

Leaders of a Post-COVID Tomorrow: Undergraduate Business Students' Perceptions of Leadership Education while at University

**by
Anastasia (Awna) Besan**

Career Development Practitioner Certificate, Douglas College, 2017
Bachelor of Arts (with Distinction, First Class), Simon Fraser University, 2014

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Declaration of Committee

Name: Anastasia (Awna) Besan

Degree: Master of Education

Title: Leaders of a Post-COVID Tomorrow:
Undergraduate Business Students' Perceptions
of Leadership Education while at University

Committee:

Chair: Meaghan Dougherty
Adjunct Professor, Education

Rebecca (Becky) Cox
Supervisor
Associate Professor, Education

Daniel (Dan) Laitsch
Committee Member
Professor, Education

Michelle Pidgeon
Examiner
Professor, Education

Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

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or

- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

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Abstract

Following challenges imposed by the COVID-19 health crisis, educators have navigated unprecedented shifts in program delivery, prompting critical reflections on the efficacy of leadership education. Drawing on insights from policy scholars and recent literature, my research highlights a notable gap: while administrators and educators shape post-crisis educational strategies, student voices are frequently excluded from discussions on how leadership and leadership training could be adapted. This qualitative study aims to address this gap by examining how existing university leadership programs align with students' readiness for future professional roles and leadership aspirations, particularly in a post-pandemic context. By engaging directly with students' insights, gathered through one-one-one interviews with student leaders attending a western Canadian business school, this research documents students' desires for a more inclusive and student-centered approach to leadership education.

Keywords: student leadership; leadership learning; extra-curricular; university support; program development and design; student perceptions

Dedication

While my research project required considerable application and many hours of analysis and revisions, it pales in comparison to the hard work that student leaders tirelessly undertake in supporting and fostering their communities.

I continue to be humbled by such leaders – enough to, in my professional practice, insist on dropping the qualifying adjective of “student” when considering their contributions.

Thank you for your efforts, your stories, and for trusting me to witness and be a part of them.

Acknowledgements

It is vital to acknowledge my positionality as a white, queer, 1.5 generation immigrant woman who has the privilege of educating young people on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations. Without the ongoing stewardship of these Nations, none of my work would be possible.

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I would also like to specifically acknowledge my supervisor, Dr. Becky Cox, who, due to unforeseen circumstances, stepped in to teach three out of the six courses that constituted this degree journey. While not every cohort member's formally assigned supervisor, Becky became a go-to mentor to each of us. She deserves much thanks for going above and beyond in order to ensure our cohort was well-supported.

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Introduction

In the thick of conducting interviews for limited spots in a competitive career-readiness program, the team of student leaders I was coaching were able to pivot quickly to online program delivery when sudden news of a global health crisis derailed our original plans. However, we soon found that we were prematurely bolstered by our in-the-moment adaptability. Instead, we kept realizing that, to deliver a program focused on empowering students to step into professional and leadership-based skills--all while accounting for their awareness of a world that was rapidly changing --was going to take so much more than learning how to work Zoom. We were in over our heads and faced with leading through uncertainty.

In this same vein, following the intensified exposure of social concerns and public need highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, educators the world over have continued to review steps taken to weather through pandemic-imposed challenges at all levels of educational and non-educational leadership alike. As policy scholars Boin and 't Hart (2022) point out, in the wake of a great shift, such as a crisis, there is an often predictable rush across all levels of decision-making flowing from a collective perception of there being a need for change, followed by possible reshaping of how issues are tackled. Such a policy window, when applied to educational leadership, necessarily challenges previously successful actions, policies, or programs and instead opens to innovation within any and all of these domains.

The push to document and notice how leaders met pandemic-necessitated educational concerns is a site for intentional reflexivity around what is and is not working. Educational leadership as a practice is under scrutiny to review if it can adequately meet the changing social - including educational needs - of a new tomorrow. While difficult to capture during a crisis, insights from players within the field of education who carried out actions and made crisis-informed leadership decisions as they were happening have been documented by several researchers (Schmidt et al., 2020; Arastaman & Çetinkaya, 2022; Andrienko et al., 2021). However, much of the focus of researchers studying educational leadership decision-making in a COVID-19-informed era has been on decision-makers in formal leadership positions. Such research has included administrators and executives, at times their community stakeholders and partners (Price

& Mansfield, 2021) but, poignantly, never the “emerging leaders” who will be inheriting a post-pandemic world to lead.

Indeed, it does not seem like common practice to take into account future leaders’ (i.e. students’) opinions or leadership input when formulating on-campus leadership strategy or, as evidenced by Jamal and Marefat (2024), even shaping training and programming that the students go on to participate in or receive. However, as Williams et al. (2021) emphasize, students who emerge as on-campus leaders are not insignificant players in changing how campus dynamics operate as they may “garner the capital necessary to shape the very image and spirit of an institution” (p. number here). There is common belief, amongst educators and non-educators alike, underpinning the near-cliché saying that to invest in education is to invest in “the leaders of tomorrow.”

Importantly though, what links existing research on student views of leadership training while at school (Cadieux et al, 2017; Ogurlu and Sevim, 2017) and more recent COVID-era researchers is that data pertaining to student opinion is collected only after students complete a program. For instance, Brown and Crawford (2022) and Garton and Wawrzynski (2021) have relayed how students related to leadership skills acquisition and practice but, because this was following participation in leadership programming or coursework, in both cases the students’ experience was always in relation to programming that the educators had themselves designed and piloted or that had already existed at their respective institutions and so likely had also been spearheaded by non-students. Yet, as the end-user and eventual next generation of leaders to enter the workforce, should students not have a say in the kinds of leadership training they may want support with or have access to while at university? My experience as an educator has shown that students are actively engaging with and forming opinions around how they might lead in their personal and professional lives, particularly in a landscape shaped by recent social change.

As an educator who works in the in- between space of career readiness instruction, leadership coaching, and program development, I have been tasked with overseeing student-led career programs and organizations within a business school whose mandate is to “develop ... socially responsible business leaders.” Yet, as each new generation of student leaders that I have mentored and learned from has come and gone, I have often wondered how their experiences in programs like the ones that I have

supported have equipped them to emerge into their respective post-graduation paths as leaders. Do the students themselves feel that their schooling has helped shape them into leaders? And, if so, would they self-identify as socially responsible in how they lead?

I am inspired to examine how students perceive their leadership learning while at university holistically and so want to collect their stories and feedback through a study that moves beyond an after-the-fact optional survey (the typical route for garnering feedback post-program). My aim is to understand how student leaders perceive their exposure to leadership learning while at school and to define possible changes that these students recommend for a leadership pedagogy that would better meet their visions for their post-graduation futures.

Literature Review

Per the description from Boin and 't Hart (2022) of what policy scholars term the “crisis reform thesis,” following instances of social upheaval, even when change is not actually being made to happen, there is nonetheless often the perception that change is needed. Whether fully engaged in policy making or not, individuals whose work is shaped by social forces, such as educators, are likely experiencing waves of demand for policy-backed change to their work.

Accounting for this, it should not be surprising then that educators, as well as our students, are likely much more tuned into subtle shifts in how the field of education, from the curriculum to the environments in which education is carried out, might be adjusting to meet a perceived “new normal.” Keegan and Bannister (2021) second this, stressing how important it is that changes to curriculum are in direct response to social need. That is, curricular shifts must remain accountable to the populations that they serve. In the case of my research, this would mean the students who are learning leadership skills as well as the wider communities that they then bring those leadership skills into.

In charting an emerging educational ecology post-COVID-19, Edwards and Magill (2023) likewise remind us that a curriculum in motion and susceptible to new policy innovations should be centering the lived experiences of students and the teachers who work mostly closely with them. However, in the rush to either anticipate or else push for reform, it is not usually the most affected whose views are centered

throughout the change management process. As I posited at the start of this paper, it is not clear to what extent student views or needs for their own leadership development have been or are being written into post-crisis university learning plans.

Several sources capture for the educator's perspective in this situation. Schmidt et al. (2022) pull together insights from leaders across higher education who have had to lead through moments of difficulty and ambiguity as COVID-19 was unfolding. They capture poignant firsthand reflections from within the field and, impressively, with data collected while COVID-19 was still resulting in school closures and lockdown procedures. Though pertaining to the Turkish education system, Arastaman and Çetinkaya (2022) similarly attempt to describe how educational leaders (in their case, school principals) cope with leadership decisions while under stress. The twelve interviews they conducted emphasize how COVID-19 is urging impacted parties to redefine what schooling and leadership even mean, especially as leadership now needs to take on a crisis-sensitive framing.

Though both of these articles are focused on accounts from deans and administrative directors or school principals, respectively, Schmidt et al. (2022) highlight that "students learn through a formal curriculum, [but] they also learn through an informal curriculum, or one based on the actions and behaviors of their instructors and others at their institutions" (p. 53). Thus, while not capturing for the viewpoints of students, as my own research strives to do, articles like these are a critical reminder that students' observation of how those in leadership positions lead through challenges is just as important as what they are learning in their courses.

That said, Schmidt et al. (2022) arrive at their reflections after analyzing firsthand accounts from just three higher education leaders while Arastaman and Çetinkaya (2022) speak with twelve principals. Price and Mansfield (2021), meanwhile, derive their findings through a larger sampling of key players, though they do so by reviewing documents, correspondence, policy briefs and anecdotal accounts collected during a community-based response to COVID-induced challenges, not limited to educational staff. Andrienko et al. (2021), on the other hand, go one step further. They compile input across a mixed-methods study which includes both twelve interviews and 77 questionnaire responses from participants across Ukraine, the US, and several Asian countries. Their findings are particularly intriguing because they span a much more

globalized sample of educators, albeit not necessarily formal leaders within the field. They articulate themes that span borders around how educators perceive the gains and losses of COVID-associated changes in teaching practice. I am choosing to bookmark common themes from this study's findings - themes such as: the need for community-building, opportunities for team work and collaboration, and learning being tied to gainful employment as an outcome - as it is likely that variations on these themes may well be felt by my fellow educators in western Canada and, by extension, the students that we teach.

Aside from capturing for educator perspectives, I was disappointed to find that few studies have zeroed in on student views of what is needed out of the next generation of leadership education. What links the work of Cadieux et al. (2017), Ogurlu and Sevim (2017), and more recent COVID-era researchers who have looked to student opinion on leadership training while at school is that data pertaining to student opinion is collected only after students complete an educator-led program. For instance, Brown and Crawford (2022) and Garton and Wawrzynski (2021) have relayed how students related to leadership skills acquisition and practice but, because this was following participation in leadership programming or coursework, in both cases the students' experiences were always in relation to programming that the educators had themselves designed and piloted or that had already existed at their respective institutions and so likely had also been spearheaded by non-students. Yet, as the end-user and eventual next generation of leaders to enter the workforce, should students not have a central say in the kinds of leadership training they may want support with or have access to while at university? My experience as an educator has shown that students are very much attempting to articulate how they might lead in their personal and professional lives, including in a landscape shaped by recent COVID-inflicted change.

Importantly, however, we must recognize that the students already making a mark as leaders on campuses tend to possess enough social status or socio-economic advantages to more readily excel in a college environment (Williams et al., 2017). It is perhaps for this reason that the student voices most commonly linked to and studied in leadership research have tended to belong to students who conform to what is considered exceptional or high-achieving, such as when Cadieux et al. (2017) examined the leadership arcs of medical residents or Ogurlu and Sevim (2017) sought opinions from "gifted" students. Departing from this, I think it is important to recognize that the

core value behind educating “the leaders of tomorrow” should arguably not fixate on a prestige few but, rather, any and all students who pass through an educational pathway. As a result, I propose to study the insights of students who voluntarily step forward and resonate with wanting to share their thoughts on leadership, rather than study the aftermath of programming designed to target a cherry-picked, narrow population.

Franklin et al. (2023) continue commenting on equity when considering leadership education by bringing to light how so much of what is taken for leadership within western educational systems can be traced back to thought leadership stemming from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the US. What I am pulling from this assertion is that, in order to build leadership curriculum that meets a changing world, it is critical to recognize voices that have been scrubbed from mainstream leadership discourse. Indeed, looking to students who have had to lead through oppression or overcome institutionally-sanctioned disadvantages might be a rich source of information for educators wanting to build a socially responsive leadership curriculum.

Though in a pre-COVID-19 context, Kezar et al. (2017) recognized similar directions for those wanting to create an inclusive leadership pedagogy. Looking at what compels students to take on leadership development while in post-secondary, the researchers importantly raise the role that campus activism plays in igniting student engagement and self-definition as leaders. Because my research is interested in student views on leadership education, work like that of Kezar et al. is a crucial reminder that leadership education is not always curriculum-embedded or under the guidance or control of educators. Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between classroom-based learning and activism, though, also lies extra- and co-curricular involvement, such as club and/or student organization affiliation. After surveying 1309 students, Garton and Wawrzynski (2021) note a definitive link between co-curricular involvement and learning outcomes related to leadership for social change, leading them to recommend a non-credit leadership course as a formalized means to engage more students. Brown and Crawford (2022) see entrepreneurship, rather than non-credit courses, as another avenue towards this end. Reviewing a program that they delivered to MBA students which supplemented the students’ in-class learning, they explain that social entrepreneurship principles can inspire a more socially conscious purpose-seeking in emerging leaders.

In all, it is telling to note how, while there is a rush in places of learning to adapt and enforce change-enabled policies, the research into the effects of this push for change is lagging. It is no minor oversight in my scholarly opinion that, within the research that does exist, the focus has mostly been on educational leaders in formal positions rather than on the students who stand to inherit a post-change educational landscape.

In creating a leadership curriculum that can meet learners' needs, it is paramount to consider what learners feel they need in their unfolding educational journeys. Jamal & Marefat (2024), an educator and student duo reshaping experiential learning resources at the University of Victoria, emphasize how centering learners' needs within their own learning opens opportunity to incorporate a diverse set of perspectives, such that leadership education can reach students of more backgrounds. The leaders of tomorrow are each and every student. To ensure that educators continue to pivot and adapt their mark on students' educational experiences so that it is relevant to these young adults' goals for their futures, it is essential that students views are expressed and considered in parallel with policy shifts that are already unfolding.

Methodology

Because I wanted this study to zero in on what university students are associating with their personal leadership outlooks and development, particularly during a period of social change, I opted to engage in a qualitative study premised on interviewing my participants. In this way, the method for gathering data included open-ended questions and so prompted dialogue and story-telling unique to each participant. I wanted to move beyond measuring for possible standards across a student group and instead towards capturing for the possibility of multiple viewpoints.

As Creswell and Creswell (2023) indicate, "open-ended forms of data [can lead to] participants [sharing] their ideas freely, not constrained by predetermined scales or instruments" (p. 193-194). Indeed, during interviews, several of my participants (Lily, Nour, Hannah) remarked about not seeing themselves as fit to be interviewed, as they did not see themselves as "expert" enough to provide an opinion on leadership learning. A quote from Ilana sums this up perfectly: "I don't know if Co-op counts as a leadership opportunity, [yet] if it does, then I think Co-op was one of my best experiences." A

qualitative interviewing approach allowed me to be present to note such sentiments and to reply through dialogue; I was able to assure the participants that it is precisely their firsthand experiences that are the most authoritative information available on what they, as students, are identifying as and seeking out of their own leadership learning.

Further, because leadership is a complex topic that can become abstract to consider if not tied to specific examples, my sense was that interviews would have allowed me to adjust for and lean into students' understandings of what leadership has meant to them. For instance, in a one-to-one context, I was able to double-check with and prompt students when they answered in ways I was not sure followed from what I had asked and to also clarify my own meaning when I sensed that my questions were not self-evident and/or when students actually posed questions to me about the proceedings.

I first drafted and then narrowed down to the final list of interview questions by carefully considering key topic areas that I wanted to explore with my participants. From experience as a coach who regularly uses open-ended questions to assess student need and then to, alongside students, co-create action plans in support of their career development, I strove to keep the questions open-ended and broad enough to be relatable from multiple angles. I also received feedback from my research supervisor about the order and flow of these questions, further considering what my participants' experience might be when asked each question.

While I devised interview questions (see Appendix) to keep us on topic and inspire discussion, the questions served less as a strict script and more as a jumping off point to help students recall and delve into experiences that they found relevant. This is what Creswell and Creswell (2023) explain is considered an "emergent design" (p. 194) in qualitative research. I expected not to and, in fact, ended up not asking all of the questions I have pre-prepared in every interview, instead allowing the flow of conversation to guide the inquiry and fill approximately 45 minutes of dialogue with each participant.

In this way, this method of data collection allowed for more nuanced sharing of individual views and honoured the participants' ability to bring forth what they found relevant (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). It was a "quality over quantity" approach, with the

aim of gathering several more in-depth accounts from students who felt compelled to participate and found the research topic relevant to their educational journeys.

Research Questions

In the predictable rush to either anticipate or else push for reform in the wake of social ambivalence (Boin & 't Hart, 2022), it is unfortunately not usually the most affected that get the loudest voice at the drafting table. I suspect that educators could benefit greatly when building future-focused ways forward for leadership education by including the voices of those who, while not formally leading, were at the receiving end of education in flux throughout a period of immense change. Therefore, the research questions guiding me are born from wanting to, as an educator, ensure that the leadership lessons that I might embed or recommend through curriculum or programming is cognizant of and shaped by student voices, also.

In order to be student-centered, it seems to me a self-evident step that students should be consulted on what they want to see from the leadership training, exposure, and practice made available to them while at university. Do student leaders feel that the existing training and opportunities equip them to lead in their post-graduation futures, particularly in a post-pandemic world? What do students want to see be incorporated into the leadership training they might encounter while at university?

Researcher Positionality

As mentioned at the start of this report, I have had historic professional involvement with the university that served as the site where my research participants are completing their studies. However, importantly, none of the participants has ever directly reported to me; I specifically did not want to speak with students who I have mentored as that would have potentially compromised the data due to a conflict of interest.

As someone whose work has included overseeing the development of student-based leadership programming for years, I have had the opportunity to really mentor and coach student leaders through a lot of their learning process. In so doing, I have previously forged deeper bonds and come to understand the sheer volume of work that student leaders undertake for their peers and for their school – all looked at by the wider

school populace as “volunteer” hours. Thus, my own bias is wanting to see these student efforts be better explored and talked about is not without a priori understandings of the student leadership landscape. While it has equipped me with a fair amount of background knowledge and context to be able to step in and pick up on contextual clues that my participants shared during interviews, this advantage was also something I had to be careful to not let colour my perceptions of what the students were newly sharing.

In having to check my own inner agenda at the door, so to speak, I was functioning from a place of deep care for students that I feel go under-recognized. As Tracy (2010) mentions, one hallmark of trustworthy qualitative research is sincerity:

Sincerity means that the research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research (p. 841).

When recruiting participants, I ensured that the recruitment poster that I circulated included a short profile statement explaining my professional background, so that students too could infer that I have a pre-existing connection to this line of work. The poster was not made available to students through me directly; instead, I had former colleagues and/or students-now-alumni reach out to their student contacts. This was to control for a possible conflict of interest all the more diligently – I did not want to run the risk of recruiting students who were only participating because they happened to know me or were doing so out of a sense of obligation due to our past collaborations.

During the interviews themselves, I believe that this common ground allowed for a better flow of conversation and common understanding, though I took great care to not insert my own views so much as respond with commentary or parroting of what the students themselves had already contributed. The transcripts of the interviews confirm this as I was often hedging my commentary with statements such as, “you were saying [such and such,] do you mean [this by that]?” or “can you say more about [a point you made]?”. To further ensure it was not just my own self-gratuitous opinion that I was remaining neutral and not swaying student input with my own opinions during the interviews, I had several of my fellow cohort members read over excerpts of my interview transcripts and provide me with feedback.

Research Participants

The participants interviewed for this research were all upper-year undergraduate students completing a Bachelor of Business degree at one of the largest universities in Western Canada. Each participant was also an involved campus leader, having had some experience participating in leadership activities and/or communities, such as volunteer and social groups, at university.

I wanted to talk to students who have had firsthand experience trying out leadership roles during their time at university and so specifically sought to recruit students who have had this sort of attachment in the activities they had taken on during their degree path. It was important to me that they had a personal and firsthand sense of how leadership is being learned and practiced by students like themselves within the university setting and, from there, could also comment on what they would like to see be part of such learning in the future.

I chose to study the experiences of students at a business school because this is in keeping with leadership education within higher education contexts being commonly associated with business-based pedagogy – so much so that business school-derived content is often imported into decidedly non-business disciplines, such as medicine, public health, and more (Cadieux et al., 2017; Quince et al., 2014). While it is completely true that students of all disciplines will encounter some form of leadership development while at university, the business school environment is explicit about expecting its students to step into a leadership mindset while undergoing their degrees. Therefore, students who have attended business school are much more likely to have reflected on and taken on leadership as a site for their learning than students who study under less leadership-guided disciplines. Business students are overtly expected to navigate leadership studies and principles throughout their time at school.

In that same vein, my participants' specific business faculty boasts the greatest concentration of faculty-specific (i.e. designed for Business students) student organizations on campus, offering more than ten student-led groups within which students can develop leadership skills. As Kezar et al. (2017) remind educators, many students find their way into leadership experience via non-curricular involvement that at times dovetails into or corroborates material they undertake in the classroom. For the

purposes of my study, I am interested in experiences of leadership while at university as a whole, so am necessarily not limiting myself to regarding leadership training or education as a strictly curriculum-facilitated effort.

Circling back to my recruitment process, the digital poster that I used to garner interest outlined my research interest and the profile of a possible participant: a current undergraduate student with “firsthand experience participating in leadership programming and/or extra-curricular leadership activities while at university.” I emailed a copy of this digital poster to several student organizations at my target university, requesting that they circulate it amongst their members. When this led to no responses, I reached out to specific student-facing staff and former student leaders (now alumni) who I know have worked closely with student leaders through programs and student organizations and asked them to reach out to students who they suspect might be interested.

Four separate students replied to me as a result of having been personally approached by a staff member and/or alumnus. Importantly, this approach adhered to ethical research standards because it was the result of a student showing interest following having been exposed to the opportunity by someone not directly involved in the research. They did not have to be compelled to participate and I would never have known about it. However, each elected to follow-up with me and make themselves available to speak on the research topic. To ensure their privacy and remove identifying details, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Below are the assigned pseudonyms along with a brief profile of each participant:

Hannah – a 4th year student leader and international student who has led student organizations, competed in global case competitions on behalf of her school, and is due to graduate in the next few semesters.

Nour – a 4th year student leader and international student who has led student organizations and cultural clubs, and is due to graduate in the next few semesters.

Lily – a 3rd year student leader who has participated in competitive student organizations and stepped up to act as a leader during class-based group work.

Ilana – a 4th year student leader and international student who has participated in competitive student organizations, completed several Co-op

work placements while at school, and is due to graduate in the next few semesters.

In all correspondence afterwards, I ensured to contact the students through the same means that they had first used to reach out to me. I contacted them only for the sake of arranging an interview and to share the consent form/instructions. In this way, I kept my influence at a minimum as a way of ensuring that students were entering the interviews as authentically as possible, without having assumed a specific orientation to the topic due to any of my input.

Important to note is that all of the four participants that feature in my research happened to be assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) individuals and persons of colour. Three were studying at the university as international students. While this is a chance coincidence, it is worth noting as a consideration to potentially contextualize further research that educators might undertake into what sorts of students are drawn towards leadership education and opportunities and--perhaps most poignant of all--the chance to speak about and want to make changes to them. It is entirely possible that the findings to this research may have been altogether different if the participants had all been white males. Instead, the student's social positionality, though not the focus of the analysis to follow, is very likely a contributing factor to how the students have experienced their own leadership development during their degree experience.

Data Collection

Upon gaining consent (verbally received and recorded following the students' individual review of a written consent form shared ahead of the interview), I conducted interviews over Zoom. Meeting over an online platform rather than in-person helped in working around students' schedules and fitting in meeting times that do not distract from their academic and extra-curricular obligations (indeed, one student met with me on their lunch break while in their Co-op workplace). Since students were able to talk to me from the comforts of their homes or self-elected locations, Zoom helped mediate a relaxed and trusting rather than formal or transactional interviewing experience.

Data Analysis

Using Zoom also allowed the interviews to be automatically transcribed into text. To account for errors, I personally re-listened to audio recordings of the interviews and adjusted the transcripts for accuracy. While reviewing and consolidating the transcripts, I had already launched into analysis by beginning to identify themes and common topics across all four interviews, all the while also staying alert to “outlier” unique ideas and even potentially unexpected insights.

Importantly, it is not for me to have imposed or expected patterns in my findings. Instead, in keeping with Williams et al. (2021), I recognized that students’ positionality and identity as defined by the context around them necessarily impacts their relationship towards accessing and receiving leadership education. Their views are uniquely their own. For all that my role was to observe and empathize, I had to maintain the integrity of the data as it was recorded.

I identified themes by locating repetition of similar ideas across the interview transcripts. If an idea occurred several times or was expressed with particular passion or insistence, I made sure to note this in a separate document where I was compiling categories and clusters that later became the themes I went on to write about. I also used the key word finder function to look back on transcripts and zero in on how each participant spoke of a particular idea, if at all. I completed analysis over the span of a few weeks because I wanted to ensure I was looking at data with a fresh mind and opting to seek out patterns that showed themselves rather than impose patterns I may have become attached to.

Trustworthiness

My passion for refining and supporting a more robust and student-centric future for leadership learning for university students is a key reason that my study may be considered trustworthy. As Tracy (2010) states, one way for a researcher to be trustworthy is to select a topic that is worthy, i.e. relevant, timely, and significant. Otherwise, a “study that is only opportunistic or convenient, without larger significance or personal meaning, is ‘likely to be pursued in a shallow way, with less care devoted to design and data collection’” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 290 as cited in Tracy, 2010).

I wanted the students that I interviewed to know upfront that they were not just speaking into a black box. Since I have worked alongside the programs and organizations that they have learned through, I strove to maintain an ally's knowledge of what goes on in these programs and to challenge my suspicions about the kinds of learning that occurs within them. I wanted the participants' trust that they would not have to fill me in from the ground up and, indeed, participants often spoke in shorthand or referred to acronyms or program specifics that I did not need to pause and ask them to explain. This helped us dive into deeper chats from the get-go and connect over a somewhat common experience.

However, for all that I genuinely care for this study and the data it elicited, I know that I am decidedly not a student leader. As I have asserted from the start, this study is about uncovering students' perceptions of leadership learning. I am, at best, a practitioner that would like to see these perceptions be paid attention to and incorporated into future university-backed resources and supports made available to emerging student leaders.

During interviews, I was careful to not pass judgment and let participants talk, at times for great lengths. I wanted to be an active listener and really allow for uninterrupted reflection, limiting my commentary to statements that would reinforce or seek to clarify something a participant has already shared. In seeking clarity or to build upon a point made, I was seeking rigour – that is, to garner as much detail as I could and have the student's stories feel rich, “bountifully supplied,” and important (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

Findings

Three out of the four participants that I spoke to stated that they felt their leadership learning while at university had adequately prepared them to lead in their post-graduation futures – but with a major caveat: only through their own efforts. As Nour put it when asked about this verbatim, “I would say yes [...] and that happened because I didn't say no and I just jumped for the opportunity that came my way,” referring to opportunities to volunteer and join student-based groups that function outside of the formal degree curriculum.

As educators and readers, we could wrap this study based on this statement alone and carry on satisfied that students are finding their way into learning leadership in a way that resonates with them and feels applicable. However, this initial statement was only the tip of the iceberg in understanding students' university-based leadership learning.

While seemingly prepared to lead as a result of their learning, the students who shared experiences with me also contextualized their learning journeys by speaking about what it took to get to the type of learning that they have achieved. All four noted that: their learning was often not classroom-based (and, at times, not recognized or supported as legitimate "learning" by their instructors); that they came into this learning in an unplanned way, often by stepping outside of a personal "comfort zone"; and that this learning was often tinged with interpersonal and emotional pressures, from burnout to navigating accountability within peer groups. Looking to the future of leadership learning, the participants spoke of wanting to see leadership learning within university be: better aligned with professional standards associated with entry-level careers and a post-COVID-19 labour market; more inviting and welcoming; and more community-oriented.

Leadership is learned outside of the classroom

I began all four interviews with a broader question to help each participant situate themselves and mention where it is that they have encountered leadership learning while at university. I asked either "how did you come to be a part of [insert student organization]?" (if it was known to me, through past emails or initial introductions prior to beginning formal questioning) or else "what stands out to you as examples of where you learned leadership while at school/where do you think you learned leadership most deeply while at school?". All four participants first entered into the discussion by referencing examples that are decidedly non-academic, either mentioning student-led extra-curricular clubs and volunteer-based organizations (colloquially referred to as "extra-curriculars") or Co-op, a co-curricular career readiness program that students complete in between academic semesters.

In fact, when asked to reflect back on their degree path and consider what they would want to pass on as advice to junior students looking to learn about leadership

while at school, Ilana further reinforced the idea that leadership is learned outside of the classroom:

I would tell them, make the most out of it. Take on any experience you think that will be useful for you [...] Do Co-ops 100% - like, don't just be a classroom student. Go outside, do that job, take that role.

This assertion was also echoed by Hannah, who, when speaking about key experiences that have shaped her into the leader she is today, mentioned:

both of [the experiences she had just mentioned] were something I never planned to do [as they are not part of standard curriculum...] You learn a lot of great things in classes, but being able to put that into practice through these experiences [...] was definitely a very rewarding experience for me.

Nour, too, agreed that classroom-based leadership learning was a lesser component of her leadership learning, stating: “the courses that you take are limited and the skills that you learn from them are limited, they're only classroom level.”

Although the participants were nearly unanimous in asserting that leadership is just not adequately exemplified or practiced within the classroom setting, importantly, they did not attribute blame to or speak badly of the professors overseeing their classrooms. Instead, there was a general sense of weariness that arose across all participant responses on this manner, with Nour musing, “no one's teaching you [leadership] in school in your class because they don't have the time, that's not part of their syllabus.” Meanwhile, Hannah was thankful to a professor for noticing her aptitude while in class:

I got interested in being involved in student clubs because of a professor of a class I was taking. This person pointed out that my note-taking style was very similar to how a consultant takes notes, so they nudged me in the direction to apply for the pro bono consultancy we have [at the university].

Though this professor did not personally guide Hannah to learn consultancy-appropriate leadership skills, their encouragement and allyship helped Hannah connect to the leadership learning that she needed.

Lily was the only participant who answered “no” when asked if they felt that their leadership learning while at university had adequately equipped them for their post-graduation future. Lily said:

I would say not really. That's mostly because, if we're talking about the [university] curriculum alone, there's almost no opportunity. You would have to go out of your way to do extra-curriculars. But that's completely dependent on like, the person's schedule. So it's not really consistent to say that.

While framing their response from the negative angle whereas the other three participants framed theirs from the positive angle, Lily nevertheless described the same reality that the others had also noted. The resounding take-away from all four interviews, therefore, was that students learn leadership by self-electing into activities and/or affiliations with student organizations, which do not adhere to and are not a part of the mandatory curriculum required to complete a Business degree. Leadership, as defined and understood by engaged student leaders, is taught or examined within the classroom in only a limited sense at best.

Leadership is learned outside of one's "comfort zone"

It must be acknowledged that, for students to first come to understand that leadership is learned outside of the classroom and then go on to seek out extra-curricular opportunities, takes a lot of interpersonal gusto and the drive to move beyond university-enabled learning dynamics. When reflecting on their own journeys into extra-curricular leadership learning, several participants spoke of stepping outside of their "comfort zone." In reviewing interview transcripts, I was struck by this metaphor, either referred to directly or alluded to through examples, as a recurring theme across the participants' recollections. Examples are as follows:

[There were] two experiences that really stood out to me, that helped me [...] step out of my *comfort zone* [emphasis added] the most as well as learn things that [...] I didn't have an avenue to learn from another experience. (Hannah)

Every time I've had a junior student, or even a peer, reach out to me over LinkedIn or otherwise, asking for [...] advice or learning, I think my top thing that I've told them is, you know, don't be afraid to step out of your *comfort zone* [emphasis added]. It can seem a bit intimidating in the beginning, but it is such a rewarding experience after. Everyone's in the same boat. (Hannah)

So yeah, so scary. I would say that I feel more confident coming out of my *comfort zone* [emphasis added] because - this comes back to, I guess you could say failure, like, because we're afraid of failing, we're afraid of being made fun of by peers. (Lily)

Even when not stating the exact words “comfort zone,” all participants remembered having to take a risk and confront a new approach to and space for learning when abdicating from classroom-only exposure to leadership. Nour shared that:

Once [she] got placed [in a student organization, [she got] more recognized for [her] work and for [her] input [within the organization] and that [encouraged her] to be more involved. So [a student] only [needs] some sort of push that gives [them] that confidence and the motivation to aim for higher.

It would seem that with risk comes reward. However, as is evidenced below, this initial leap into self-directed learning is something that students are tasked with navigating without much institutional support.

Leadership is correlated with professionalism and career readiness

Not only is the kind of leadership that student leaders value not learned within the university business classroom setting, but Ilana took this one step further, likewise critiquing certain extra-curricular involvements, such as student clubs, as “just [helping her] develop general skills...[such as] organizational skills or communication skills.” By providing a foundation of skills she could leverage, “these [club-based] roles... ultimately helped [her] succeed in [her] Co-op or any other future opportunity” (Ilana).

What Ilana is outlining here is that, even if clubs are one of the places where students are able to apply their learning and gain more practical leadership awareness, there is still a spectrum within how readily the clubs emulate a professional standard of leadership that will support students in their post-graduation careers. Not all clubs are shaped equally and each club reflects the current students that run it or participate as active members. While staff support is available, the clubs are intended to be run for students by students and, as I can attest to from my time at this university, staff involvement tends to be minimal or only on an as-needed basis. The depth of the leadership that students learn while participating in clubs will therefore depend on the club’s make-up as well as its alignment with the types of leadership associated with students’ target industries or careers of choice.

As a career educator, it was interesting for me to note Ilana's vehement belief that leadership is best learned in industry or the workplace, as happened for her on Co-op. Asked a clarifying question, "In a hypothetical alternative degree journey - so let's say you had not done Co-op - do you think you would have been exposed to this kind of leadership?", Ilana resolutely answered:

Nope... Maybe, maybe. During my part time jobs, yes. I've done a quite a few. I feel like some other experiences that might teach you a little bit could be [being a] Teaching Assistant (TA). TAing holds so much accountability. You can't just be a TA like that - like, there's so much responsibility. So I think those types of opportunities. And like, yeah, any other job that you do.

But Ilana was not the only participant who drew a link between leadership and themes like professionalism or career readiness. In speaking of how classroom review of leadership concepts is limited, Nour mentioned:

[faculty do not] teach you what's the interview type. That's like... I had no idea what case interviews were. No idea. [...] Students [who] were not involved in co-curriculars do not have the exposure to the fact that companies hire like years in advance.

What she is outlining here is that, for many entry-level opportunities within business-affiliated sectors, it is the norm to recruit students while those students are still a year away from completing their degrees. She went on to say that, without certain extra-curricular programming, she would have never been recruited into the role that she has secured following the completion of her degree:

I would even go ahead and say I would not have gotten the role that I got right now, which was my ideal dream role, if I did not do [a specific extra-curricular program]. There's absolutely no way. (Nour)

Without tapping into co-curricular or extra-curricular spaces that communicate this standard and prepare students to undertake such "recruits," in part by coaching on sector-specific interview formats, students are left unaware and disadvantaged. They might unknowingly be jeopardizing their chances at early career success, all because they do not know that this type of information will likely not get to them from within the classroom. By only adhering to what has been communicated by the university as mandatory curriculum, students therefore can graduate with a Business degree, but are not guaranteed to have accessed the kind of sector-specific learning that would have supported them in jumpstarting a career.

Lily poignantly added further context to this issue of classrooms not adequately readying students for professional standards of how to lead themselves or others:

There was one group project I was in where, even if a member of the group didn't do anything, they would still get at least 50% of the grade. And I found that very appalling because it's like, what if you go into the workplace and you don't do anything? You will not get paid 50% of your salary. You just get fired. So that's a big issue that, at least these standards or the situations that come from [classroom-based] group work, where you can best learn and develop your leadership skills in a way that's most easily accessible to students, it does not accurately reflect the workplace. You would have to go out a way to do extra-curriculars [to learn these standards].

Not only are students finding their way into opportunities to learn applicable leadership skills only by happenstance and self-selection, should they happen to join clubs or student organizations, but the few instances of learning that do exist within the classroom are also largely left up to students to figure out and manage. In the example Lily provided, there was no penalty or even interference from the professor when one of Lily's teammates chose to do zero work in support of his group, only to still receive a passing grade for that Business course. This sets a precedent around self-responsibility that does not align with expectations adhered to in professional settings.

Leadership is framed as a bonus or a choice

It would seem that, due to being preoccupied and busy with existing teaching responsibilities, professors are not stepping in to notice or interfere when students are circumventing their group work responsibilities or off-loading leadership responsibilities onto a select few. Lily explains this as:

You could say accountability is kind of non-existent and you could say people who are being leaders -- leaders that fit [the school's] actual own tenets -- they are very few and far between. Most people are just kind of concerned about getting things done, which isn't necessarily bad, but they don't get it done well or like actually responsibly.

Institutional support is also limited when students engage in leadership learning outside of the classroom and so feel the added impact of balancing multiple commitments. Often, student leaders' involvement in club-based activities is demanding, as they ideate, organize, and deliver everything from workshops to events to engage the student body. At Business school, especially, these events are not only social, but often

feature industry guests and allow for networking opportunities with professional speakers and community-based sponsors. Whether professors understand the load of this style of engagement or not, they seem to have little tolerance or empathy for students needing flexibility or grace as a result of busy evenings in between classes. As Nour put it:

It's not like you have one less assignment because you were busy planning a big event for, like, The Big 4 [i.e. the leading, global professional services firms] this week. Like you don't get, I don't know, a free dining hall pass [...], you don't get to walk around in specific merch [...] Nobody really knows that so much is happening behind the scenes.

Therefore, even if students chance into extra-curricular opportunities that allow them to build their leadership ability and gain access to professional standards displayed by prospective employers, they do so without much recognition or institutional accommodations. Remembering back to being a student leader at an international boarding school, Nour recounts how she would be permitted to miss assignments or get credit towards her final grades as a result of her volunteering output. Now at a Canadian university, however:

Over here, if you talk to [...] your teacher [and say] I'm having a hard time, had to miss 8 AM class plus [was] coming from [next city over], cannot make it to [the city where campus is located since I was] making this event happen [...], the response, I would say, 9.8 out of 10 – because, in my experience, only one instructor might have a level of understanding -- but 90% will say that unfortunately, it's not fair to your peers.

In this example, professors are equating giving leeway or support to student leaders as special treatment. In so doing, they are unknowingly making the experience of applied student leadership and leadership learning all the more exhausting for students to juggle on top of their academics. And yet, as we have seen, these same students do not believe that the academic curriculum is equipping students to learn the kinds of leadership that they see as valuable. Students soon learn that professors will not empathize or value extra-curricular involvement as on par with the learning that happens in-classroom. This unfortunately contributes to student leadership learning becoming an activity that students not only have to opt into, but which adds a major additional strain to their degree experience.

Leadership cannot be learned without sacrifice

The resulting reality becomes that students who go out of their way to enhance their standard degree learning by volunteering their time towards applied leadership learning through extra-curriculars are often over-burdened with responsibility and performance-based pressures. This runs the risk of students potentially encountering associated challenges, such as mental and physical health challenges. As Nour explained:

It's unpaid. It's all voluntary. So you're only driven by your own personal motivational factors that push you. So, in most cases, [...] it causes burnout [which] usually happens once you're in the process [of organizing club activities and events].

For the sake of access to leadership opportunities and exposure to prospective employer guests, students sacrifice balance in their schedules and voluntarily take on added load, all while having to maintain good academic standing.

However, while such a sacrifice is problematic and likely to lead to challenges with burnout as a leading risk, the ability to make the sacrifice is not entirely up to sheer will. Indeed, not all students are able to volunteer unpaid time to access this type of leadership learning. For those who need to work in order to fund their schooling, for example, hours spent outside of the classroom are a limited commodity that cannot as readily be contributed towards unpaid labour for the sake of leadership learning. Not all students have equitable access to such opportunities, even if they recognize that this is a pathway into leadership experience. As Lily noted:

With everything that's happening or just how busy a student is in general, you know, if we're not including the other responsibilities, it can be very hard to invest in yourself and that's one of the biggest hurdles is that, whether it's financial reasons or like time commitments, you know, such as getting to classes at 7 am and being dead tired by noon, it's hard to get those kind of opportunities and that's also another major roadblock to actually developing those kind of interpersonal skills that leaders need to succeed in the workplace now.

As such, it appears leadership learning is further made inaccessible to students depending on their social positioning and whether they can afford to spare time and energy towards this learning. For all that students might be enthusiastic and have a desire for this type of learning, in addition to managing mandatory classes, they may not have the privilege of even attempting it.

Leadership can be different: The participants' recommendations

For all that the participants outlined a reality where leadership learning is something that needs to be sought out and only a select few are able to adequately access, they also spoke of the immense support that they and their fellow peers were at times able to cultivate amongst themselves as co-organizers. Towards the end of each interview, after each participant had reflected on their personal experiences, I asked if there is anything they would like to see be different about how leadership is learned at university. Several themes emerged, namely: the need for a more community-oriented cultures amongst student organizations; tolerance for different stages and styles of learning; and the championing of a leadership style that more closely reflects workplace norms within a post-COVID workplace reality.

Leadership can foster community support

Students have a great capacity to shape their own leadership efforts and collectives from a more inclusive approach. Recalling what helped her step into her own success as a student leader, Hannah put it this way:

When you're meeting your peers, it has to be done in a way where you're not kind of displaying any kind of superiority complex. It was very balanced. And above all that, I think there was a sentiment of wanting to achieve good things together. There was never holding back on opportunities or knowledge. It was a very shared approach.

When institutional support is limited and students are inadvertently left to their own devices to enact leadership, the relationships between students become paramount for setting a foundation for effective applied learning. The student leaders turn to one another to shape a culture and, in so doing, create a community that has lasting impact.

As Nour related:

I think it goes without saying that people who get who gain a lot from the student community are even more passionate about giving back. Because then they realize the power that community holds for them.

In this example, students are able to build off of the efforts that they harness collectively in order to share the load that comes with leadership roles within student organizations.

They step in to give back and uplift one another and so create a cyclical culture of giving back, so much so that, even as alumni, they still feel compelled to return to their alma mater to support succeeding generations of budding leaders:

[These leadership-based clubs are] only possible [...] because of the support of alumni. So it's actually like a full cycle if you think about it. Like, people wanted the program, they do the program, they get placed [in entry-level roles], and then in the future when they see other students in the same thing, they are more willing to help because of all that they got from the program. And it just like continues [...] So, when I finished [my time with a student organization], I was in that way. I had just got placed [in a post-graduation job] and I had this feeling of immense gratitude for the student support network that the program held [...] so I was more than willing to give at this point because I knew how much I gained. (Nour)

Community is not limited to students supporting students or alumni input only, however. As Ilana describes, for her, leadership success at university was directly related to her parents' encouragement and support:

Even in my high school, I was so involved just because I was [...] motivated by my parents. So I just think it's not [just the school's role in encouraging leadership learning], it's your thinking, your family, how they have built you so far.

In each of these examples, it would seem that social support from peers and loved ones played an instrumental role in allowing students to take on the challenges that come along with leadership learning while at university. Collectively, the participants celebrated that they were able to step into leadership as a result of a committed community built off a giving-back mentality.

Leadership can be open to different kinds of learners

Because so many clubs and organizations that are student-run host limited spots for members, particularly those who want to take on key organizing roles, these roles are allocated through competitive "hiring" processes. This demands a certain level of confidence and interpersonal comfort from student applicants hoping to secure these roles, meaning that less outwardly confident students are not often assumed to be as fit for club-based leadership.

However, as Lily recounted, when she participated in a definitive leadership learning moment at a student organization, she found that the senior student leader who

had been selected to act as “program manager” made a real difference in student learners feeling more comfortable to evolve as leaders because the senior student leader accepted different styles of learning. Lily stated:

Attitude was a really big part of it because while [the student program manager] was very, you could say, she had a lot of energy, she was very excited and very passionate about the project and actually being able to... basically draw [out] our potential and encourage us to grow and that was a big part of it. [...] She's like, okay, I will have to find or figure out a way to help you guys be able to cross this gap because this will help you in the future.

Rather than move ahead with her own agenda or leave less experienced students with less refined leadership outlooks to fend for themselves, the senior student leader instead made students feel that she saw promise in them and she was committed to helping them realize it. Not all student leaders have this “attitude,” but it made a marked difference to Lily’s experience when she benefited from it directly. This led her to see this senior student leader as a role model and example of leadership worth emulating.

For all that Hannah is set to graduate as a very involved student leader, there was a time when she, too, felt like a novice with little direction in her leadership learning. She mentioned that particular individuals who were further along in their leadership development took an interest in her and helped her bring forth a drive to see herself as a future leader, also. Initially facing barriers as an International student, Hannah felt that her leadership learning only truly took shape once she recognized other learners’ approaches and so was inspired to take personal control of her own.

I think when I started university, I was - I am - an international student. So I was totally focused on [...] academics and perhaps figuring out what I'd like to do post-grad because when I'd started [my Business degree], I wasn't quite too sure what I can make of my degree [...] So really, all the decisions I've made throughout my degree, especially early on, have been guided by really, like impactful, strong individuals. (Hannah)

Because individuals noticed her and offered their support, Hannah was able to go from a student who was entirely new to the Canadian university learning environment, to a leader who caught the interest of several leading corporate employers. She credits this to mentorship from those who allowed her the chance to learn alongside them rather than seeing her inexperience as a reason to further gatekeep her from leadership opportunities at university.

Leadership can reflect post-COVID workplace norms

Since so much of leadership learning while at Business school is geared towards developing as a leader who will hopefully go on to join workplace teams focused on strategy and innovation, the type of leadership that students learn while at school should ideally ready them for workplace expectations. Several participants linked leadership learning to professionalism, as we have seen, while also expounding upon what they see as post-COVID leadership approaches prevalent amongst their colleagues, mentors, and future employers. Below are excerpts that illustrate this:

I just feel like it's so important that your employees should like you. And I think part of a good leadership role is being understanding...you appreciate your employees, and if you show that understanding, they would love you. So I feel like it's just so so important. (Ilana)

My impression [of] leaders is that a lot of them are, you could say, they get offended if you kind of question them because they're like, "oh, well, I'm the leader, I have the most experience," right? And while, well, sure, there is some truth to [this...], that doesn't mean that [they're] always right. But that's just a big gap that I feel is not really addressed in a lot of potential leaders [...] in the future or, you know, they might be a leader for whatever organization I work in, and that's one of my biggest concerns right now. (Lily)

I think a few things that a leader must have post-COVID are just understanding that employees need flexibility to perform to their optimum level. Maybe initially, the norm was that we need to be in the office 5 days a week and [...] deliver 40 hours. And we found out, because of COVID, I guess, the blessing in disguise was that that's not entirely true. Some people can be more productive while working remotely or in a hybrid model. [...]. So I think there's a need for understanding, flexibility and honest communication between a leader and perhaps the person they're leading and that's just so important after COVID. And that's, I think, one thing that a leader cannot compromise on if they want to be an effective leader per se. And another thing that comes to mind is really intentionally setting goals and expectations as soon as you're in a working relationship, or that the leader/mentee relationship starts, just understanding what the expectations are on both ends, what goals they'd like to meet. So someone who's very invested in wanting to have that open, honest communication right off the bat. (Hannah)

Collectively, the participants described noticing an emergent leadership style within workplaces that centers flexibility and accountability towards employees. Ilana spoke of a leader who is willing to understand her workplace needs and goals as deserving of their employees' "love" and loyalty, a critical component of relationship-building at work.

Lily spoke of leaders who assume a higher-than-though approach as a menacing potential that is out-of-touch with what she sees as effective leadership in her future. Hannah also mentioned flexibility as a core behavior she now expects of workplace leaders and added that shared understanding through open communication must be established and maintained from the get-go in a leader/mentee relationship.

Conclusion

As I have documented by exploring student participants' stories, so much discovery of leadership aptitude and equitable relationship-building at university is happening within student-based spaces, maintained by students for students. There is a disconnect between the kinds of leadership that students find relevant and useful for their professional development and post-graduation success and the learning presented within the classroom.

This creates a danger that students who may not come to realize that leadership learning exists within voluntary student spaces will instead follow a mandated curriculum plan and graduate with a degree that is theoretical but not applied, therefore not equipping them to act as leaders who can understand and traverse a post-COVID-19 professional landscape. Because faculty are not fully aware of the load that students take on when they do join extra-curricular groups or activities, they are less likely to support or accommodate student leaders. The take-home message from this is that leadership efforts enacted by students are inadvertently under-valued by the institution, all while students see it as critical for access to industry connections, standards, and pre-employment training.

What the students experience while undertaking leadership learning is at odds with how their professors and university perceive the voluntary efforts through which these students obtain their leadership skills. Students are left to chance into this type of learning. As Nour put it, when referring to taking chances and falling into a leadership development track through extra-curriculars while at university, "maybe I got lucky in that sense."

However, as the world pivots following a major global crisis and workplaces evolve to take on emergent leadership approaches in response, it is questionable

whether students should “luck” into learning about leadership. Within a business school environment, which prides itself for fostering leaders, there is all the more precedent to re-evaluate how leadership is being taught and what students themselves are craving in order to feel better prepared to enter into a changing professional world.

Following analysis of my participants’ perceptions of their own leadership learning while at university, as well as their recommendations for potential changes to said learning, I recommend that universities take a more active role in examining where and how students learn leadership. Because curriculum changes are infamously slow to make happen, universities might start by better recognizing the efforts that students are already labouring to make happen outside of the classroom. Supporting students by providing them with resources, such as additional funding or leeway on their academic responsibilities (e.g. extension on assignments, credit towards grades for completing voluntary hours), could be an accessible first step.

Another benefit to the university better supporting existing student leadership initiatives is that other students will more likely see these efforts being uplifted and promoted and so self-elect to make take them on for their own learning. Because extra-curricular learning happens outside of the classroom, students do not always spare or may not be able to spare time to explore this kind of learning. However, with more institutional support, students might have added flexibility to enhance their degrees with this type of learning instead of seeing it framed as a fringe activity that is less important than following standard curriculum.

Flexibility is also a theme that characterizes a post-COVID-19 workplace, as described by several participants. As entry-level professionals, they note that more effective workplaces are ones that provide employees with trust in taking on more hybridized schedules and/or invest in employees’ needs. As such, student leaders want the same for their leadership learning while at university – a culture of mutual support, empowering of one another, and trust when sharing the load of labour.

Recommendations for Further Research

My research examined insights provided by four student leaders, all of them coincidentally female-assigned, racialized persons. To continue to build a more robust

understanding of students' perceptions and desires for their leadership education, future research might look to examine insights from a more diversified pool of participants. Nevertheless, because my participants were all engaged senior-level students who had been led by and have led other students themselves, I trust that their views showcased awareness of existing student leadership dynamics within extra-curricular groups at a leading western Canadian Business school.

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Appendix. Interview Questions

What follows is a list of questions that I used as an entry-point into discussions with student participants during our one-on-one interviews.

- Tell me how you ended up a member of [student organization]? OR What is one example of how you learned leadership while at university?
 - How have you experienced leadership while participating in [student organization]?
 - Are there people you associate with leadership at this organization?
 - What kinds of actions or characteristics do they showcase as leaders?
- Do you think your leadership learning while at university has given you the skills you need to act as a leader in the future? Why or why not?
- What kind of leadership skills do you think would help you prepare for your future? OR What skills do you think students need in order to be prepared to lead in their futures?
- What would you suggest students do in order to get leadership education/training while at university?
- Is there anything you would like to see be different about leadership that is learned while at university?