FROM PERSONAL PEDESTAL TO INTERCONNECTED PROCESS: REFRAMING LEADERSHIP FOR THE 21ST CENTURY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT

by

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A THESIS

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As university students step into leadership roles, their development as leaders becomes shaped by the ideologies upheld in their learning environments. In a time of increasing social diversity yet pressured erasure of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in education, this study seeks to analyze leadership as a discipline to better understand how universities can best train and support students who aspire to be—and in many cases, already are—leaders of the 21st century.

To investigate the strategies and practices that can prepare student leaders at universities, there were three primary stages of qualitative research. First, a literature review provided a groundwork understanding of leadership theory and emerging concepts to critically consider the discipline of leadership. Next, this collected knowledge was synthesized into conclusions about the current landscape of leadership study. These conclusions were then applied to a review and analysis of four current university leadership centers and their training programs for undergraduate students. Ultimately, the conceptual understanding, synthesized conclusions, and program analysis were utilized to present recommendations for university environments.

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And to the University of Oregon, thank you for helping me become the leader I am today.

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Preface: A Personal Leadership Story

During my second year of college, a group of students told me that I should run for student body president. Having been in leadership roles since middle school, it felt like the natural next step in my journey as a leader. I also knew that I had the heart and the care for my community to dedicate my time to the role, and I assumed these qualities would be enough to do positive work.

Once elected as the Associated Students of the University of Oregon's (ASUO) President and beginning to carry out my duties serving the student body, I naturally turned my attention to the communities around me: what did they need or want from their president? My Vice President and I hosted round table discussions over dinner with other student organization leaders to discuss solutions for collectively improving campus culture together.

However, this approach did not match the narrative about how the president *should* act that advisors and fellow peers pushed upon me. Because adjectives like "strong" and "self-assured" were consistently used to describe the "ASUO President," it felt necessary to mold my leadership style to reflect these characteristics and have all of the answers without needing to consult others. I was also constantly being asked, "What is *your* legacy going to be?" and "How are you going to use this job for your future?" These questions perplexed me because I felt this role should not be centered in the self but in the 24,000 students it represents.

These pressures from my environment catalyzed my shift to an individualistic approach, one that ultimately limited my connection with students and led to mistakes that harmed an underrepresented community on campus. After the year ended, I began to wonder why this happened. Why was this leadership role expected to focus on personal goals? Why did I neglect a community-oriented style of leadership? These questions guided me towards this project.

Introduction

Why Study Leadership Now?

Born from a personal inquiry to find answers after not feeling prepared for my role as ASUO President, this thesis has evolved into a timely call to action for American society. Despite our country's identity developing into a more diverse environment with continued increases in numbers of persons of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and individuals openly identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ), this last presidential election demonstrated the United States' (U.S.) continued cling onto the need for a dominant patriarchal White "hero" archetype whose decisions harm these very groups—all of whom have historically less power than the identity of a white man (Allen, 2023; Amnesty International, 2025).

Further, the current U.S. Presidential administration's executive mandates are directly targeting places of education at the K-12 and Higher Education levels by challenging their content and the people who belong in the space. Whether dismantling programs that include the words "diversity" or attempting to deport students, the educational environments that shape young people are being stripped of resources to help students develop into leaders who respect, acknowledge, listen to, and care for *everyone* they will work with, represent, and lead (Education Counsel, 2025).

Thus, now more than ever, it feels extremely important to focus on leadership as a discipline, not only to prevent electing future leaders who prioritize personal power and enact harm, but also to guide a new generation towards understanding leadership within a multicultural, multi-identity space that our nation and its organizations, classrooms, meeting

tables, and communities have become. This thesis aims to be a first step in developing how education—specifically Higher Education at the undergraduate level—can lead this charge.

Research Design

The purpose of this research is to critically consider the discipline of leadership and confront ways in which students are introduced to leadership theories and practices at an undergraduate level. In pursuit of gained knowledge on leadership as a discipline, this study begins with an intentional review of sources that cover the history of leadership theories, challenge traditional approaches to understanding leadership, and outline new emerging concepts. This knowledge is then synthesized into conclusions about the state of leadership study in the 21st century. These conclusions are applied to an analysis of four current university leadership centers to gain insight into the kinds of program offerings available and their content for undergraduate students. Finally, recommendations for facilitators of undergraduate student leadership programs within university settings are made with one proposed solution-oriented option for implementation.

Intended Outcomes

1. Knowledge: A Leadership Study
2. Synthesis: Conclusions for Leadership in the 21st Century
3. Application: University Leadership Center Analysis
4. Recommendation: Suggested Future Action and PPPM Curriculum Spotlight

These sections each a reflect key research question.

Research Questions

1. What is leadership, according to literature?

    a. What are the prominent leadership ideologies that have shaped the study of leadership over time?
    b. What are some emerging concepts that may challenge these concepts?
2. What are some conclusions that can be drawn about the discipline of leadership that demonstrate what is needed from leaders and leadership in the 21st century?
3. How are these findings applied to an examination of programs offered through university leadership centers?
4. Based on examined programs and self-reflective inquiry, what recommendations can be made to facilitators of undergraduate student leadership programs?

The following detailed methodology shows how this study sought to answer these questions.

Methodology

This thesis is an exploratory qualitative study drawing on a review of literature, information available online, existing university leadership training program websites, and other publicly available information. The project consists of two primary research stages: intentional overview of leadership through traditional theories and emerging concepts and an analysis of specific university leadership centers and their programs as case studies for undergraduate leadership programs. I outline these stages and their primary sources below.

Within the first stage of research, three primary texts centered the three-part literature review. While additional texts were explored, these three works presented the most holistic collective overview of ideas within the discipline of leadership. First, it felt necessary to begin with a foundational text that described theories and ideas that have historically defined leadership as a discipline. To obtain this grounding knowledge, this study primarily called upon Peter G. Northouse's *Leadership: Theory and Practice 7th Edition* (2016) because of Northouse's

prominence as a leadership scholar and its wide availability. The text is critical to this study because of its breadth of information, historical overview of the study of leadership, and neutral language about the definitions presented. There has also been almost ten years for its content to have been implemented within university student leadership programs.

The next text expanded the research by challenging the idea that leadership is inherently positive. Craig E Johnson's *Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow* (2025) builds upon leadership definitions and terms by highlighting the potential leaders have to be positive or negative influences on communities. Johnson also introduces Parker Palmer in the beginning of his textbook through an opening epigraph on leadership's capacity for "light" or "shadow" which sets up the paradigm explored within Johnson's book. Inspired by this inclusion, Palmer's views on overcoming the leadership shadow are also explored in the second section of the literature review through his work *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (2024).

The third critical text in this first research stage is Helena Liu's *Redeeming Leadership: An Anti-Racist Feminist Intervention* (2021). Liu expands beyond the destructive side of leaders and offers perspective on the harms leadership as a discipline has perpetuated with its systemic roots in white patriarchal society. While Liu is a researcher from Australia and the focus of this thesis is the United States, her emerging ideas provide guidance on how to "redeem" leadership, a concept that complements leadership scholars the United States as will be discussed in the third section of the literature. Her identity as a female Asian woman also brings a voice that contrasts the white, male-dominated scholarly works explored thus far within this thesis.

After reviewing these sources and communicating relevant content, their messaging is synthesized in the form of succinct conclusions that describe the 21st leadership landscape as

seen through these intentionally chosen texts. The conclusions are shared in a separate section of the thesis and include arguments that pull from the review of literature.

In the third stage of research, these conclusions are applied to an analysis of university leadership centers as case studies for student leadership offerings on college campuses. As a hub for leadership learning, workshops, and co-curricular or extra-curricular development, university leadership centers and institutes offer a range of programs training leaders for the 21st century. For this study, university leadership centers and institutes were found through a Google Search and reviewed online on their respective websites. A large number of university leadership centers and institutes were initially found through the search terms, "university leadership centers" and "university leadership institutes." To narrow the number of centers and institutes reviewed within this study, four leadership centers were chosen based on established criteria: inclusion within the Big Ten conference, availability of program descriptions online, and a desire to isolate a range in approaches to describing and practicing leadership. Three institutions were chosen because they met the identified criteria: University of Oregon, The Ohio State University, and Northwestern. A final school was chosen outside of the Big Ten because of an isolated Google search for university programs that included "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" and "Anti-Racism." This school, Tulane University, was the only program found using these search terms and had enough online information describing the program. This university's leadership center also served as its own unique case study to draw conclusions about the political state of leadership programs on college campuses in 2025.

To analyze these university leadership centers according to the synthesized conclusions, visual tools are applied to each of their programs. These visual tools are further outlined in the beginning of the third section of this thesis, "Application: University Program Analysis."

Following the analysis, key takeaways are articulated based on these programs to summarize findings and outline gaps between existing programs and the prior conclusions drawn from the literature review describing the needs of 21st century.

Finally, using the collective findings from the previous sections, recommendations are made to facilitators of student leadership trainings like those within university leadership centers. Following these recommendations, an example of a curriculum-based program that meets many of these recommendations is presented as a self-reflective inquiry. As a student of this leadership class, I detail the class content, learning objectives, assignments, and experience to demonstrate how the curriculum aligns with the synthesized conclusions from the literature review and offers a model for what co-curricular or extra-curricular programs within university leadership centers could do to address the current gaps within existing university programming.

Knowledge of Leadership

Foundational Understanding in the Evolution of Leadership Ideology

Beginning the endeavor towards understanding "Leadership" is daunting. One of the first leadership researchers, Ralph M. Stogdill (1974, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 2) affirmed this when he claimed, "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it." Ideas regarding the roles, identities, and needs of the leader have shifted throughout history. Before tackling the needs of 21st century undergraduate student leaders, it is necessary to look backward at the evolution of Western society's attempts at defining leadership.

Historical Lens

Because humans naturally organize themselves into groups with decision makers and followers, it may be argued that leadership has always been informally seeped into our learning and thus has the potential of being studied. However, for the purpose of this analysis, the scope will begin with the 20th century as this is when—according to Northouse—scholars within academic institutions began diving deeper into the conceptualizations of leadership. Scholar J. C. Rost provides a helpful overview of these definitions as he studied leadership materials written from 1900 to 1990 and analyzed over 200 different definitions (1991, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 2). Rost's analysis indicates that leadership has transformed over time from initially being described as a set of individual traits or characteristics rooted in domination that instills respect to being understood as a situational and relational process between a leader and their group seeking to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2016). To dive deeper into these very

different approaches to leadership, we will first look at how they evolved through studies and findings across the 20th century.

Leadership as Individual Traits

One of the first systematic attempts at studying leadership began with trait-based analysis and theories. In practice, this looked like researchers studying the innate qualities of key "social, political, and military leaders" (Northouse, 2016, p.19) like Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, and Napoleon. Scholars attempted to identify the traits that these "great" people possessed and believed only individuals that exhibited these traits would have the capacity to become a leader. These early theories were thus called "great man theories" because they were most often based on male leaders who held power and influence over groups of others. Though some women like Catherine the Great and Joan of Arc were exceptions, the theories predominantly centered men who historically had held leadership positions within Western society.

These "great man" theories produced a range of results, including conclusions about physical features, personality traits, and other individual characteristics. Factors like height, extraversion, intelligence, and fluency were identified early on as important (p. 7). As scholars produced more research into "great" people, the list of traits grew and varied. Words like "masculinity," "dominance," "initiative," and "self-confidence" were added to the list (p. 22). However, while many of these studies produced traits with similar ideas and themes, it eventually became clear that their results lacked true consistency amongst traits across identified leaders.

To address these inconsistencies, researcher Stogdill decided to analyze these 20th century studies twice throughout his career (Northouse, 2016, 19). His first attempt synthesized over 124 trait studies conducted between 1904 and 1947; ultimately, his results suggested there

was “no consistent set of traits” that “differentiated leaders from non-leaders across a variety of situations” (1948, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 19). While he did find leaders to be above-average in eight categories (intelligence, alertness, insight, responsibility, initiative, persistence, self-confidence, and sociability), he also claimed that the individual does not simply become a leader because they possess these traits; the traits they “possess must be relevant to situations in which the leader is functioning” (1948, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 20). This laid the groundwork for a societal shift away from a trait-based understanding of leadership towards a more situational approach. When Stogdill conducted a second study spanning the years 1948 through 1970 and published his findings in 1974, he further affirmed the situational approach by ultimately claiming both traits *and* situational factors were important when determining “great” leadership (1974, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 21).

Both of Stogdill’s studies set up researchers to make the shift from solely trait-focused leadership to a more situational approach. While most scholars were prompted by his second study to begin other approaches to leadership studies, some academics took initiative directly following his first study; these presented an understanding of leadership known as the “Behavioral Approach” (Northouse, 2016, p. 71).

Behavioral Study Forming the Bridge

Following the publishing of Stogdill’s work in 1948 and his first claim that traits were not the sole factor in determining “great” leadership, two universities—The Ohio State University (OSU) and the University of Michigan (UM) —decided to research leadership functioning beyond the leader as an individual and believed there were alternatives to trait-based ideas (Northouse, 2016, p. 71).

Northouse (2016) describes how OSU researchers were more interested in leaders' *actions* when they were leading, rather than in the characteristics they possessed. They formulated a questionnaire with 150 questions called the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) based on a list of over 1,800 leader behavior aspects. After giving the LBDQ questionnaire to hundreds of people across multiple settings from places of education and learning to the military and industrial settings, researchers found that there were two primary types of leader behaviors. The first type was "initiating structure" (p. 72) and referred to task behaviors such as providing organization, clarifying work contexts, defining worker responsibilities, scheduling meetings, etc. The second type was "consideration" (p. 72) and referred to relationship behaviors such as trust-building, establishing respect alongside camaraderie, and promoting liking between the leader and their followers. OSU researchers decided that these two behaviors were not along one shared continuum, but rather, were two separate behaviors and could be demonstrated by one leader at the same time in varying degrees.

Northouse (2016) similarly describes how researchers at the UM explored leadership behaviors and identified two types of leadership behavior orientations: "employee orientation" and "production orientation" (p. 73). Employee orientation reflects leaders who emphasize strong human relations and value workers as human beings. Production orientation describes leadership that stresses technical production and accomplishment of tasks. While these two orientations align with the two types of behaviors identified by OSU, researchers at the UM first believed that these orientations were at opposite sides of the same continuum; however, as they continued their studies, the UM researchers eventually decided to reframe this continuum as two independent leadership capacities, similar to OSU's model.

Both studies ultimately produced two definitions that encapsulated the kinds of actions leaders take; because taking an action inherently impacts others, this opened conceptions of leadership as a discipline affecting beyond the individual. In fact, after publishing their initial findings, OSU and UM explored these conceptions by producing research to determine how leaders could best combine task and relationship behaviors to maximize impact for their community. This kind of analysis served as the basis for the development of what Northouse (2016) calls the "Situational Approach," or a more situations-based understanding of leadership (p. 93).

The Situational Leadership Shift

As Northouse (2016) notes, the first ideas of "Situational Leadership" were proposed by researchers Dr. Paul Hersey and Dr. Ken Blanchard in 1969 (Northouse, p. 93). These foundational ideas attempted to draw conclusions about the dual types of behaviors that had been identified from the ongoing behavioral studies (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 93). While Hersey and Blanchard refined their work over time to develop this approach to leadership and solidify its definition within the study of leadership, their main premise consistently argued that different kinds of leadership are demanded across various situations and as such, being an effective leader means adapting leadership style accordingly Northouse, 2016).

In 1985, Blanchard created a model for this approach, now referred to as Situational Leadership II (or SLII®), and it became widely used for leadership development and training (1985, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 94). Because of the model's ability to be applied to both leaders and followers, many companies and work groups have attempted to learn from its conceptualization of leadership. A copy of the model can be found below in Figure 1.

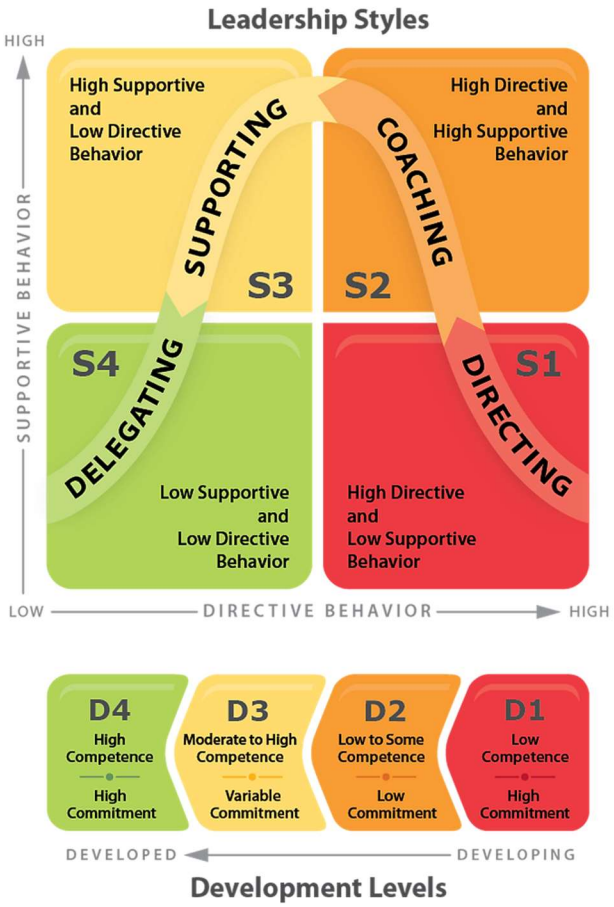

Figure 1: The Situational Leadership Model, Situational Leadership II (or SLII®), created by Ken Blanchard

SOURCE: *SLII®. Powering Inspired Leaders*™, https://www.blanchard.com/our-content/programs/slii

As previously mentioned, behavioral leadership approaches shaped the development of Situational Leadership and thus SLII®. This is seen in the X and Y axis of this model which are defined as "Supportive Behavior" and "Directive Behavior." These two behavior categories reflect the two dual behavior types presented in the research from OSU and UM. Similar to OSU's initiating structures and UM's production behaviors, directive behaviors focus on completing tasks and clarifying who is responsible. Likewise, OSU's consideration behaviors and UM's employee orientation align with supportive behaviors, helping members of the team or group feel comfortable within the working community or situation.

These two categories of leadership behaviors—directive and supportive—are visualized across four quadrants of an axis to show how the behavioral tendencies of a leader result in various styles of leadership. By conceptualizing leadership in this way, leaders can understand how their actions may be interpreted by their followers.

Extending beyond individual leadership behaviors, the SLII® model was one of the first that considered the followers' roles within the leadership process by including the "development levels" of the followers at the bottom of the model. A "development level" is "the degree to which followers have the competence and commitment necessary to accomplish a given goal or activity" (Blanchard, 1985, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 96). This framing allows the leader of a group to think critically about what the followers need and modify their leadership style accordingly. With this additional layer, the SLII® model initiated further shifts away from theories of leadership focusing solely on the individual. SLII® illustrates a process that relies on relationships between people rather than one person.

Leadership as a Relational Process

Thus far, Northouse (2016) has provided an outline beginning with the development of leadership from "great man" trait-based theories, shifting to behavior-based ideas researched by OSU and UM, and culminating in a situational model that addresses leadership beyond the individual. This range in how scholars have conceptualized and thought about leadership throughout time overviews the transformation of leadership from an individual ideal into a dynamic process. This transformation is affirmed by scholar J.C. Rost's material analysis on leadership in the 20th century mentioned at the beginning of this thesis's historical overview section.

At the end of his analysis, Rost (1991) describes approaches for the 21st century which recognize that "emerging research emphasizes the *process* of leadership, whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal, rather than developing new ways of defining leadership" which include "authentic leadership," "spiritual leadership," "servant leadership," and "adaptive leadership" (as cited in Northouse, 2016, pp. 4-5). Northouse (2016) follows a similar conceptualizing of leadership in his own definition: "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6). Further, within Northouse's own chapters, he includes sections on authentic leadership, servant leadership, and adaptive leadership as examples of "new" or "popular" leadership approaches as well as "transformational leadership" (Northouse, 2016, pp. 160, 195, 225, 257).

While each of these approaches are different and Northouse treats them as separate ideas, they fall under a similar category. Though not coined in Northouse's text, the second text of this literature review, *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow* Johnson, 2025, refers to them as "normative theories" because they "tell leaders how they *ought* to act" through "moral principles" and "guidelines" (p. 245). For the purposes of categorization within this thesis, these kinds of leadership approaches will be understood as normative theories. The following sections describe transformational, authentic, and servant leadership as examples of normative theories to demonstrate how they conceptualize leadership as a process. These three normative theories are specifically highlighted because of their reference in later sources.

Transformational Leadership

First formed in 1973 by James V. Downton and strengthened by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, the theory of transformational leadership has risen in popularity since its inception (Northouse, 2016, p. 162). At the turn of the 21st century, a content analysis of articles in the

Leadership Quarterly completed by Kevin Lowe and William Gardner (2001) found that about one-third of leadership research was about some aspect of transformational leadership (as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 161). Other leadership scholars like John Antonakis (2012), Bernard Bass (2006), and Ronald Riggio (2006) also noted its increasing popularity and connected that growth to its "emphasis on intrinsic motivation and follower development" (as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 161). This focus on follower development reveals the shift away from leadership as purely individual.

Expanding on the details of this theory, Northouse (2016) describes transformational leadership as "a process that changes and transforms people" (p. 161). This transformation requires the leader to be "concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals" while "assessing followers' motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings" (p. 161). As a transformational leader, "followers and leaders are inextricably bound together in the transformation process" (p. 162).

One of the early scholars to develop the theory, Burns (1978) wrote about leaders like Ghandi as an example of a transformational leader who was "attentive to the needs and motives of followers" by helping them reach their "fullest potential" (as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 162). From these earlier writings, scholars continued to expand on what being a transformational leader means with multiple models and versions of the theory; however, the underlying concern continues to be "improving the performance of followers and developing followers to their fullest potential (Northouse, 2016, p. 167).

To accomplish this goal, Northouse presents four transformational leadership factors that leaders can learn from: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (p. 167). In other terms, these factors involve the leader effectively

working with others by fostering trust and collaboration while encouraging individuals within the group to reach their own goals through celebrating accomplishments (Northouse, 2016).

One example that Northouse provides that directly involves university students is the story of Dr. Cook, a college professor who leads a study abroad program in the Middle East on archaeological digs (p. 183). The participants come from multiple universities of various sizes and do not typically have knowledge about what an excavation looks like. Dr. Cook recounts one summer's experience and describes the development of the team from beginning to end of the program. He discusses how students "seemed unmotivated" during the first weeks of the program and frequently reported sickness or feeling lost with the project (p. 184). He decided to call a meeting and gave each student an opportunity to share personal feelings about their current work and their goals for the summer. He also took the chance to share his own personal stories and goals for the group, communicating that they all had a "shared responsibility" for the group's success *and* "independent authority" over the details of their individual assignments (p. 184). Following this meeting, Dr. Cook "observed a real shift in the group attitude and atmosphere" as students "seemed more involved in work" with "less sickness" and "more camaraderie" (p. 184). By "try[ing] to listen to the students and use their particular strengths," Dr. Cook was able to see his students develop during the program with ten returning for the following year (p. 185).

This case study illustrates transformational leadership by describing a transformation that took place in the followers (students) of a leader (professor). It also provides an example for how to go about catalyzing that change, which in this case was a group meeting that opened space for collective discussion with an individual focus.

As seen in this case study and prior descriptions, the transformational leader will ultimately "model the way" and "inspire a shared vision" that "enable[s] others to act" (p. 174).

Authentic Leadership

Northouse (2016) describes authentic leadership as one of the most recent leadership approaches and grew out of research on transformational leadership (p. 195). As the title of this model indicates, the concept centers itself around the authenticity of leaders. One of the first scholars to formally articulate this approach was Bill George in 2003. He described five dimensions of authentic leadership: a passionate sense of purpose, value-driven behavior, connected relationships, self-discipline, and a compassionate heart (George, 2003, as cited in Northouse, 2016, pp. 197-199). Northouse also refers to each of these dimensions as "important features of authentic leaders" which "provide a practical picture of what people need to do to become authentic in their leadership" (p. 200). This calls back to the normative theory definition which instructs on how leaders "ought" to act (Johnson, 2025).

Following George's work, other scholars like Fred Luthans, Bruce Avolio, and Fred Walumbwa began developing definitions and models to further understand authentic leadership (Northouse, p. 201). Northouse (2016) aligns with the lengthy definition set by Walumbwa (2008) who, after conducting a comprehensive literature review, states that authentic leadership is:

> A pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development. (p. 201)

Northouse uses this definition to present four components that "form the foundation for a theory of authentic leadership:" self-awareness, internalized moral perspectives, balanced processing, and relational transparency (pp. 202-203). Northouse claims that these components go beyond Geoge's five qualities list to describe the "lifelong process" that authentic leaders go through to develop these qualities in order to "apply them to the common good" (p. 206).

The examples of authentic leadership that Northouse offers as case studies focus on individual people who went through personal reckonings with their own morals, life paths, and power to either make a change in how they were leading that better reflected their own personality or to better impact the world around them (pp. 210-217). The descriptions that Northouse offers and his examples that focus on one person demonstrate how authentic leadership contrasts with transformational leadership by turning the process from being followers-focused to individual-focused. This seems to align authentic leadership with earlier trait-based and individual focused theories despite its claim as process-oriented by Northouse (2016) and Rost (1991).

Servant Leadership

The final normative theory explored in this section is servant leadership. While Northouse acknowledges that most people may not think of a leader as a servant, he suggests the servant leadership approach offers a "unique perspective" that "challenges our traditional beliefs about leadership" (p. 225). Though its origins are from the 1970s in writing by Robert Greenleaf who claims servant leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve" (1970, as cited in Northouse, 2016, p. 226), Northouse notes its contemporary popularity as a research topic (p. 225). Though many publications have sought to "clarify" and "substantiate its basic assumptions," Northouse describes servant leadership as leaders being "attentive to the concerns of their followers" by empathiz[ing] with them, and nurtur[ing] them" (p. 225). Similar to transformational leadership, servant leadership involves a leader being aware of their followers' needs and empowering them to "develop their full personal capacities" (p. 225).

What differentiates servant leadership from transformational leadership is its reliance on specific characteristics and behaviors within the various models and definitions scholars have

produced. Servant leadership grounds itself in qualities that leaders must aim to attain as evidenced from Larry Spears's (2002, as cited in Northouse, 2016, pp. 227-229) "10 characteristics" based on Greenleaf's writings to the behaviors Northouse (2016, p. 233-236) details based on collective scholars' works, Characteristics and behaviors commonly associated with being a servant leader include listening, having empathy, putting followers first, behaving ethically, empowering others, and building community (Northouse, 2016). By having these qualities, a servant leader's assumed outcomes are follower performance and growth, organizational performance, and societal impact (pp. 236-237).

The examples that Northouse (2016) provides as case studies for servant leadership are similar to those of authentic leadership; they focus on one individual rather than a process like the transformational leadership case study about the university students studying abroad. The descriptions include a high school teacher helping juniors prepare for college, a doctor serving the poor, and a flight attendant offering her help to a new mom (Northouse, 2016, pp. 243-248). While these individuals demonstrate strong character, the examples do not touch on how they connect to leadership as a process, making their alignment with the textbook's definition of leadership as a process confusing.

Concluding the Foundational Understanding and Historical Overview

Ultimately, the goal of this section of the literature review is to demonstrate the evolution of ideological changes towards conceptualizing leadership. Interestingly, while Northouse (2016) describes leadership's movement away from trait-based theories towards its recognition as a process, the normative theories he claims as "emerging" and "new" seem to call back to the early "Great Man" theories that detail what characteristics individuals need to possess in order to be a leader.

Challenging the Ethics of Leadership Ideology

Up to this point in the literature review, the presented leadership theories and approaches have been portrayed with an assumption that leaders who follow these theories will be doing positive work. This assumption stems from the discipline of leadership historically failing to address the shortcomings of leaders and their influence, a failure scholar Craig E. Johnson (2025) aims to address in his text *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow.* Johnson claims that for "most of us, leadership has a positive connotation" (p. 3) and seeks to challenge this notion in his work by presenting the "dark (destructive) side of leadership" (p. 3). This challenge to traditional leadership ideology builds the second section of this thesis's attempt at understanding leadership through a holistic lens.

Recognizing Power as the Potential for "Light" and "Dark"

As an introduction to his text, Johnson presents a passage from writer and teacher Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak* (2024). Originally written in 1999, *Let Your Life Speak* (2024) asserts that a leader is a person who "has an unusual degree of power to create the conditions under which other people must live" (Palmer, as cited in Johnson, 2025, p. 3). For both Palmer and Johnson, power is a critical element to leadership; they emphasize the importance of recognizing this power *and* making the conscious effort to use it to prevent harm in other people' lives as the commitment leaders must make to best implement leadership processes within their teams and communities (Johnson, 2025; Palmer, 2024). However, enacting this mindset requires shifting the mindset about leadership.

In the same section of his book, Palmer (2024) says, "We have a long tradition of approaching leadership via 'the power of positive thinking.' I want to counterbalance that approach…" (p. 61). Counterbalanc[ing] is the shift that is necessary to holistically

acknowledging the power of a leader and their leadership processes. For Johnson and Palmer, counterbalanc[ing] means addressing the "dark" and "destructive" side of leadership: the failures, the hurt, the "shadow" (Johnson, 2025, p. 3). Once a leader has reckoned with their shadows, only then can they make the conscious decision to "do more harm than good" (Palmer, 2024, p. 61).

Both Johnson and Palmer have their own list of shadows that they believe leaders must address. Palmer's shadows are more personal and self-reflective while Johnson's shadows focus on certain aspects of leadership like power and privilege. Both offer lenses to dive into how leadership can be harmful that will be explored in the next sections.

Personal Leadership Shadows: "Inner Work"

Palmer (2024) examines the leadership "shadows" in a very individual-oriented manner, referring to them as "monsters" that "are not theoretical" but grounded in an "inward journey" (p. 62). The first is "insecurity about identity and worth" (p. 66) which causes leaders to detrimentally equate their title with their identity and cultivate environments that force insecurity onto others within their roles. The next is perceiving the world as a "battleground" and viewing work as a competitive place that houses "allies and enemies" to "win or lose" instead of a system "working together for good" (p. 68). The third shadow is a term he calls "functional atheism," or the leader believing every responsibility falls to them, which perpetuates burnout and limits the potential of the team (p. 68). The fourth shadow is fear, specifically the fear of life's "natural chaos" (p. 69). Natural chaos is seen when leaders try so hard to control and organize their team or the workflow to avoid messiness, which limits creativity and other people's ideas. The final shadow is a bit darker and as Palmer writes is the "denial of death" (p. 69), which refers to the projects, programs, or ways of leading that may actually *need* to die to make way for more

innovative ideas. This denial is also linked to another leader's common fear: failure. Palmer refers to failure as a "little death" because of society's deeply negative associations with making mistakes; however, he argues that if we let go of this fear, "new life can emerge" (p.70).

These five monsters or leadership shadows represent an inner journey that leaders must embark on within their personal selves. Palmer goes on in the next section of his book explaining how society should approach the encouragement of doing inner work by making it more common within institutions. Palmer believes that inner work can be helped along in community" by establishing "communal processes" that navigate the discussion of personal shadows within the workplace (p. 71).

The tricky part is figuring out how to navigate inner work within a professional setting or reframing it to fit these spaces. While Palmer does not clarify how to do this, diving deeper into Johnson's conceptual shadows begins to build a language around this work that can be better adapted for leadership training within educational or professional settings. While the personal shadows that Palmer outlines do not have to be excluded from institutions, understanding ways to communicate these concepts in a less personal way may feel more accessible for organizations to implement within their leader development.

Conceptual Leadership Shadows

Johnson (2025) presents a more conceptual framework and describes leadership shadows as "burdens" that challenge leaders to make ethical moral choices or lead them to make harmful decisions towards their followers, organizations, and communities they serve (p. 8). If not fully identified within the self and able to understand their impact on an organization, these shadows can result in "destructive leadership" traits or behaviors, some of which include arrogance, manipulation, abuse, and corruption (p. 4). The studies that have investigated these traits and

behaviors have found that destructive leadership is seeping into organizations at every level and costing leaders and followers' money, time, energy, and trust that is harder to gain back (p. 5). To prevent the continuation of destructive leadership, Johnson emphasizes how important it is for leaders to come face to face with the "dark side of leadership" (p. 3) by knowing the shadows, rather than ignoring them. In the text, he spends time defining six different shadows; for the purposes of this thesis, this section will focus on two: power and privilege.

The first shadow he addresses is power. The importance of this shadow cannot be understated. As noted previously, the epigraph that Johnson (2025) chose to open his text, defines leaders by their, "power to create the conditions under which other people must live" (Palmer, 2024, as cited in Johnson, 2025, p. 3). Power comes in many different forms and can be used to influence a group. How a leader handles the power they hold over others—whether their general followers or their direct team members—impacts their capacity for shedding a "light" or shadow onto their organization and community. To understand how power can become a shadow, it is important to know the various types of power that leaders have the potential to hold. Johnson (2025) details various definitions of leadership powers within his text that are listed here:

> Hard power: uses inducements (bonuses, raises) and threats (arrests, firings) to get people to go along
>
> Soft power: based on attracting others rather than forcing them or inducing them to comply
>
> Smart power: combining hard and soft power to achieve their goals
>
> Coercive power: based on penalties or punishments such as physical force, salary reductions, student suspensions, or embargoes against national enemies

Reward power: depends on being able to deliver something of value to others, whether tangible (bonuses, health insurance, grades) or intangible (praise, trust, cooperation)

Legitimate power: resides in the position, not the person

Expert power: based on characteristics of the individual regardless of that person's official position

Referent power: rests on the admiration one person has for another

(pp. 8-9)

One leader usually does not rely on only one level of power. Often, leaders weigh which type or types of power will bring them the most "success" given their specific circumstances. While this success may not necessarily be harmful, leaders who do not understand the impact or extent of their power may end up perpetuating harm. This is why power can be a leadership shadow or burden. By informing leaders of their own power—and its range—they can be more aware of the potential they hold for making positive or negative decisions.

Further, leaders recognizing their own power and its potential could prevent what Johnson describes as the "power paradox" (p. 9). This phenomenon occurs when individuals who enter leadership focused on the needs of others lose sight of their original motivations as they experience what power feels like. Johnson writes, "Feeling powerful, they become less dependent on others, lose their ability to empathize, and shift attention to meeting their own needs, resulting in abuses of power" (p. 9). Johnson (2025) also warns that the greater the extent of that leader's power, the greater their potential is to abuse it. He suggests that once a leader reaches a stage where they are abusing power, it is crucial they are reminded of the shadows of power they are perpetuating; however, in many cases, it is too late because the leader has already isolated themselves within their organization by intentionally establishing an environment to

hold power over their followers. Thus, by educating leaders on their power and its capacity for harm as they step into leadership, the power paradox could be avoided as leaders will have an early chance to reflect on how assuming this power may affect them and take necessary steps to avoid corruption. Further, allowing the leader to recognize the potential harms may prevent leaders who have good intentions from falling into other destructive leadership behaviors, as Johnson (2025) notes that many leaders do not even realize they are making decisions aligned with the dark side of leadership (p. 4).

At its core, Johnson (2025) makes it known that power has incredible potential to do good or cause harm, intentionally and even unintentionally. Urging that leaders recognize their unique power and its potential, this thesis notes that a step in the preparation process for becoming a leader should include instruction on how to know the power within a leadership position or a leadership process, and further, the range in potential for light or shadow it holds.

Privilege

The second shadow Johnson presents is privilege. Johnson (2025) centers his definition of "privilege" in the relationship between the leader and the follower (p.13). His main concern is the leader having greater privileges than the follower, such as a leader using power to ensure their personal privileges are met or unfairly capitalizing on personal perks and rewards. For example, a nonprofit CEO gives themselves a higher salary than they necessarily need. This privilege distances the leader from the rest of the organization's team and can be addressed through sharing these privileges with an entire organization or environment, when possible.

It must be noted that this is only one lens of viewing privilege. The goal of describing Johnson's view of privilege as a shadow aims to bring to light what could be missing from this

interpretation. Further definitions will be discussed as this thesis digs deeper into emerging leadership ideas and concepts.

Johnson's Solutions to Destructive Leadership

After grounding his text in the potential shadowy dark side of leadership, Johnson (2025) spends much of the rest of his book attempting to find solutions and practices to combat the destructive side of leadership. While he initially urges leaders to look inward like Palmer suggests, he also presents ways to go beyond personal work through practicing "ethical decision-making and behavior" as a leader and as an organization (p. 171).

To expand on this, Johnson (2025) outlines tools to accomplish ethical decision-making and behavior. Some examples include "the four way method" which grounds decision-making in sets of questions based on "truth," "consequences," "fairness," and "character" and the "five timeless questions" to manage the "gray area" (pp. 190-194). Examples of questions from these various tools include:

> What are the facts?
>
> Who is most likely to be affected?
>
> Do the proposed solutions treat everyone involved with respect and dignity?
>
> Will carrying out the proposed actions make the agent(s) more or less virtuous?
>
> What are my core obligations?
>
> Who are we?
>
> (Johnson, 2025, pp. 190-194)

These sets of questions aim to guide the leader towards reaching an ethical solution; however, many of these questions involve answers that the leader may not be able to provide with their own knowledge. Johnson (2025) does not address how to go about asking these

questions to others and instead emphasizes that an individual leader of an organization should consider the questions as decision-making formats when making an ethical decision (p. 190).

To address ethical leadership at an organizational level, Johnson (2025) details structural reinforcements for promoting ethical decisions within group or work environments (p. 331). Some examples of these solutions include monetary and nonmonetary reward systems, performance evaluation processes, and establishing a code of ethics (p. 338). These solutions expand the responsibility of ethical leadership and decision-making beyond one individual leader by establishing structures that carry out the ethical decision-making process throughout an organization.

Finally, Johnson (2025) turns to the normative leadership theories of transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and servant leadership that Northouse (2016) previously detailed as solutions for destructive leadership and examples of ethical leadership. Johnson (2025) claims these theories are "specifically designed to improve the ethical behavior of leaders and followers" (p. 245). His descriptions and definitions mirror those of Northouse with additional comments on how they contribute to ethical leadership. For example, Johnson says transformational leaders "engage in higher-level moral reasoning" and "institutionalize ethical practices" (p. 246). He also asserts that authentic "leaders acknowledge the ethical responsibilities of their roles, can recognize and evaluate ethical issues, and take moral actions that are thoroughly grounded in their beliefs" (p. 252). Lastly, he connects servant leadership to ethical leadership by citing its foundation in altruism and commitment to others before the self (p. 263). By suggesting normative leadership theories as the pathway for ethical leadership, Johnson (2025) grounds the solution to destructive leadership in theories that instruct individual leaders on how to act, the qualities to possess, and the ideals they should embody.

Recalling Normative Theory Limitations

The connection to normative theory as a solution for destructive leadership or shadow behaviors brings up similar concerns communicated at the end of the previous section of the literature review. As previously discussed, theories like transformational, authentic, and servant leadership re-establish ways of thinking about leadership that focus on individual characteristics, rather than leadership as a process. Though important that Johnson (2025) highlights leadership's potential for shadows and destructive behaviors that negatively impact organizations or communities, presenting normative theories as solutions limit the process of leadership as dependent on an individual leader; further, many of his solutions lack instruction on how to interact with communities the destructive shadows may impact or have impacted.

The next section of this literature review looks beyond the individual and focuses on how to address the communities, teams, or followers that destructive behaviors or shadows have harmed.

Beyond the Shadow: Redeeming Leadership

Turning to Helena Liu's *Redeeming Leadership* (2021) offers the opportunity to dig deeper into how leadership can cause harm beyond the individual to communities, teams, or followers. Liu provides a fuller understanding of leadership's potential. Considering that the authors of the previously discussed texts and many of their cited scholars were white men, it felt essential to pull from voices less frequently reflected in the leadership literature space. Liu was able to offer a voice that acknowledged how history and identity impacts the shadows described by Johnson. Liu expands the concept of shadow and claims that going unchecked, leadership can cause "violences" (p. 17). Complementing the shadows of leadership, these violences demonstrate why more traditional theories that glorify the leader can be problematic if not

balanced with an understanding of the potential to cause harm. A key difference, however, is that the "violence(s) of leadership…have served to reinforce gendered and racial hierarchies" (p. 17). Liu's extension into topics of race, gender, and identity opens another critical lens to view leadership, one that does not often get used when describing leadership ideologies and definitions.

By ignoring topics of identity and lived experience, Liu believes leaders and leadership scholars have gotten away with "romanc[ing]" leadership (p. 4). She recalls the "charismatic authority" concepts of leadership from the 1900s—concepts that align with the "Great Man" theories Northouse (2016) described—and claims that since the inception of studying leadership, "leadership theorists have also been quick to defend 'leadership' against leaders" even when leaders should have been challenged (p. 5). She also points out that "few proponents appear to agree on what leadership is, yet many insist that it is inherently good and urgently needed" (p. 5). Similar to the problem Johnson (2025) notes about viewing leadership as inherently positive, Liu asserts that this positive view has shaped and will continue to shape leadership unless leaders and institutions begin to call out the violences and work to "redeem" them. For Liu, redemption goes beyond a personal self-reflection or single institutional change; she seeks to undo the systems that have perpetuated a leadership landscape that endures harm or violence among the communities served by leaders.

Liu's descriptions of leadership not only consider non-traditional ideas, they also push the discipline to take on these concepts in order to redeem its content. The first step in the process of leadership redemption is recognizing the violence, similar to Johnson's acknowledgement of the shadow. In her book (2021), Liu presents four violences: dominance, purity, destruction, and salvation. She follows chapters on these violences with opinions on how

to “undo” their harms through reimagining leadership as a discipline. These insights go beyond personal work and beyond individually focused leadership strategies; they support the concept that leadership is a process that involves working with others within an organization, team, or community.

Her reworking of leadership inspires this thesis to think differently about the leadership lens many historians and scholars have constructed, as described in the first section of the literature review. Liu offers a conception of leadership that believes in a better system, rather than offering new theories or definitions. When imagining this new leadership system, there must be an understanding of the issues with the current system, which Liu outlines in her book as violences. For this thesis, the two violences of focus will be “dominance” and “salvation.” Aligning in similar nature to Johnson’s discussion of power and privilege, these violences present a lens that incorporates race and other aspects of identity into these leadership shadows.

Dominance

Going back in time further than both Northouse and Johnson, Liu (2021) argues that “the early formation of leadership studies took shape around the values of the European Enlightenment” (p. 22). These values centered a man who maintained order, rationality, and autonomy, and this type of man typically found himself amongst colonization and imperialism trying to prevent “chaos and violence” during the colonial period (p. 22). By rooting her historical basis for leadership during the colonial era, Liu found that leadership concepts were built alongside imperialism and links conceptions of leadership directly to the need for control and power over others, otherwise known as dominance (p. 21).

She further connects these early ideas to the normative theories previously outlined and discussed in this literature review. She writes, “Although successive conceptualizations of

charismatic, visionary, transformational, authentic, and servant leaders were touted through universalist claims of their applicability, their proponents overwhelming theorized from a narrowly masculinist, white, and North American-centric perspective" (p. 22). This link between colonialism and normative theory suggests that despite what Northouse and Johnson offer as successful leadership concepts, these ideas perpetuate the violence of dominance because of their roots in colonial abuse of power and white, male-centric lens.

As an example of the perpetuated harm, Liu explains the continued lack of diversity in leadership and ongoing normalization of the white male leader (2021, p. 22, 31). She notes that even when there is a leader who is female or a person of color, they are clarified as a "Female CEO" or "Asian manager" (p. 31). While this problem is rooted in white normalization, Liu assures this not an "attack on individual white men," but rather a call on the "problematic nature of leadership itself" (p. 39). Thus, by promoting these normative theories, Liu warns that scholars will continue to ground leadership in individualistic, patriarchal ideals that will limit leadership as a discipline for the remainder of the 21st century.

In a later section of her book, Liu references scholar bell hooks's "dominator culture," (p. 109) which aligns with this idea of dominance as violence. Dominance culture is built on "interlocking oppressions" that hooks argues has shaped leadership and include imperialism, whiteness, capitalism, and patriarchy (2003, as cited in Liu, 2021, p. 109). Instead of dividing these ideas into four categories, hooks asserts that it is the system that must be faced head on. Liu affirms this when stating "when we confine political change to one axis of power at a time, we preserve dominator culture as a whole" (p.110). Liu uses this concept by hooks to articulate that the problem lies not in one category of dominance, but in the collective violence of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" as a connected machine (2003, as cited in Liu, 2021, p. 111).

For Liu (2021), this machine exhibits the violence of dominance and has strong roots within the discipline of leadership and thus within Western systems of leadership. This is why she encourages a complete rethinking of leadership rather than offering an additional theory or approach.

Salvation

The second violence this thesis explores is what Liu (2021) calls "salvation" (p. 81). Liu articulates similar ethical leadership challenges to those described by Johnson. However, instead of turning to the solutions Johnson (2025) found in namely ethical leadership, ethical decision-making, Liu (2021) questions the methods that have been used as anecdotes to "bad leadership" (p. 81). She writes, "Far from calling leadership into question, many scholars and practitioners counteracted the mounting examples of ethical failures with ever more glorified characterization of leadership as quintessentially moral and good" (p. 81). These "glorified characterizations" include not only ethical leadership, but also what she calls "kindred forms of leadership" which "articulate an explicit moral component to the practice of leadership" (p. 84). These kindred forms happen to be the normative leadership theories and approaches presented by both Northouse and Johnson. As she highlights servant and authentic leadership, Liu affirms their "considerable advancements in highlighting the crucial connection between ethics and leadership" while critiquing these models for their "preserve of exceptional individuals who possess the right traits and exhibit the right behaviors" (p. 84).

Focusing on and glorifying the right traits and behaviors has resulted in what Liu calls "benevolent violence" which occurs when good intentions still cause violence (p. 85). Leaders of organizations that perpetuate benevolent violence may believe they are doing the right thing; and, because they are blinded by their ethical goodness, they do not see the sexism or racism

they continue to allow (p. 88). This is not a fault of the leaders themselves but speaks to the issues with leadership as a system built on ideologies that romanticize the white, patriarchal individual (p. 99).

An example that illustrates benevolent violence is found in the results of a study done by scholars Marieke van den Brink and Yvonne Benschop who interviewed senior members of promotion committees within organizations (2012, as cited in Liu, 2021, p. 85). They found a tendency among men to assume women, "would struggle to balance their caring responsibilities with the demands of their career" (p. 85) and choose not to promote them to prevent a stressful workload. These same concerns did not apply to men because of the assumption that "care-taking was exclusively a female problem" (p. 86). Though they may have had good intentions to prevent stress or simply had unconscious assumptions impacting their decisions, these promotion committee members perpetuated sexism and thus benevolent violence.

Benevolent violence highlights the large gap that exists when normative theories or ethics are the solution to destructive, harmful, or shadowed leadership. Leaders can try to do inner work, follow the steps to be a transformational or authentic or servant leader, and facilitate processes that promote ethical decision-making; however, all of these solutions do not turn the leader's attention towards the identities and lived experiences of the people they represent, lead, or serve. If leadership is truly a process as Northouse (2016) defines, Liu's discussion of violences highlights a neglect to establish understandings of leadership that consider everyone within that process.

To rethink how leadership can be understood as a dynamic process that includes people in relation to each other, Liu (2021) offers ways to undo the current leadership system and its violences through redemption.

Redemption: Undoing Leadership and its Violences

Liu (2021) warns that combatting these violences is difficult in a leadership landscape that idealizes the leader as hero and individual agent for promoting ethics and making impact. She also notes that the current leadership development market rewards "heroic and hyperagentic individualism" (p. 98). Thus, the path towards "undoing" leadership is not easy; it involves unraveling systems and rethinking what leadership means. Liu calls on approaches to leadership to move "towards a redemptive engagement with difference and diversity" (p. 99). To do this, scholars must "look to the margins, to communities that have long been led, rather than the leaders" (p. 99). Shifting the focus to these groups—which include marginalized identities, social justice movements, and organizing activists—reveals strategies that have long centered leadership as a process that catalyzes action and accomplishes shared goals (Liu, 2021).

For instance, one solution Liu finds amongst these communities is solidarity (p. 112). Liu describes solidarity through its requirement to listen to all voices and fight for causes from which not everyone in the group may benefit. Solidarity means engaging in conversations across differences and facilitating productive dialogues, debates, and collaborative work. She emphasizes the importance of including people who have been historically marginalized and provides a personal example of needing to include more Indigenous voices in her work (p. 113). By encouraging the leadership process to intentionally include historically oppressed identities or practice non-traditional community traditions like solidarity, Liu rejects the heroic leader, or "great man" theory, and shifts instead towards "understanding that we are interrelated and interdependent" (p. 115). Rather than controlling the environment, the leader gains responsibility for opening it to those who may have less power or privilege in the decision-making process.

By expanding leadership's power beyond an individual leader, identities that are more likely to be confined to stereotypes like women and people of color have the chance to define themselves and their role within the leadership process (p. 115). This "self-definition" is another key to Liu's interpretation of leadership redemption (p. 115). She affirms the right "to develop self-definitions of our identities" so that "we may come to love femaleness, queerness, Blackness, Indianness and all other dimensions of identity that have been marginalized in dominator culture" (pp. 117, 118). For Liu, this love represents the antithesis of dominator culture and a pathway towards interconnectedness (p. 119).

Interconnectedness stands at the center of Liu's goals for redeeming leadership. While similar to the relational understanding of leadership that Northouse (2016) describes, Liu's perspective demands relationality seep into all aspects of leadership, not just in concept but in practice. By introducing community practices like solidarity into the leadership space, she expands actions typically associated with leadership, affirming her view that leadership is *not* held within the control of the leader but in a people-powered process. She affirms this when she says, "to celebrate individual leaders in our societies is to fixate on a narrow and relatively insignificant part of humanity. It overlooks life's rich interconnectedness in favour of a romance that serves only to bolster the status of our society's elites" (p. 126).

Liu's perspective on leadership serves as a call to action: redo, reconstruct, and redeem leadership. Continuing with the current social meaning and connotations that come with the term leadership will only perpetuate a system that rewards those who affirm the dominator culture.

While some may push back that this is only one opinion, it is important to note that Liu is not the only scholar challenging leadership's perception and practice within society. Other leadership "redeemers" have shared their research on leadership's failures and means to address

them in a socially aware way. Voices like bell hooks, whom Liu draws on in her own work, author of *DEI Deconstructed* Lily Zheng (2022), and scholar Brenda Allen (2023) in her book, *Difference* Matters, call out dominant culture and present ideas that shift the attention away from individual personal development and towards recognizing identity's important relation to others within leadership processes. Demographically, most of these voices are women and specifically, women of color, making their perspectives especially important as much of leadership literature has been written by white men—including Northouse, Johnson, Palmer, and most of their cited scholars.

Concluding the Literature Review

Reflecting on the collective narrative that this three-part literature review details, there is a gap between the theories presented as successful by Northouse and Johnson and the harsh reality Liu reveals about the harms that the system of leadership continues. The next section of this thesis explores the gap by drawing conclusions based on these explored texts about the current leadership landscape and its implications for student leadership in the 21st century.

Synthesized Conclusions

The critical texts examined in the above literature review tell a story about the leadership ideals that are traditionally studied and taught to students, a story that does not meet the needs for 21st century student leadership. With its foundation in "great men," problematic positivity, and unwillingness to fully put a "relational process" to practice, leadership requires a reworking (Northouse, 2016, pp. 3,19; Johnson, 2025, p. 3; Liu, 2021, p. 24). To expand on how these texts support this conclusion, the following discussion synthesizes and builds upon the claims and arguments from these authors. Additionally, this section discusses the discipline of leadership in ways that reflect the motivation for this study and its guiding research questions.

Leadership has become increasingly understood as a relational process.

From its beginnings in individual trait-based theory, leadership has shifted towards recognizing a leader's impact on others and being understood as a dynamic process involving more than the one primary leader (Northouse, 2016, p. 4). Conceptually, this makes sense; being a leader means representing, guiding, or making decisions that affect other people and should be studied as such. While Northouse addresses this by directly defining leadership as a process in which "leaders are not above or better than followers" (p. 7), the theories that he discusses reflect this process being held in the power of the individual leader. His approaches guide an individual in becoming the most dynamic leader within any situation, rather than discussing the relational parts of this so-called "relational process." Northouse assumes that if the person in charge is transformational, authentic, servant-oriented, or adaptive, then they should meet the needs for this relational process.

Liu (2021), in contrast, emphasizes people who often get overlooked within the leadership equation when she notes that:

> While we may imagine leadership to be exemplified in the gripping speeches delivered by charismatic CEOs or the bold decisions handed down in the executive boardroom....what makes businesses and organizations function is the work that happens in the space between people; the unglamorous process of coordination, collaboration and communication that knit the various and varied activities of workers together. (pp. 125-126).

For Liu, calling leadership a relational process requires acknowledging that everyone within the process is on "the same boat" (p. 129); it is not focusing on one person who has the power to control the process. Rather, it is focusing on sharing that power throughout the organization to propel group success through actions taken together. Rather than relational, she uses the word interconnected to describe the kind of leadership that society needs, emphasizing the power and necessity of connections between people in the process.

Although the texts may have different interpretations of what leadership as a relational process means, it is clear that the definition of leadership continues to shift to address needs for the 21st century as a more globalized, relational, and interconnected society. However, there is no erasure of the role of an individual leader within the definition of leadership as relational. Leadership as a relational process highly involves the leader in that process and remains an important part of leadership, echoed in Liu's push for self-definition as well as Palmer's discussion of inner work. Ideally, leaders not only do personal self-work, but encourage inner work and self definition for their communities, team, and followers as part of the leadership process to foster an environment that recognizes identity and lived experience.

Not based on levels of individual focus, qualifying leadership as a relational process instead focuses on whether the leader is the sole controller of that process, or if they open the process to others by including other perspectives in decision-making and sharing power to enact action. Further, determining leadership as individual or relational falls into two categories: in theory and in practice. While Northouse (2016) may have claimed a relational definition of

leadership, the approaches he later described center the individual leading the leadership process. Thus, his interpretation would be relational in theory, but individual in practice. In contrast, Liu views leadership from a very action-based lens; she both conceptualizes and practices leadership as relational. By separating theory and practice, the difference between words and actions associated with leadership is revealed to show a gap between what leadership theories scholars claim are relational processes and what practices actually facilitate relational processes.

When considering how to prepare students for 21st century leadership, using words or theories to describe leadership as a relational process is not enough; there needs to be active practice that demonstrate what the process looks like. Evaluation of whether a program views leadership as relational in theory and/or in practice will occur during the analysis of university leadership centers in the next section of the thesis.

Leadership holds power that has the potential to cause positive or negative impacts.

Based on Johnson's (2025) argument that there is a dark side to leadership and strengthened by Liu's (2021) assertion that leadership violences are continuously perpetuated today, leadership must not be seen as inherently positive. Leadership and leaders harness power; this power must be recognized for its capacities to both uplift and harm the communities it impacts.

There are two key steps within this conclusion: understanding leadership's power and acknowledging its capacities. Every position within the leadership process—from employee or student to CEO or teacher—harnesses their own unique responsibilities, titles, and power. Understanding this power should be a necessary preparation for a 21st century leader entering any position of leadership or taking on a role in the leadership process.

One way that leaders could be introduced to their power is through definitions found in both Northouse's *Leadership* (2016) and Johnson's *Meeting Ethical Challenges* (2025). Leaders could then reflect on these definitions and the kinds of power they hold in reference to their position or role. For example, this could mean figuring out where a role's soft or hard power lies. By mapping out power in this way, the leader becomes aware of the power they themselves or their group holds. However, becoming familiar with power does not stop at the individual level.

Acknowledging power's capacities as negative or positive leads to the second part of this conclusion. Building off the first conclusion that leadership is a relational process, decisions made or actions taken using power will thus impact individuals within and beyond a given process. Leaders throughout a process should acknowledge the extent to which these decisions will harm or help impacted communities—casting light or shadow. Acknowledgment can look like instituting one of the ethical decision-making practices Johnson proposes or reflecting on how power has been used in the past and how affected communities reacted. Within this type of reflection, it is critical to see the range of impacts, both positive and negative. As Johnson (2025) echoes over and over, it can be easy to overlook the shadows and focus on the shiny parts of leadership; however, Liu (2021) reminds us that this has created a system that "romances" the idea of leadership and puts white, patriarchal conceptions on a pedestal (Liu, 4).

Thus, individual or organizational self-reflection is not enough. To echo Liu's arguments for solidarity, this acknowledgement goes beyond personal or even internal organizational reflection and calls on those with power to determine a decision's or action's impact. If leadership is a relational process, then leaders should not be afraid to collaborate within that process and ask those who will be affected by a decision or process. Further, encompassing Liu's

(2021) mindset of interconnectedness, collaborating with groups rather than assuming impact opens up space for shared decision-making and relinquishes control from one individual leader.

Ultimately, learning how power will impact others provides clarity on whether that power—and the holders of that power—is negative or positive. While the path forward is easy if determined positive, being able to admit when leadership is destructive, or shadowed, or violent can be difficult. This suggests a need for leadership training to instruct students on how to recognize when the power of a leadership process is destructive to a community.

Thus, in the later review student leadership centers, their programs will be analyzed for whether they acknowledge leadership's power and provide practice in assessing how the decision made or actions taken with that power will impact others.

Neglecting the instruction of leadership as relational in both theory *and* practice with a positive or negative range of impact will only continue to perpetuate harm to the communities that leaders serve.

This third conclusion is the throughline that gets to the root of the story these leadership texts tell. Despite a commitment to leadership as a relational process, the reality remains that theories and approaches highlighted as examples continue to center an individual leader with primary control of a leadership process. This is seen in Northouse's (2016) and Johnson's (2025) offering of normative theories, such as transformational, authentic, and servant leadership, as the modern approaches to leadership and solutions to shadowed leadership. Reading the content of these normative theories unveils definitions centered in characteristics and traits—the very foundation of historical descriptions of leadership that so many scholars claim the discipline has moved away from. If these isolated normative theories are the result of years of trying to

understand how leaders can be dynamic within their environments filled with followers, stakeholders, team members, and impacted groups, something is missing.

The work of Liu (2021) sheds light on some of these missing pieces. She is not afraid to call out the profitability of these theories and the content they do *not* include. Even though Johnson (2025) touches on privilege as a shadow to leadership, there is no reference to privilege beyond that which comes with a higher hierarchical role; the connection between shadow and systemic problems such as racism and sexism is never made. If talking about the destructive side of leadership, it feels necessary to discuss the prevalent societal destruction that leaders have perpetuated and continue to enact. Luckily, Liu connects those dots, not only discussing the issues but suggesting ways to redeem society's current leadership landscape.

Liu's (2021) suggestions rooted in the acknowledgement of differences while supporting interconnectedness call on leadership scholars to reconsider what leadership means; positive and individualistic approaches do not resolve the leadership preparation questions for students in the 21st century. As such, any institution aiming to teach leadership must ensure their curriculum recognizes leadership as relational—both conceptually and in application—as well as its power charged with potential help or harm.

Ultimately, these conclusions form the basis for the analysis of university student leadership programs, which takes place in the next section of the thesis.

Application: University Program Analysis

The third research question within this project asks: How are these findings applied to an examination of programs offered through university leadership centers? To answer this question, the next part of the research process analyzed four university leadership centers as case studies through the lens of the synthesized conclusions shared above. The process of identifying which universities to research included general research about universities with leadership centers, research into the Big Ten Conference, personal connections, and consideration of choosing a diverse set of school (public, private, etc.).

Following a general online search for "university leadership centers" or "university leadership institutes" that listed hundreds of university leadership centers, Big Ten schools were specifically chosen to review. Among the Big Ten schools, two were chosen based on available content and difference in approaches: The Ohio State University and Northwestern University. One was chosen based on both content and personal connection: The University of Oregon. The final school was isolated during an additional online search which included specific keywords like "antiracist," "equity," and "inclusion" and was then narrowed based on the information available online. This school is Tulane University. Each university leadership center's programs and content were reviewed to gauge alignment with the conclusions drawn during the literature review synthesis and to illustrate the range in leadership programming available to undergraduate students. To measure results, a few tools were developed based on the synthesized conclusions. These tools are briefly described below.

Individual to Relational Theory and Practice Spectrums

This first spectrum visually represents and measures the application of the first synthesized conclusion—leadership has become increasingly understood as a relational process.

The goal of this tool is to determine leadership's range in definition from individual to relational, both in theory and in practice. The result is two simple identical spectrums as shown in Figure 2:

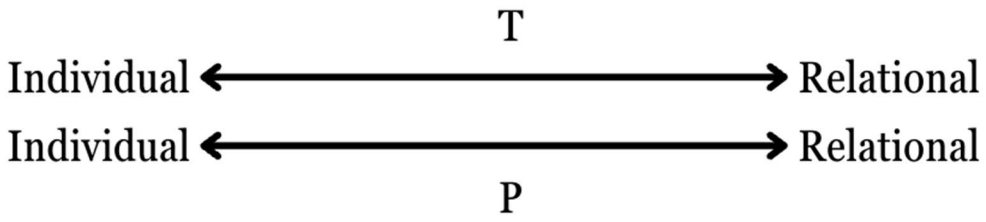

Figure 2: Individual to Relational Theory and Practice Spectrums Visualization

The top "T" representing theory and the bottom "P" representing practice delineates the two spectrums from each other. The delineation reflects the discussion about the difference between describing leadership as a relational process and practicing leadership as a relational process. Language and concepts provided on university leadership programs' websites were the primary source materials when establishing a university's theory and definition of leadership as individual or relational. Each website's description of the training programs they provide and how the programs are conducted were the primary sources when establishing a university's application, or practice, around leadership.

As noted in the synthesized conclusions section, theorizing leadership as a relational process through words is not enough; there needs to be active practice that demonstrate what the process looks like. This tool aims to illustrate whether both relational qualifications exist.

Negative to Positive Leadership Spectrum

Another spectrum (see Figure 3) was created to measure how these centers engage with leadership. This spectrum derives? from the second synthesized conclusion, which establishes leadership as having potential for both a positive and negative charge. While the second conclusion outlines how power can be evaluated for having a positive or negative impact, precise

application to university leadership centers cannot be determined without direct contact with program participants who can speak to their own positive or negative impacts. Because interviews are out of the scope of this research, the evaluation of university leadership centers instead focuses on whether a center's available website information describes leadership as positive, neutral, or negative. In this case, negative means recognition in leadership's potential to enact harm and does not equate to a view that all leadership is negative.

To decipher the approach to leadership, the websites were reviewed for negative or positive language in reference to leadership or to a program's description of their leadership development approaches.

Figure 3: Negative to Positive Charge Spectrum Visual Representation

As discussed in the synthesized conclusions section of this thesis, recognizing leadership as inherently positive neglects the potential destructive shadow side to the decisions leaders make or that leadership processes enact. Promoting only the positive within student leadership spaces limits students' ability to grapple with the potential their power holds, which is why it is important to try to gain an understanding of university approaches.

Combined Axis

The final visual tool of analysis (see Figure 4) is a combined axis; the negative to positive range is on the x axis and the individual to relational range in practice is on the y axis. University leadership centers will be placed on the axis as their programs are explored. Their placement will

be determined by the collective average of their individual programs' placements with more robust or popular programs being weighed heavier. General website language will also help determine a center's placement. In addition to placing the university leadership centers on the graph, the three main scholars from the literature review above will be represented alongside the universities in the final figure to demonstrate how these entities relate to one another and show which universities are closer to one another and to what scholar's work. Below is an example featuring the scholars only:

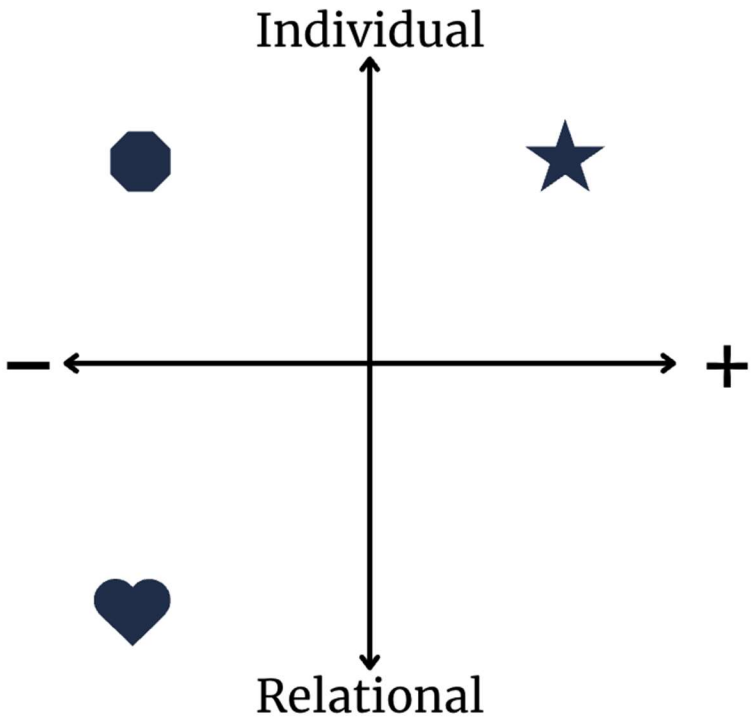

Figure 4: Combined Axis Visual Representation

The shapes reflect placement of the three scholars primarily featured. The star represents Northouse (2016) as individual in practice and positive in charge. The octagon represents Johnson (2025) as individual in practice and negative in charge. The heart represents Liu (2021) as relational in practice and negative in charge.

For this visual, the "In Practice" range of the Individual to Relational spectrum is used, rather than the "In Theory" range. This choice was made to emphasize Liu's (2021) call to turn

words into action. As these university centers instruct students on how to be agents of leadership, rather than simply thinking about leadership, using the range focused on practice more closely represents what universities aim to accomplish through leadership centers and programming.

To calculate a leadership center's placement on the combined axis, these factors were considered: their overall website language, the collective leadership spectrums of their programs and offerings, and the popularity and occurrence of the programs analyzed.

Using these tools as visual representations, each university will be explored as case studies for applying the conclusions made following the literature review.

Case Study 1: University of Oregon Holden Center for Leadership and Community Engagement (Holden Center)

The University of Oregon's leadership center was chosen for its proximity to this thesis and inquiry in this campus's offerings as well as its extensive online presence. Named for the Holden Family, the Holden Center claims that leadership is "about people, voice, learning, and action" and "connecting your heart to understand your ability to change the world" to ultimately "build you into the leader you've always wanted to be" (Holden Center, 2025). By claiming leadership is about people and action while also advertising these programs as self development, the website language reveals both relational and individual conceptions of leadership. When comparing how the language aligns with program offerings, the center offers a range of programs that similarly reflect both individual and relational practices as well as positive and negative charges. To explore this further, each individual program will be analyzed.

Student-led Workshops

One of their most popular offerings at the Holden Center is leadership workshops for groups led by students and intended for student groups. By recognizing that all parts of teams

and organizations can benefit from these trainings rather than the highest levels of leadership, these workshops fall into the relational side of the in-practice leadership spectrum, as these workshops are meant to challenge participants to put their learning into practice.

While there was no available access to current presentations and curriculum, the extensive online list of trainings and descriptions reveals content that aligns with the interconnectedness needed for leadership today. Some of the program titles include,

"Introduction to Inclusive Leadership and Practices,"

"BIPOC Leadership: Examining the Influence of Culture,"

"Intersection of Identity and Leadership,"

"Unconscious Bias in Leadership," and

"Building a Community: For New Group" (Holden Center, 2025).

Other program titles focus heavily on the individual, like "Discovering Your Leadership Style" and "Leadership and You" (Holden Center, 2025). The inclusion of topics that recognize the need to work together across differences demonstrates a commitment to leadership as a relational process. This is further affirmed by some of the stated learning outcomes within these workshops:

> Participants will learn proactive and reactive practices for creating inclusive group environments.
>
> Participants will be able to identify how leadership is influenced by whiteness.
>
> Participants will identify how they can empower themselves and others.
>
> Participants will explore how their own unconscious biases show up in their day-to-day life and their leadership practices.
>
> Participants will learn several strategies for building a strong and healthy community.
>
> (Holden Center, 2025).

With goals to learn skills that will not only benefit the self but also impact the group, these workshops help facilitate leadership as a relational process. Further, the existence of workshops that acknowledge whiteness's influence on leadership and the presence of unconscious bias within leadership processes aligns with language associated with leadership shadows and violences, which reflects a view of leadership that is not inherently positive.

These factors place the workshops hosted by the Holden Center at these positions along the spectrum:

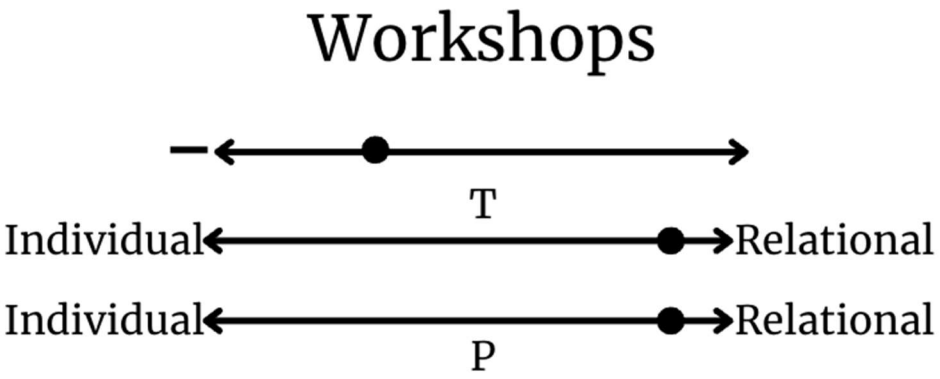

Figure 5: Holden Center workshops placement on leadership spectrum

Strength-Based Coaching

Another highly advertised offering from the Holden Center is the Clifton Strengths assessment, a tool all students can utilize because of payments in their student fees. Clifton Strengths can help students, "discover and maximize [their] inner talents" through assessment of their top five strengths and an individual consultation to gain insight on these strengths (Holden Center, 2025). With an emphasis on strengths to "develop leadership capacity," this offering aligns more closely with the positive side of the charge spectrum; however, strengths

consultations do include understanding “the potential shadow sides, or challenges, of your strengths” (Holden Center, 2025). While focusing on personal strengths, this program allows students to recognize why these strengths may be challenging and incorporates recognition that leadership is not always positive.

Though targeting individual characteristics, the Clifton Strengths assessment also offers group consultation to interpret how each group member’s individual strengths will impact the larger group. This takes an individual focus and expands it to a relational focus, even revealing the challenges the group may have and brainstorming ways to work well together. One limitation to the workshops is that they do not mention identity or background, focusing solely on the top five individual strengths and how they relate within the group. Neglecting this layer risks overlooking key aspects of relational leadership, but through a combination of this group strength consultation and the other workshops offered, it is anticipated that group members should be able to see how their strengths may be impacted by their own identities and learn how to practice relational leadership within their organization.

However, when analyzing Clifton Strengths as strength-based coaching alone, this program’s placement on the leadership spectrum is shown in Figure 6 below:

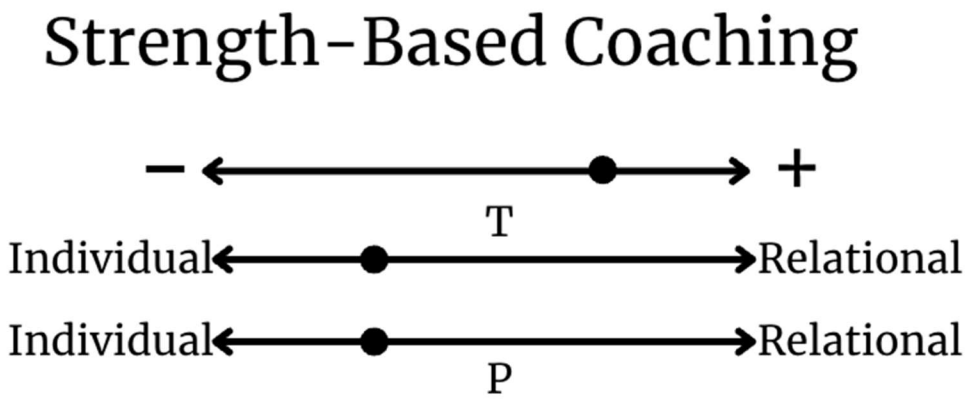

Figure 6: Holden Center strength-based coaching placement on leadership spectrum

These placements were difficult because of this program's contrasting features with highly individual and positive aspects in the emphasis on personal strengths and highly relational and negative aspects in the opportunity to compare strengths amongst the group and learn about the shadow sides. However, because these latter two features of the training are optional, the positive and individual aspects were weighed heavier in the placement consideration.

Overnight Institute

Finally, the Holden Center also offers both short- and long-term group programs for leadership development. Their short-term "LeaderShape Institute," typically held over a series of days at an off-campus site, includes programming that builds from personal values to creating a "community-oriented vision" to combat social and global issues (Holden Center, 2025). Though focused on individual development, the objective is to help participants, "create an action plan to help share that idea with friends, campus, the community, and the world" (Holden Center, 2025). Because of the language that highlights making community change through personal development, the LeaderShape institute falls between individual and relational on the in theory spectrum. The inclusion of other people in the implementation process offers relational potential,

but having the action plan development and vision stay within the participant holds power at the individual level, putting its placement more towards individual in practice.

Additionally, in the advertising of this program, the language emphasizes leadership as a positive way to make change. For this program, leadership is a solution to the problems of the world through the development of participants' "powerful" visions, "lifelong leadership skills," and passions (Holden Center, 2025). With no association between leadership and its negative potential as well as the enacting of visions without consulting the community aimed to help, this institute aligns with the inherently positive view of leadership.

With these considerations, the below figure reflects the placement of this program:

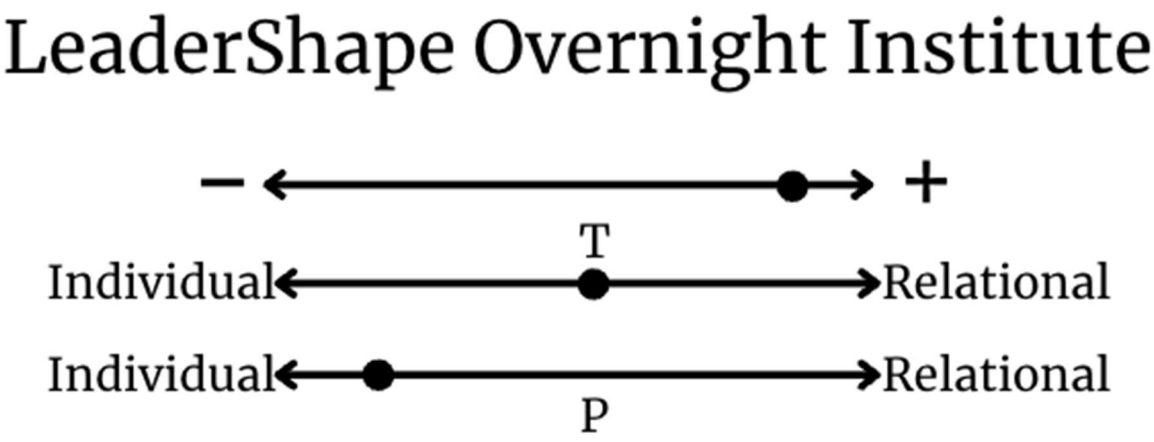

Figure 7: Holden Center overnight institute leadership spectrum placement

Cohort Program

The long-term cohort program, the "Emerging Leadership Project," focuses on personal leadership skill development alongside a group to encourage learning from each other. One student said: "I have met so many people that I would not normally get the chance to interact with, and learned a lot about how our identities, racially, culturally, etc., affect our leadership styles" (Holden Center, 2025). Encouraging learning about from fellow peers reflects an

understanding of leadership as a relational process within the program's learning environment, pushing the placement on the in theory spectrum closer to the relational side; however, the action that students participate as practice follows similar methods to the LeaderShape Institute. After developing leadership skills alongside the cohort, each student designs their own service project to impact other groups and communities. Because the power for impact is held within the individual designing and developing the project, the placement on the in practice spectrum falls on the individual side. However, with a longer program, there may be opportunities for students to connect with the communities their project seeks to impact unlike the four day overnight institute. Because of the potential for outreach and collaboration, the placement leans closer to the middle of the spectrum.

Additionally, the program's language highlights the leader's capacity to enact positive change. Its advertising refrains from using negative language which reflects its encouragement in participation to students; however, this also places its charge spectrum closer to the positive side.

Considering these factors, the spectrum is illustrated in the figure below:

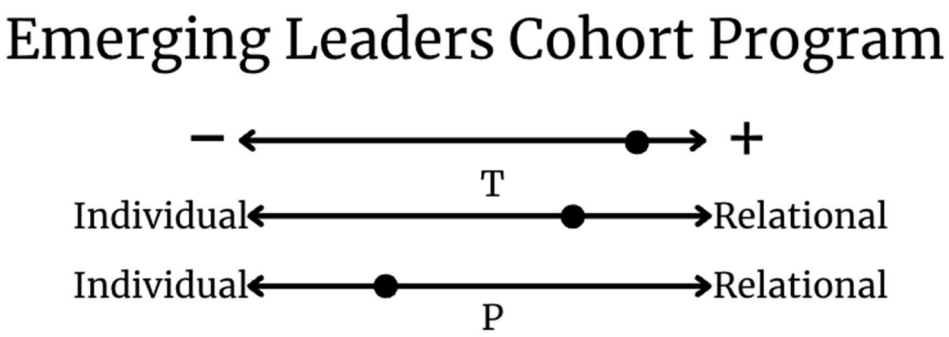

Figure 8: Holden Center cohort program leadership spectrum

Combined Leadership Axis

Looking at these programs holistically, the University of Oregon's Holden Leadership Center has programs that fall under multiple categories within these spectrums, some relational

"in theory" while others are "in practice." Most of the language speaks positively about leadership; however, the fact that there are programs that do challenge the positive nature of leadership is an important step. Overall, if a student leader wanted to understand leadership as relational in both theory and practice while challenging leadership's power as both positive and negative, they could do so by engaging with multiple programs within the center.

With such a diversity in offerings that fall under contrasting areas of the axis, it is difficult to place University of Oregon on one spot in the combined axis; however, considering all assessed programs and their popularity, their assigned position lies here:

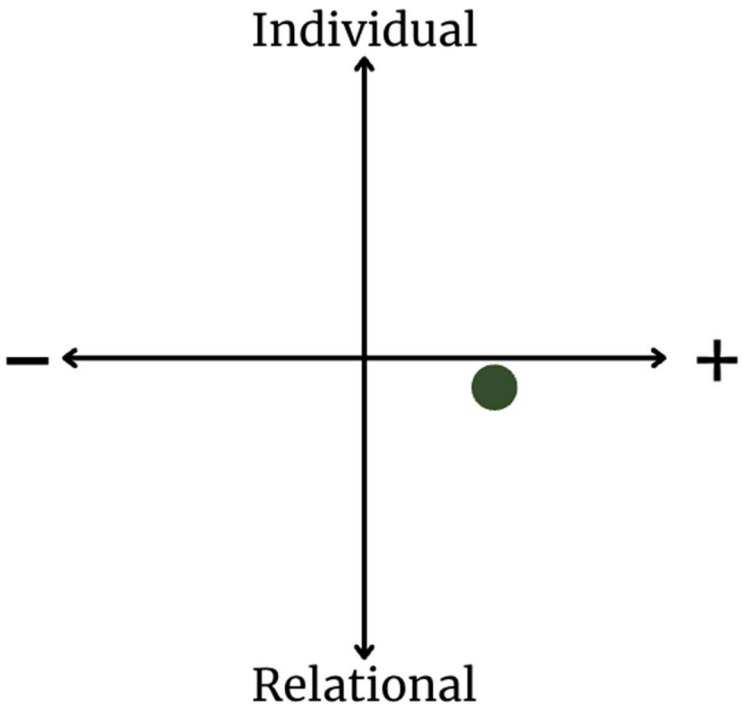

Figure 9: University of Oregon Holden Center's Combined Axis Placement

How does the Holden Center address student leadership needs for the 21st century?

Ultimately, the University of Oregon Holden Center's workshops are the most relevant offering when trying to train student leaders. Their trainings on inclusive leadership, unconscious

bias, and BIPOC leadership include recognition of leadership's systemic issues and shadows that Liu demands. Additionally, these workshops target all individuals within a leadership environment instead of individuals or top leaders, thus modeling the relational leadership process. Because these trainings are completed outside the classroom, they offer greater access for any student to engage. Offering more trainings like these or making them available to students beyond those already involved as a leader within a club or organization would best help the Holden Center strengthen their abilities to meet the needs of the 21st century student.

Case Study 2: The Ohio State University, OSU Leadership Center

The Ohio State University (OSU)'s OSU Leadership Center was chosen to highlight examples of approaches to leadership that are traditional, positive, and in need of updates. Housed within the OSU's Departments of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership, the OSU Leadership Center aims to "provide research-based resources and high-quality practical programs to build and strengthen leadership capacities that make a positive difference" (OSU Leadership Center, 2025). Open to individuals, organizations, and communities, the center offers workshops, online resources, and a "foundational leadership certificate" (OSU Leadership Center, 2025). Most of these resources are led by professionals, not students, and while open to students, also serve community members, faculty groups, and professional organizations. The next sections dive further into their program offerings, website language, and leadership spectrum placement.

Workshops for Leadership and Team Development

OSU's workshops range in content within four categories: communication and conflict management, strengths-based training, leadership development, and team building and development. Within each of these categories, there are workshops for specific audiences. For

example, the conflict management workshop is for “managers, supervisors, and team leaders” rather than all members of the organization. Their leadership development category targets the individual with trainings like “Tapping into Your Greater Leadership Potential” and “Applying Your Personality Type to Build Your Leadership Skills (MBTI)” while also trying to help with group development through individual learning with trainings like “Dealing with Ethical Dilemmas” and “Why Can’t We All Get Along” (OSU Leadership Center, 2025). Under the specific “Team Building” category, they offer the same “Why Can’t We All Get Along” and “Applying Your Personality Type” through a group setting as well as offer a training on “Managing Multiple Generations” (OSU Leadership Center, 2025). This combination of individual and team workshops demonstrates some understanding of leadership as relational; however, the binary split between “individual” versus “team” keeps the two ideas separate instead of along one continuum that views the individual in relation to the rest of the team. This limits the development of leadership as an interconnected process.

The workshops also lack recognition of identity within leadership and emphasize conflict resolution as the main solution to overcoming problems when working with other people, rather than learning how the backgrounds and identities of team members may impact different opinions in a workplace. Further, by isolating the conflict management training to only team leaders, the learning and power to impact others is kept within higher leadership roles. Based on their separation of individual and team programs along with their lack of trainings on leadership across identities, OSU Leadership Center’s workshops place on the individual to relational leadership spectrum remains individual for both theory and practice.

When assessing OSU’s workshops for their viewpoint on positive or negative leadership, their trainings called “Mission Possible: Positive Leadership” and “Dealing with Ethical

Dilemmas" reveal their mindset (OSU Leadership Center, 2025).. The goal of the positive leadership training is to promote positive culture within the workplace and maintain a happy attitude. Their solution to a leader's shadow side or potential negative impacts is to ensure that leaders are positive, likeable people who foster a positive environment. This way of combatting negativity neglects other factors like identity and biases the leader might have. Similar to Johnson's solutions, this path provides characteristics and actions that prevent negative shadows, rather than getting to the root of tensions and issues. This is also reflected in OSU's "Dealing with Ethical Dilemmas" workshop which uses Johnson's language about having "strong ethical leadership" and advises leaders through an "ethical decision-making model" (OSU Leadership Center, 2025). Because this workshop acknowledges "ethical failures," this shows their belief that leaders can fail and have negative impacts (OSU Leadership Center, 2025). However, by framing the failures as ethical only, the workshop content neglects factors that Liu addresses like how power's impact and historic failures have affected marginalized or non-dominant communities. This lack of acknowledgement of how identity and background impact personal leadership development and team development was considered in the placement on their respective spectrums which are found in Figure 10 below:

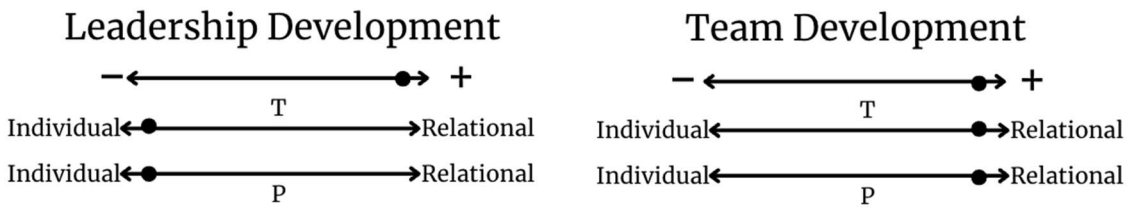

Figure 10: Placement for the OSU Leadership Center's workshops, separated by personal leadership development and team development based on the center's own separation.

Other Offerings

While the workshops are OSU's Leadership Center primary program offerings, they also offer strengths-based training through CliftonStrengths like the University of Oregon. However, unlike the University of Oregon, the strengths-based assessment is only offered to individuals to determine their individual strengths and does not provide the opportunity to learn the shadow side of these strengths nor open the opportunity for analyzing group dynamics. This prevents any acknowledgement of leadership's capacity for negative impact or its recognition of being a relational process. Because of this, the spectrum outlining OSU's strength-based coaching looks very different than the University of Oregon. It can be seen in the figure below:

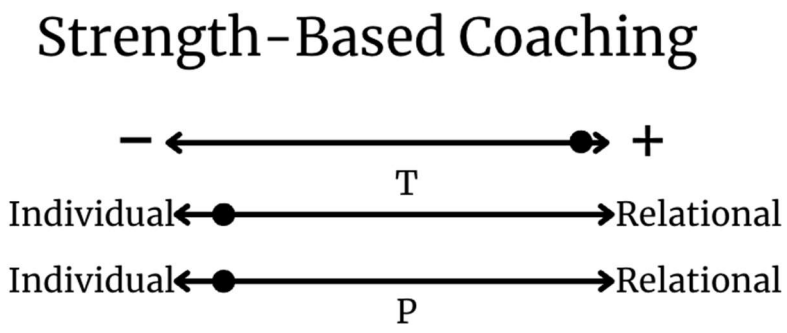

Figure 11: OSU's strength-based coaching leadership spectrum placement

Additionally, OSU has online resources for groups which consist of "team building" exercises that primarily detail ice breakers and group activities. While this helps build trust within a team and does reflect a relational process as it aims to "build dynamic groups," they do

not imply that this connects to leadership but rather emphasize group function (OSU Leadership Center, 2025). They also emphasize positive language to encourage use of the products. The leadership spectrum for this program can be found in the figure below:

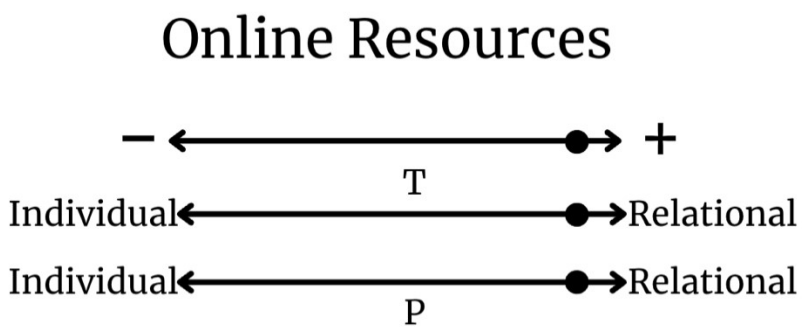

Figure 12: OSU's online resources leadership spectrum

Overall, the OSU Leadership Center serves as an example of a center that prioritizes positive leadership and separates individual and team development rather than establishing a relational leadership process. While they acknowledge ethical failure, their steps towards bettering leaders do not address personal background, identity, or the histories that have shaped and continue to shape leadership and leaders today. This case study reveals the shortcomings within university leadership centers when continuously offered programs fail to adapt to changing needs. Though the website brags about its "32 years of hands-on workshops and strength-based training activities to both organizations and individuals," the workshop titles and descriptions call to question whether updates have been made (OSU Leadership Center, 2025).

Interestingly, OSU was also previously featured in the literature review as an important institution for leadership research during the era of behavior-based research. Though unclear on their continued prioritization of leadership research, their workshops do align with behavioral models by instructing leaders and groups on their behavior, whether a conflict-resolution training

or workshop on personality types. This places OSU's Leadership Center offerings at a very different position the University of Oregon on the combined axis:

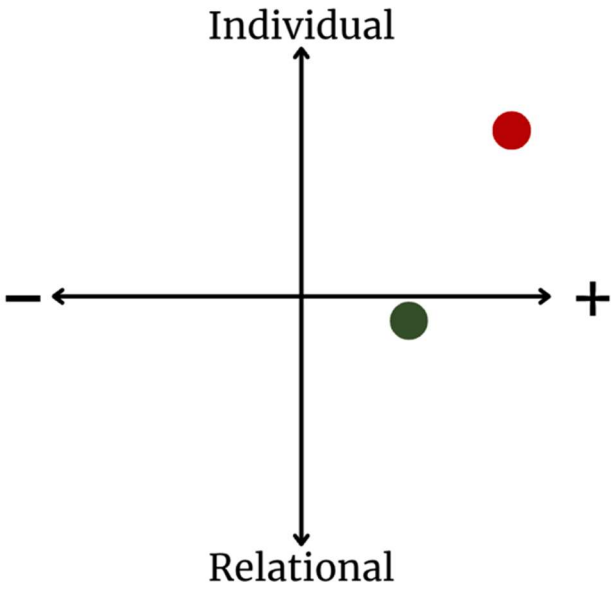

Figure 13: OSU Leadership Center Combined Axis Placement as compared with the UO Holden Leadership Center Combined Axis Placement

How does the OSU Leadership Center address student leadership needs for the 21st century?

The OSU Leadership Center ultimately provides an example of programs that do not meet the needs of the 21st century student because of the emphasis on the individual as holding the leadership power, separating individual and team trainings, and pushing positive leadership as a solution for problems. While they do admit ethical failures exist, as Johnson does, they do not dive deeper into the systemic issues within the discipline of leadership, which Liu and this thesis suggest is necessary for the 21st century student leader. Further, though they do not reference the normative theories discussed in the literature review, their priority to develop specific qualities within individual leaders, like being ethical or positive, and aligns with these approaches. To better align with today's needs, the OSU Leadership Center should eliminate the binary between individual and team and create workshops that incorporate both within one

space. They could also add information within their ethical leadership training about the historical reasons behind some of the ethical failures, including leadership's systemic racism and sexism and why this has encouraged prioritization of dominance.

Case Study 3: Northwestern University's Center for Leadership (NUCL)

The Northwestern University Center for Leadership (NUCL) was chosen as an example of a curriculum driven offering and its connection between theory and practice. NUCL seeks to reach "all students" to "develop their leadership capacity" and "explore leadership as a dynamic process" (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). With an emphasis on leading with teammates in mind, their approach is outlined clearly online with specific steps on what it means "to become an effective leader" (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). Their steps include:

> Start with questions, not answers
> Learn what motivates those around you
> Play to your strengths
> Enable the excellence of others first
> Select a few challenging experiences
> Experiment, observe, learn, apply, repeat
> Know why you lead
> Build resilience through risk and failure
> Build a network of trusted advisors
> (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025)

In addition to these individual leadership steps, they also clearly define what it takes to "build an effective team" with steps such as:

Be on time and ready to contribute
Demonstrate success through small wins
Play to everyone's strengths
Get to know each other outside of project work
Use a project plan to achieve success
Have honest conversations
(Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025)

These two approaches present NUCL's beliefs about the process of leadership. Based on these steps and their website descriptions, NUCL views leadership as a relational process in theory and encourages individuals to lead with fellow teammates and other people in mind. Their language also reflects the normative theory of transformational leadership by presenting the process of becoming a leader as a personal transformation that also impacts the larger group. Though they separate individual leadership and team leadership into a binary like the OSU Leadership Center, the content of both approaches reflect knowing the self in order to best lead others, which is a quality of interconnectedness that reflects the relational side of leadership. By outlining these steps as a conceptualization of leadership on their website, NUCL establishes a relational placement on the in theory spectrum.

Leadership Certificate: Putting the Theory to Practice

Looking at their programs and practices demonstrates how NUCL applies these approaches in practice. For undergraduates, the center highlights "personalized programs" to develop individual leadership potential which seems to contradict their relational approach (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). The first advertised offering is the "Undergraduate Leadership Program Certificate" which includes classes such as "Paradigms and Strategies of Leadership" and "Leading from Design." Upon further exploration of the course content, the classes begin by focusing on individual leadership development with descriptions like "help you

become an effective leader" and "to lead out of who you are, you must know who you are" (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). However, this personal growth is then applied to acquire other more relational outcomes like "thrive in teams" and "inspire others" (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). Some of the outcomes even address the need to recognize difference within leadership spaces and processes; for example, "mobilize different types of people to maximize performance leading others" (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). Additionally, students must complete a field study that "shifts the focus to the follower side of the leadership process" and address the question "what do I understand about the perspective and experience of those I hope to lead?" (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). This language not only acknowledges leadership as a process, but also reflects needs presented by the scholar Liu to turn attention away from leaders and towards the people who they serve and their unique lived experience. Through the field study, students get to put NUCL's approaches as theory into practice, aligning their in practice spectrum as relational.

When analyzing this program along the charge spectrum, it does address the possibility of leadership failure in the learning outcome "overcome adversity and learn from failure" (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). However, beyond this, there is no connection to the systemic failures of leadership or the shadow side of leadership. The certificate program's collective leadership spectrum is found in the figure below:

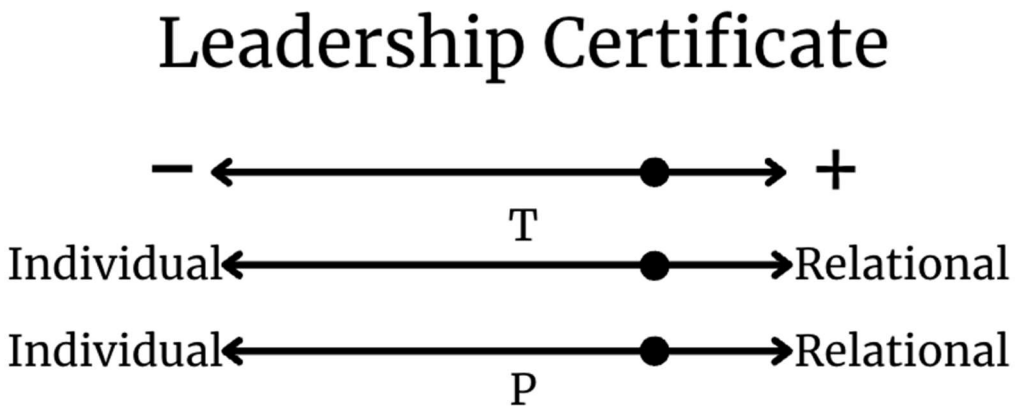

Figure 14: Northwestern Leadership Center's Leadership Certificate Leadership Spectrum

The NUCL website also features student quotes that reveal insights into the aspects of the program that are helpful. These quotes include:

> The leadership program helped me think more deeply and thoughtfully about the value of my present and future leadership roles and my efficacy in those positions. It helped me to understand more clearly the type of person I am.
>
> (Student 1)
>
> The classes really allowed me to reflect on myself and understand motivations of leaders that I have since used in different clubs and teams I've been on.
>
> (Student 2)
>
> It provides students with a platform to engage with others and bounce ideas off of each other to improve not only themselves, but the others within their class.
>
> (Student 3)
>
> (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025)

Students 1 and 2 emphasize important considerations for undergraduate leadership development. Because undergraduate students may not have been in leadership roles or spaces and are still within learning environments, having instruction that prompts self-discovery and growth aids in developing a sense of leadership. As noted in the synthesized conclusions section of the thesis, understanding leadership as a relational process does not mean removing individual leadership development; addressing the self is the first step in recognizing leadership as an interconnected and thus relational process. The key is to combine this work with

acknowledgement that leadership goes beyond the individual and presenting opportunities to work with others, which this program accomplishes.

One downside to this program is its exclusivity because of its availability only through curriculum. This limits who can partake as not everyone may have access to the class or time in their schedule. It also proposes questions about how to build a similar program beyond the classroom.

Team Programs with Financial Incentives

NUCL also offers a "Leadership Ambassador" program for the university and encourages other students to engage with the center. This program aims to "promote leadership dialogue across the university" and equips undergraduate students to "administer various leadership ventures" such as "hosting events" and "engaging in outreach activities" (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). Most students who participate are already involved with the NUCL, primarily through the certificate program. As a paid position, this role also incorporates a financial layer to student leadership development that has not been featured in other programs. Because of the financial compensation and work environment, this program offers the opportunity to practice leadership within a team workplace setting that features people of different backgrounds and experiences. However, this is not stated as an official outcome of the program. Finally, because this position is geared to advertising the NUCL positively, most language about the program describes leadership as positive.

Similarly, the NUCL offers a "Leadership Ventures" program which is a team-based opportunity for groups to receive team coaching and up to $2,000 for starting a new project (Northwestern Center for Leadership, 2025). Some of the previous projects have included developing a formal wear shared closet and a peer-to-peer Black mentorship program. Like the

Leadership Ambassador Program, this program is highly collaborative and team oriented, providing practice working with others to achieve goals. However, this program views leadership as a way of facilitating problem solving and gives students the chance to define the problem that they want to tackle for themselves.

Both of these programs share a similar leadership spectrum that views leadership as positive and relational through team collaboration. However, it also lacks recognition about the importance of identity within group work and assumes leaders are coming in with their individual capacities developed. The spectrum for these programs is found in the figure below:

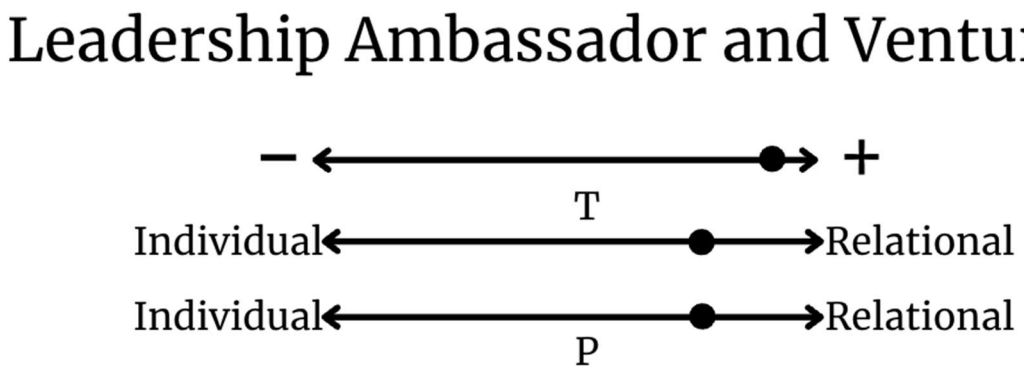

Figure 15: Northwestern University Center for Leadership's Leadership Ambassador and Leadership Venture programs' leadership spectrum

Overall, Northwestern University's Center for Leadership backs their practices with their highly emphasized approaches. With all factors in consideration, this places their position on the combined access here:

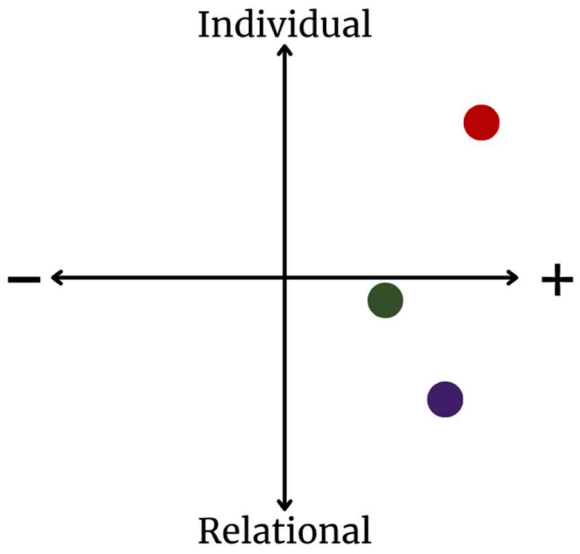

Figure 16: Northwestern Center for Leadership Combined Axis Placement as compared with the UO Holden Leadership Center Combined Axis Placement and the OSU Leadership Center Combined Axis Placement

How does the NUCL address student leadership needs for the 21st century?

The NUCL addresses student leadership needs through its clear instruction of leadership as a relational, interconnected process. Their Leadership Certificate program articulates the importance of understanding the self and personal identity in order to contribute to and collaborate with a group. Further, they outline their approach on leadership through specific steps and put this approach into practice in the certificate program. These qualities allow NUCL to successfully meet student needs; however, there are other areas of improvement. For instance, they do not explicitly acknowledge the shadows side of leadership or the systemic issues within leadership. By building onto their process-based relational model by incorporating historical

background and the potential harms that come with power, NUCL would be better equipped to meet student need.

Case Study 4: Tulane University Leadership Institute (TULI)

The Tulane University Leadership Institute (TULI) was established in 2020 through the university's most recently adopted strategic plan to promote leadership within the Tulane community and bolster the future of the university's success. The institute aims to "equip individuals, teams, and communities with the knowledge and skills to think, learn, act, and lead with integrity and wisdom" (Tulane University Leadership Institute, 2025).

While they offer a range of programs, the reason this center was chosen to highlight is unique within this thesis study. First, it must be noted that this institute primarily targets the university's own faculty and staff. There is not a focus on undergraduate student leadership development. However, when researching leadership training programs with a specific emphasis on diversity or anti-racist goals, this was one of the only available programs with in-depth information. At the time of discovery, the program was called the "Anti-Racist Leadership Program," but over a few months, the website began to change to reflect the current demands of the Trump administration (Tulane University Leadership Institute, 2025). Now, this program is called the "Intercultural Leadership Program" and utilizes language that is safe from investigation by the federal government (Tulane University Leadership Institute, 2025). No longer referencing diversity and equity, the program goals now read with references to bias, discrimination, and harassment. For example:

> Learning about ILP leadership models and change management strategies that prevent and reduce bias, discrimination, and harassment
>
> Thinking critically about how bias, discrimination, and harassment manifests in campus learning, living, and working environments on campus environment

(Tulane University Leadership Institute, 2025)

Watching the title and website content change within a few week's time made it clear the power that fear and money has over universities within the United States right now, a definite shadow side to U.S. leadership. Further, having this program only open to adult employees of the university prompted questions about why a student version does not exist and what a similar program could look like for students. Thus far in the research process, this example felt closest to the call Johnson makes to shed light on the shadows and Liu makes for redeeming leadership by having conversations that "engage in strategic and comprehensive discussions on topics such as intercultural life, organizational change leadership, restorative practices, community service, engagement, and initiatives aimed at reducing bias" (Tulane University Leadership Institute, 2025). However, because it did not exist for students and endured a name change, it revealed some of the failures of current university-level leadership training and instruction for students in the 21st Century.

With all of this in mind, there was also an attempt to place this program along the leadership spectrum. The program recognizes the need for leadership training that addresses historical bias and promotes leaders working "effectively across cultural and social landscapes" to "foster collaborative environments," demonstrating their commitment to understanding the individual within the dynamic process of leadership (Tulane University Leadership Institute, 2025). For these reasons, this institute falls under the relational category both "in theory" and "in practice." Further, this program's recognition of the biases, discrimination, and harassment that can happen within their own community reveals their ability to acknowledge leadership's potential to cause harm rather than only being a positive quality that needs to be strengthened. This puts their charge spectrum closer to the negative side rather than being inherently positive.

Together, the leadership spectrum for this program can be found below:

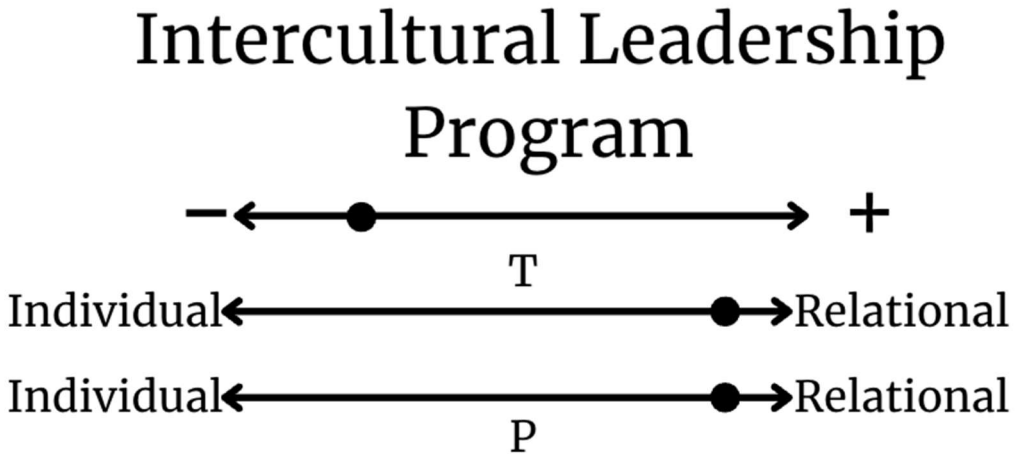

Figure 17: Tulane University Leadership Institute's Intercultural Leadership Program's Leadership Spectrum

Additional Programs

Though the focus of this case study is the Intercultural Leadership Program, their other programs and offerings are reviewed to calculate TULI's combined axis position. TULI also offers an Emerging Leaders Program that targets Tulane University employees who wish to "expand their influence, take on greater leadership roles, and drive meaningful change" (Tulane University Leadership Institute, 2025). The goals of this program primarily target individual growth that will lead to university-wide success, recognizing leadership as a relational process that builds beyond the individual to support the community. Additionally, TULI offers 1:1 coaching and personal assessments. These offerings are highly individual and contrast with the other more relational programs.

Overall, this institute offers a range in offerings like the University of Oregon's Holden Center, but their Intercultural Leadership Program provides a unique perspective. Despite being targeted towards employees and university leadership, it expands the potential for what student leadership instruction and training could look like within a university. Considering all programs, the placement of TULI amongst other centers can be found in the below figure:

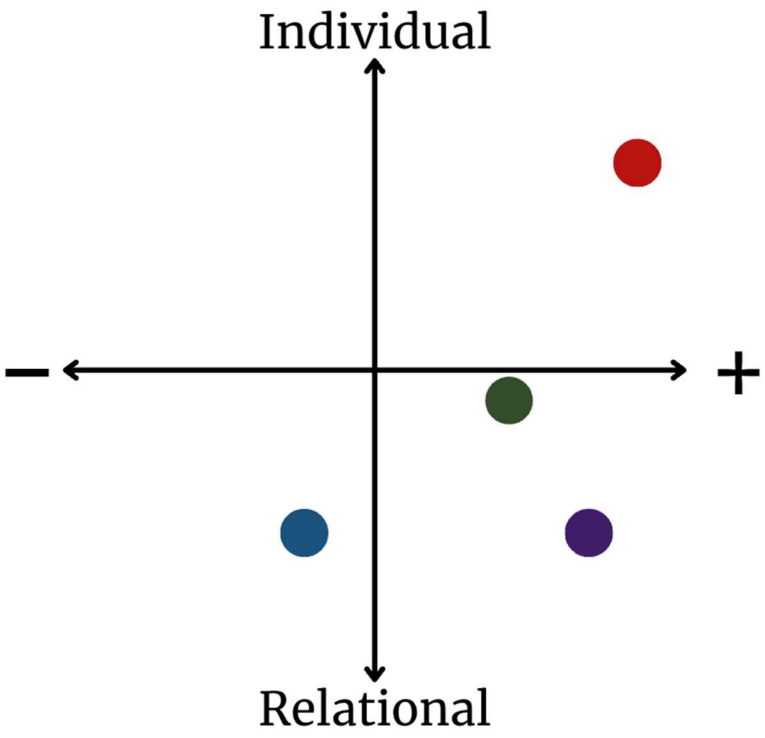

Figure 18: Tulane University Leadership Institute Combined Axis Placement as compared with the UO Holden Leadership Center Combined Axis Placement and the OSU Leadership Center Combined Axis Placement and the NUCL Combined Axis Placement

How does the TULI address student leadership needs for the 21st century?

Even though TULI provided an example for recognizing systemic issues like racism within a leadership space, they do not meet student leadership needs because they do not offer this program to students. If TULI could create student-facing workshops or cohort-program that incorporate aspects of the Intercultural Leadership Program like recognizing bias and identity, this would be a step forward for student leadership.

Key Takeaways from University Leadership Centers and Programs

These four examples of university leadership centers serve as beneficial case studies to build from the conclusions drawn during the literature review process. Combining the case

studies and the primary scholars within the literature review of this thesis, the collective combined axis provides a comparison tool that can be found in the figure below:

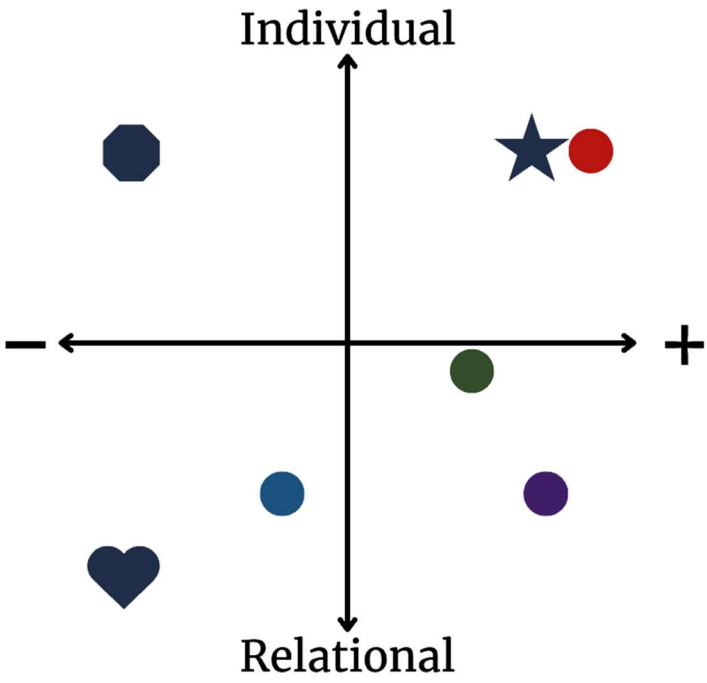

Figure 19: Combined axis between literature review primary authors and university leadership centers; for reference, Northouse: star, Johnson: octagon, Liu; heart, Holden Center: green, OSU leadership center: red, NUCL: purple, TULI: blue

Using this tool and the overall analysis of university leadership center programs, some key takeaways on student leadership's intersection within the larger leadership discipline can be offered.

First, the normative theories were not as present as expected, but their language and ideas were. In the literature review stage of this thesis, all three primary texts discussed normative theories like transformational, authentic, and servant leadership as examples of relatively recent leadership theories. Based on Northouse's detailed chapters on each of these examples as well as Johnson's offering of these theories as solutions to leadership shadows, one assumption going into the case study analysis was the use of these theories to instruct students on how to be

leaders. Surprisingly, these theories were not addressed directly; however, the normative approach of instilling qualities and skills within the individual leader to actualize a leadership process was present in some of the programs. For example, the Holden Center's LeaderShape Institute encouraged leaders to develop individual capacities and visions to impact a community along with guidance on what skills were necessary for the individual to make this difference, rather than how to collaborate with the members of the community to make the change. Additionally, NUCL discussed personal reckoning and transformation as necessary to then transform the team at large, which reflects aspects of authentic transformational leadership. Overall, it was surprising to see the lack of reference to these theories and demonstrated that the student leadership programs within the examined universities are already looking to the future of leadership as a discipline.

Second, to develop leaders who understand leadership as a relational or interconnected process, the case study findings show a progression from personal development to active group collaborative practice. This calls back to the first synthesized conclusion which determines leadership's growing understanding as a relational process, putting the individual as interconnected with the people they work with to accomplish the action or goal at hand. Some examined programs were able to balance this individual-to-other continuum well by first focusing on personal growth and identity work before shifting a lens applying leadership skills for the purpose of working with others. For example, NUCL's Leadership Certificate program allows students to take coursework on figuring out why they want to lead before learning theories on how to lead with others as the priority; then, they ultimately get field experience to practice this. This model is similar to the Holden Center's Emerging Leadership Program which progresses from individual leadership development to figuring out a plan on how to impact a

community; however the Emerging Leadership Program did not clearly connect how to shift the focus from the self as having the primary leadership power and vision to including others in the process. Another observation is that this kind of progressive learning depends on the time students have to learn and develop their leadership. The programs that could establish relational understanding while also doing personal development were typically cohort or curriculum based. Such programs offered time for self-growth, connection to others, and practice. Not all formats offer this same capability, so it is something to be considered for student leadership training development.

Third, case study programs did not often recognize the shadow side or the potential negative impacts that power has. Calling back to the second synthesized conclusion from the literature review acknowledges the power that leaders hold to create positive or negative impacts. A takeaway from the examined leadership center programs is the lack of addressing this power. While many programs were quick to convey leadership's potential to make positive impacts and encouraged students to get involved in their program to make those impacts, many failed to address what actual power the student held in their role or identity and its potential to harm rather than help. Further, when the negative aspects of leadership were addressed, they were typically discussed as leadership failure or ethical failure without diving deeper into the leadership violences that Liu describes. The only programs that did address historical systemic failures within leadership were the Holden Center's BIPOC training, specifically targeted to BIPOC students, and TULI's Intercultural Leadership Program, only meant for working professionals. By expanding these topics to general student leadership programs with broader audiences, students could understand how they may unintentionally use the power they hold in their position as a leader or fellow group member in a collaborative leadership process to

perpetuate violence, whether through expected dominance of certain identity groups or by assuming the needs of communities that are not their own through. Addressing leadership failure as a result of "poor" leadership and providing skills to help the individual be an ethically "good" leader is simply not enough; there are histories and systemic layers at play to the leadership shadow that many programs do not address.

To conclude these takeaways and this section of the thesis, the discovered gap between university student leadership programs and the needs of the 21st century is the failure to instruct leadership as an interconnected process through the lens of addressing systemic issues and the shadow side of leadership. Most programs either believed in leadership as a relational, interconnected process or addressed the shadow side of leadership, but rarely combined both ideas through a holistic lens. This begs the question: what would a university student leadership program look like that believed in leadership as an interconnected process and addressed the potential for leadership's power to cause either harm or help? The next section attempts to answer this question.

Recommendations: Meeting the Needs for the 21st Century Student

Based on the previously synthesized conclusions and their application to university programs, developing programs for the 21st century student is a complex process. While many programs have moved away from referencing normative theories and view leadership as a relational process, there is further work to be done to connect this process to the shadows and violences that the system of leadership continues to perpetuate. Recommendations for making this connection will be articulated in the following sections.

Begin with the Individual

As discussed throughout this thesis, the process of leadership begins with the individual. Examined university leadership center programs typically addressed the individual through the lens of gaining individual competencies or capitalizing unique strengths; however, drawing on Palmer and Liu, this personal development should be taken a step further to include participation in inner work and the opportunity to create a self-definition.

Palmer's concept of inner work pushes the individual to ask hard questions that isolate their personal shadows, instructing students to take an inward journey to face their insecurities and fears. This aspect of personal development could help student leaders establish self-awareness and understand early on how to work on their weaknesses as a leader. However, focusing only on the shadow is not the recommendation; there should be a balance between recognizing individual strengths and areas of growth.

Additionally, all students should have the opportunity to define themselves with a holistic definition that presents their full identity within a space. Though this may seem simple, Liu offers the term self-definition for a reason; people with identities that have been historically excluded from leadership may not feel able to define themselves within a leadership space.

Opening space for every participant in a program to provide a self-definition or communicate their identity—whether written or verbal—offers students a chance to consider their identity as valid and necessary for the space.

Talk about Power

Power is a topic that almost all case study programs neglected to address; however, power should be explored as part of what drives the leadership process at the individual and collective level. Calling back to the quote Johnson uses as an introduction to his text, leaders and leadership usually contain a "degree of power to create the conditions under which other people must live" (Palmer, 2024, as quoted in Johnson, 2024, p. 3) Getting familiar with the power that exists within an individual leadership role or a collective leadership process can help students know their own capacities for making positive or negative impacts to the communities they serve.

Another important reason to recognize power is to grapple with how certain identities have more power than others and have historically contained this power through their dominance, resulting in systemic harmful leadership systems. Giving students the opportunity to recognize the power they hold through a leadership role *and* through their own identity can build awareness about power they may not have known they have. Once a student has awareness of the power they hold, they can also make better decisions about using that power.

Shift the Focus to Others

If students have a foundation in their personal identities, goals, passions, shadows, and power they hold, they are prepared to turn their attention away from the self and towards others within the leadership process, whether fellow peers, their followers, or the communities they seek to impact. Student leadership programs must be ready to provide resources to help facilitate

this shift, whether background on the histories that shape the present identities or tools to communicate across differences. The historical context is especially important when shifting the focus to groups who have been harmed by dominance and oppression within leadership.

Making this shift opens space for others to share their identities through self-definition which adds value to the leadership environment by bringing in voices with unique experiences and backgrounds. Students then have the chance to grapple with their own identities and power in relation to others, giving them the opportunity to personally confront their position within the leadership's systemic issues. This work reflects the call Liu makes to redeem present leadership systems by practicing leadership as an interconnected process.

Share Power through Collaboration

Once the shift to interconnected leadership has been made, the goal of the relational, interconnected leadership process is to continue shifting between individuals and identities in relation to one another through collaboration. For this to happen, the power held within individuals because of their role, status, or identity must be shared with the group. While giving up power and its privileges can be challenging, the result is a strengthened base of power flowing through the interconnected leadership process.

Student leadership programs can help guide students through developing shared power and collaboration by offering spaces to practice this kind of leadership. Whether giving groups a goal to work towards or offering space for students to develop their own visions together, student leadership programs that not only provide resources for working with others but require practice in actively collaborating in a relational process can more readily prepare students to enter leadership environments for the 21st century.

Ultimately, if leadership is to move beyond its systemic violences or shadows that have continued to perpetuate harm to communities, student leadership programs that inspire interconnected collaboration and charge groups with shared power provide a method to begin the redemption process that Liu calls for. The next section will offer an example of this kind of environment through self-reflective inquiry with an undergraduate leadership course.

Self-Reflective Inquiry for PPPM 494: Leadership and Social Change

PPPM 494: Leadership and Social Change is the capstone class of the Planning, Public Policy, and Management (PPPM) major at the University of Oregon designed and taught by Professor José Melendez. As a PPPM student and graduating senior, I began taking the course spring term amidst the writing of this thesis. Having finished reading the critical texts and wondering what a learning experience that viewed leadership as a relational process *and* addressed systemic issues could look like, I found myself in a space that answered many of these questions. From the featured textbooks and readings to the style of activities, I knew that this version of leadership training was one example that scholar Helena Liu may have envisioned when trying to redeem leadership.

In order to convey this argument, I will outline the course's objectives and descriptions, highlight relevant readings, provide examples of my own work within the class, and discuss how this course supports 21st century undergraduate students through the lens of the above recommendations.

Course Descriptions and Goals

In the syllabus of this course, the overview says, "this course will explore leadership across cultures, contexts, and purposes, including organization, community, and political spheres" (Melendez, PPPM 494 Syllabus, 2025, p. 2). The description continues to list key

questions covered in class such as: “What is leadership? How has leadership varied across time and place? How do leadership norms and expectations impact organizations, communities, and policies?” (Melendez, PPPM 494 Syllabus, 2025, p. 2). These questions are supported by a promise to “gain cultural and historical understanding” which “includes the processes used to create ‘followers’ and ‘others’ who are excluded” because “leadership has the potential to both inspire and divide” (Melendez, PPPM 494 Syllabus, 2025, p. 3). The course learning objectives and outcomes similarly state that students should be able to “differentiate when and how leadership excludes or includes individuals or communities” (Melendez, PPPM 494 Syllabus, 2025, p. 3). Based on these descriptions, the course acknowledges that leadership has historically not included everyone instead of focusing on certain people who were “great” leaders or held characteristics or qualities students should focus on to become a leader. By acknowledging the exclusion that has existed, the course addresses shadows within leadership beyond ethical failure—an aspect of leadership that university student leadership programs struggle to address.

Other learning objectives for this course focus on communication as a tool to unite rather than divide and practice through facilitation. Throughout the term, groups are assigned chapters and readings to facilitate as a training module for the class and then build a module for audiences beyond the classroom. By establishing the main project of the class as a group project, leadership is affirmed within this class as a dynamic process that can be carried out by collective groups rather than one person.

Additionally, there is a large emphasis on community within the class and building an environment that allows for learning from one another as part of the leadership process. The syllabus outlines the importance of having difficult discussions during class which “requires students to take risk and practice making sense of these with one another, in community”

(Melendez, PPPM 494 Syllabus, 2025, p. 3). As a student of the class, I can attest that these difficult conversation about identity and life experience occurred and were successful because of the commitment students had to each other in the shared space. Additionally, the syllabus's teaching philosophy section discusses intentions for students to "relate content knowledge to their own experiences and to ask questions about power, access, and equity in larger social issues" (Melendez, PPPM 494 Syllabus, 2025, p. 4). This ties directly to the recommendations made at the beginning of this section that emphasize the importance of recognizing personal identity and power within the systems that build our leadership spaces, a quality of developing leadership as an interconnected process.

Overall, this class's description, objectives, outcomes and environment gear the class towards a relational understanding of leadership that also highlights its shadow side through historical exclusion, making its purpose and goals in line with the needs for student leadership training within the 21st century. Next, the PPPM 494 course content will be explored.

Course Content: Textbooks and Readings

The two primary textbooks of PPPM 494 are Brenda Allen's *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (2023) and Erin Meyer's *The Culture Map: Breaking through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business* (2014). While Allen's *Difference Matters* highlights different aspects of identity and why they matter in workplace environments, Meyer's *The Culture Map* offers personal stories, models, and advice on communicating across culture.

Each of Allen's *Difference Matters* (2023) chapters focuses on a different aspect of identity: gender, race, social class, sexuality, disability, and age. She breaks down societal populations into "dominant" and "nondominant" groups for these categories and gives definitions with neutral, clear language to describe concepts that can be difficult to put into

language (Allen, 2023, p. 5). These include but are not limited to gender vs. sexuality, institutionalized racism, white privilege, ageism, and hegemony. By providing these terms, Allen equips students to discuss these topics that may be avoided in the workplace or by leaders themselves. Allen also gives the historical context and addresses how the past has shaped various identities to be dominant or nondominant, acknowledging the systemic issues within and beyond leadership. As a Black woman, Allen offers her own stories and experiences within academia and leadership environments, expanding the perspective of leadership beyond textbooks without anecdotes written by white men. Though not specifically deemed a leadership book, the text delivers necessary content to shift the leadership lens from self to others of different backgrounds within an interconnected process.

The second text, *The Culture Map* (2014) takes readers away from the U.S. and moves to an international scope. Meyer highlights differences across global cultures and how to navigate these differences. This text is also not framed as a leadership text, but rather seeks to prepare readers for real-world work though global communication frameworks and personal workplace anecdotes. Centered on communication skills, techniques, and knowledge, Meyer provides practices for communicating with people and cultures who differ from one another using researched backed practices. Although *The Culture Map* primarily targets cultures in a national sense, the communication tools can be applied in any setting when working with others who have different backgrounds, cultural upbringings, or values. Through these communication skills, students learn tools that help facilitate collaborative work with people who have different communication styles or cultural backgrounds, or both.

These two texts ground the course in a dynamic approach to leadership by teaching difference and how to discuss difference in culturally sensitive ways while working in the same

environment. These texts promote discussion of identity in relation to the group at large and provides instruction on how to communicate across differences.

Additionally, the course includes other supporting articles and readings that align in supporting the needs of 21st century students who aim to understand leadership. One of the first and most crucial sources is, "Meeting the Challenge of Leading in the 21st Century: Beyond the 'Deficit Model' of Leadership Development" (James & Ladkin, 2008). As the first chapter of a publication from the United Kingdom called *Leadership Learning: Knowledge into Action*, authors Kim Turnbull James and Donna Ladkin who, acknowledging "the call for more shared and collaborative leadership," question traditional leadership development tactics that gather high profile individuals for one specialized training (p. 14). They call out this "dominant approach" being rooted in Great Man theories that have developed into other individualistic theories (transformational, servant, authentic, etc.), as previously discussed in this thesis (p. 15). They also believe "the relational dimension of leadership" is not simply a leader's influence on followers, but rather describes a "network" that can "be exercised across many different organization boundaries and works" (p. 18). Because of this, they too seek to design leadership development differently, making a claim that also echoes this thesis:

> By conceptualising leadership as a function of the interplay of individual agency with organisation culture, structure, and the wider socio-historic moment, it becomes clear that leadership development interventions themselves need to orient themselves beyond the individual capabilities of programme delegates.
>
> (James & Ladkin, 2008, p. 18)

This is the interconnectedness Liu discusses and that this thesis urges leadership development to center for students. By including this reading as one of the first of the course curriculum, it was clear this course aligned in argument with this thesis's research and could offer an environment to learn these concepts.

Other content included New York Times articles like “Ambition Has Always Been ‘Ladylike,’” “Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Supreme Court’s Feminist Icon, Is Dead at 87,” and “Jeff Flake: In a Democracy, There Can Be No Bystanders.” These current events articles made the content feel relevant and offered stories to attach concepts and ideas to. In particular, the article on Ruth Bader Ginsberg highlights how her leadership involved working with others with different backgrounds and beliefs than hers to accomplish action, affirming collaborative action as a method for accomplishing action.

There were other academic readings that offered concepts and terms to help provide definitions and descriptions for difficult ideas. These readings included:

“Achieving relational authenticity in leadership: Does gender matter?” by Alice Eagly (2005)

“Ethics and Leadership” a publication by Susan P. Mullane, Ph.D. from the Johnson A. Edosomwan Leadership Institute University of Miami (2009)

“Geographies of Organized Hate in America: A Regional Analysis” by Richard Medina et. al. (2018)

Each of these readings and their content also supported the needs presented in this thesis by discussing identity, the ethical leadership shadow, and the shadow of systemic violence. Eagly’s (2005) “relational authenticity” provided a concept that helped bridge the balance between showing up in leadership environments authentically and adjusting actions or behaviors while working with others (p. 461). Argued as a “recasting of authentic leadership,” Eagly describes how a leader’s authenticity only matters to the extent that their followers can relate to them and that certain identities will inherently struggle more with this than others, including women (p. 461). Instead of simply instructing leaders to be themselves, she notes how this

advice will put nondominant leaders at a disadvantage in a system that idealizes white, male leadership as the norm. She instead suggests leaders learn to be authentic in a way that reflects their values while also relating to their followers.

Mullane's (2009) article on ethics within leadership— a work coming out of a university leadership institute—draws on an earlier version of one of this thesis's critical text *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership* by Johnson, articulating his concept of light v. shadow. Beyond presenting this concept, Mullane goes onto describe how to create an ethical environment through a code of ethics, a solution Johnson also presents. Though this text alone would not be enough to address the extent of leadership shadow because of its sole focus on ethics, its content in addition to the other readings and texts supports student learning by offering a tool to facilitate ethical processes within a leadership space.

Finally, Medina's (2018) article, the "Geographies of Organized Hate in America: A Regional Analysis" expands conversations on identity, difference, and systemic violences by giving students a research-backed explanation for the hate that exists within the United States towards certain identities. This text addresses the shadows that go beyond ethics to make students grapple with reasons for the perpetuation of violences Liu articulated.

Overall, the content of this class addresses both the importance of viewing leadership as a relational, interconnected process and recognizing the shadows that exist ethically and systemically within leadership. Further, by providing terminology for identity difference through Allen's *Difference Matters* (2023) and skills to address difference through communication tools and concepts like relational authenticity, this class prepares students to interact in workplaces and leadership environments with diverse groups.

Assignments and Analysis of Reflection Papers

To apply the content, this course offers assignments to practice learned concepts. First, students must engage with other students through online discussion posts. Instead of simply laying out personal thoughts or ideas, students must ask a question that is then answered by a peer. This kind of learning reflects the dynamic nature of this class, reminding students that communication with each other is what catalyzes the leadership process.

Students also write reflection papers throughout the term to check in on their personal learning. These papers are anonymous and solely between the professor and the self, isolating the individual leadership development to personal purposes only. This echoes the idea that the first step to understanding leadership as a relational and interconnected process is personal development. For this class, the reflection papers offered space to do the inner work Palmer (2024) suggests by grappling with personal areas of improvement and growth while also connecting class concepts to life experience. Some examples from my own reflection writing in this course are shared below to demonstrate this course's support in my rethinking of what leadership means and how it should be practiced:

> For example, when I went to a leadership training about authentic leadership last year, I felt inspired and ready to take what I had learned and apply it to my position. However, I was not equipped with the vocabulary to express that despite the inspiring lecture, my truest version of myself could not be embodied within my role. At the moment, I was extremely frustrated by this, but as I look back now, I realize there was a middle ground: relational authenticity. Like Eagly says in her article, "It would therefore be bad advice to exhort women and other outsiders to merely be themselves and express their heartfelt values." There has to be recognition that leadership is inherently relational, and as such, requires adapting oneself to the environments one leads or may need to take up space in to make key decisions. (Webster, C., PPPM 494 Course Reflection #2, April 19, 2025)

This entry demonstrates how Eagly's (2005) definition of relational authenticity helped me expand beyond the normative idea of authentic leadership towards a relational and

interconnected concept which explains why authentic leadership as a theory and approach does not ultimately meet the needs of 21st century leaders.

> Monday's reading about Google's attempt on finding the most effective team deeply engaged me. I have been doing research on leadership theory for my undergraduate thesis, and one overarching trend is the shift from leadership rooted in an individual to leadership as a relational process. The team dynamic could be argued as one of these processes. Interestingly, as the researchers attempted to discover the formula for the best team, they first looked at each individual and their unique characteristics instead of the group dynamics. Because everyone differed, the study did not produce conclusive results. However, once the researchers switched from individual trait-based data collection and to group behaviors, they were able to actually draw conclusions from the observations and data. It made me wonder how this shift could be actualized in other ways within the field of leadership. (Webster, C., PPPM 494 Course Reflection #4, May 8, 2025)

This entry shows how I applied a reading about a study done by Google to the knowledge I had developed about leadership as individual and relational. The study's results also affirmed the arguments of my thesis by switching their assessment methods from individual traits to a group dynamic to better represent group processes. It also supported my learning as I now a specific example of applying the dynamic process definition of leadership to research.

> During the debrief, I listened to experiences I could not relate to and had my assumptions of people shattered. It felt like the space was not meant for voices like mine and that my experience as living comfortability would reveal a dark truth. When we drew the diagram on the board and talked about everyone wanting to be middle class, we mainly focused on those in the "poor" category trying to claim "middle class." However, I think many upper-class individuals experience the same pressure. I know when my parents talk about our social class, they typically say "upper-middle class," but from my understanding, I feel that we are beyond the middle class. That being said, I no longer know where the line between middle or upper class is anymore. (Webster, C., PPPM 494 Course Reflection #5, May 16, 2025)

This entry reveals a more personal inner work perspective and demonstrates the importance of creating spaces where people interact with multiple perspectives. One of the reasons that viewing leadership as an interconnected process is necessary is because of the perspectives that are brought to the metaphorical table where leaders make decisions. The more voices with nuanced

backgrounds, the greater the chance a decision will reflect a larger group of people. Additionally, by encouraging personal acknowledgement of the hard topics in our own lives, this course as a form of leadership training challenges student leaders to think about how their own identities may be a part of the systemic problems within leadership.

As previously discussed, the other main assignment associated with this course is a large group project which requires groups to facilitate specific class content and then develop a training module for a targeted audience. This gives students a chance to practice leadership as a dynamic relational process by learning how to communicate with students on their team while creating a facilitation that is meant to be led by multiple people. The topics of these facilitations include the identity chapters by Allen and communication lessons by Meyer as well as other readings on ethics and psychological safety. Ultimately, the in-class facilitation and development of a student-led training module takes the learning a step further by transforming gained knowledge into a practiced act of leadership through teaching others in a collaborative process.

How does PPPM 494: Leadership and Social Change address student leadership needs for the 21st century?

Considering all analyzed elements of PPPM 494 and further applying the specific recommendations from the beginning of this section to PPPM 494, this course addresses student leadership needs by creating an environment that encourages students to connect the relational process of leadership to the shadows and violences that the system of leadership continues to perpetuate. It accomplishes this by following the recommendations outlined at the beginning of this section.

First, PPPM 494 grounds the individual through personal reflection assignments that provide opportunities for inner work. These assignments take place during the first half of the

term and give students the chance to work through content to improve understanding and relate it to their own identity. The reflections support individual leadership development because they encourage students to make connections between class content and the real world. The reflections also support personal grappling with the challenges or privileges one's own identity holds. Through reflections that are simultaneously both content-based and personal development, PPPM 494 provides students with space to focus on the self.

Second, PPPM 494 talks about power. Though not as explicit, students have the chance to think about the power they hold through course content, especially as it pertains to their identities. Students read *Difference Matters* (2023), which includes a chapter on power that helps frame author's following chapters on identity groups. Allen's chapter on power specifically discusses topics that Liu addresses like oppression, resistance, ideology of domination—highlighted previously in the literature review, and ideology of patriarchy (Allen, 2023). These concepts remain present throughout the identity chapters of the book and offer insight into the power—or lack thereof—of certain identities.

Third, PPPM 494 shifts the focus to others. PPPM 494 provides the resources to help facilitate this shift through the content on histories that shape the present identities and *The Culture Map*'s (2014) tools on how to communicate across differences. While the content itself gives students the opportunity to think about other groups or people with different backgrounds or identities, the class discussions about the content offer an opportunity to actively practice shifting the focus from the individual to others within a leadership space. The classroom environment encourages students to share their identities through personal experiences, a form of self-definition, which adds value to the collective leadership environment because of the voices with unique experiences and backgrounds. Students then have the chance to actively grapple

with their own identities in class and their power in relation to others, giving them the chance to personally confront their position within leadership's systemic issues.

Finally, PPPM 494 helps guide students through developing shared power by offering the opportunity for students to collaborate on a group project. Students must use their collective power found in personal identities, background, and leadership skills to develop their own visions for teaching a challenging topic. As student groups facilitate on course topics, they learn how to share leadership within a space and take part in leadership as a relational, interconnected process. This facilitation is a critical reason PPPM 494 helps prepare student leaders for the 21st century; this gives students the opportunity to apply content, theory, and class discussions about difference and communication when working with their fellow students.

Overall, PPPM 494: Leadership and Social Change provide an example of how student leadership programs can prepare students through a combination of individual identity work, recognition of power and its shadowed systems, space to practice communicating across differences, and the opportunity to use shared power to tackle a challenging topic. Applying all of these factors to the combined axis that this thesis has been developing, PPPM 494: Leadership and Social Change aligns with the work from Liu as an attempt to undo leadership's systemic roots in white, colonial, patriarchal structures by pushing students to envision leadership as a relational process that recognizes the power in difference.

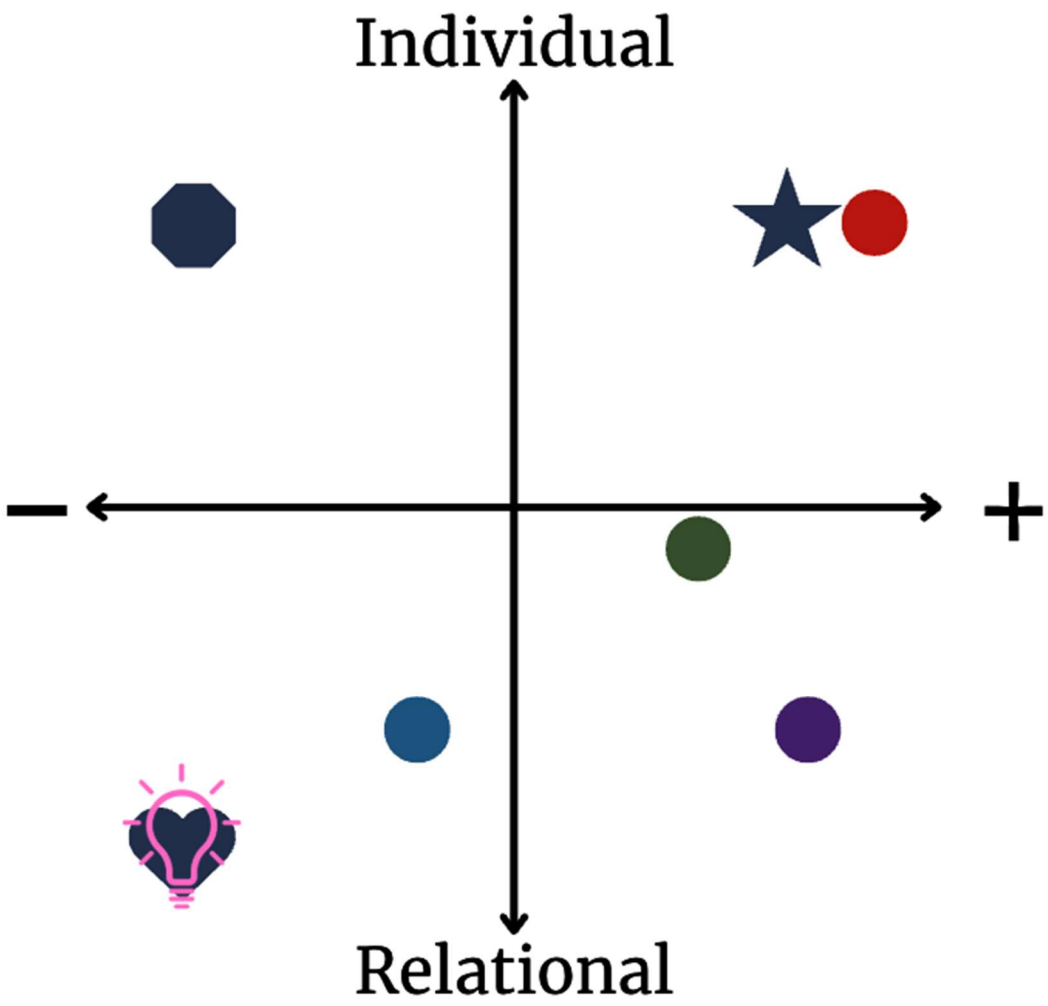

Figure 20: Combined axis featuring literature review primary authors, university leadership centers, and PPPM 494: Leadership and Social Change

For reference, Northouse: star, Johnson: octagon, Liu; heart, Holden Center: green, OSU leadership center: red, NUCL: purple, TULI: blue, PPPM 494: lightbulb

Culmination: An Interconnected Vision

This thesis project began from a place of personal inquiry about leadership after a year of frustration and confusion with my student leadership environment's pressured prioritization of an individualistic style of leadership and its harmful consequences. These questions about how leadership is understood in society and how these understandings apply to university student leadership programs developed into a study that revealed a vision for the future of leadership and how universities specifically can enact these programs.

This vision centers leadership as an interconnected process that honors identity's complexity, acknowledges shadowed histories, recognizes collective power, and encourages working collaboratively to accomplish shared goals. Affirmed through the work of authors like Johnson, Liu, Allen, and Turnbull James, the landscape of leadership needs leaders who are willing to denounce the romanticized perception of a strong CEO or President who solely contains the power and can do no wrong; we need leaders who enact leadership as a process and are not afraid to call out when this process is failing others.

Many of the examined university student leadership centers and their programs have elements of this above vision. Despite an initial assumption that these centers would mainly prioritize individual, positive, or normative leadership approaches, the analysis demonstrated otherwise. By offering workshops that address unconscious bias and white dominance in leadership or a curriculum that intentionally shifts the focus towards followers, programs are adapting to the needs of the 21st century.

And yet, there is still room for growth. University leadership centers and programs can further actualize an interconnected vision by combining all elements articulated in the recommendations section. While PPPM 494: Leadership and Social Change provides one model,

there is potential for taking this curriculum-based course and adapting it for an extra-curricular or co-curricular space. Looking to the future, a pathway for continuing this work could be in the development of one or more student leadership modules inspired by the PPPM 494 course and elements of interconnected leadership in examined university programs.

If more student leadership programs prepared students to lead with a willingness to engage collaboratively in community and with the awareness of their power, their identity, and the histories that have shaped the interplay between power and identity, perhaps the U.S. will not be in the position it is today with an oppressive President. As we watch an individual who embodies white patriarchal colonial dominance and uses his power to attack universities, immigrants, members of the LGBTQ community, and people of color, this thesis's ultimate call is to build shared power through community and confidently equate this to **leadership**.

My ultimate hope is that universities answer this call and catalyze student **leadership** through this interconnected vision.

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