leader's main focus/priority?

4. What are some areas of leadership in which you would like to develop?

5. What is an example of a time you were directed by a great leader?