

# INTERDISCIPLINARY LEADERSHIP: COLLECTIVELY DRIVING THE FIELD FORWARD: PRIORITY 7 OF THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP EDUCATION RESEARCH AGENDA 2020–2025

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DOUGLAS R. LINDSAY<sup>1</sup>, AND KATHERINE L. FRIESEN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, CO, USA

<sup>2</sup>St. Thomas University, Miami, FL, USA

## Problem and Impetus

The field of leadership is as diverse as the leaders in the world, and those they are called to lead. However, unlike most other disciplines, leadership is informed, influenced, and enlightened by different bases of knowledge, approaches, and developmental strategies that transcend any single discipline (Riggio, 2011). The challenge leadership educators face is that the current structures in the larger academy do not support this conception. There is territorialism, prestige, and tenure

and promotion systems, just to name a few factors that affect the ability to fully impact leader development (Becher & Trowler, 2001). In fact, there is actually little agreement on what a degree in leadership studies or leadership education should look like, where it should be located, the relevance of training, education, and application, and large differences between those that teach leadership and those that market leadership programs (Guthrie, Batchelder, & Hu, 2019; Guthrie, Teig, & Hu, 2018; Kellerman, 2012). This results in

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Correspondence: Douglas R. Lindsay, United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, CO 80840-6226, USA. E-mail: douglas.lindsay@usafa.edu

a duality of forces that create the current context. The first is that leadership is inherently multidisciplinary. Disciplines like philosophy, literature, the arts, psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and history; fields of study such as business, education, and agriculture; and even professions such as health care and social work contribute to the knowledge that informs the empirical understanding of leadership (Bishop, 2009; Burns, 1978; Kellerman, 1984; Rost, 1993). To fully understand and develop leaders, access is required to these knowledge bases that are often separated by pedagogical and philosophical domains. Based on current structures, while such a need is recognized, scholars are not in a position to leverage these disparate knowledge bases. Instead, what is found is a disjointed field that lacks a unifying identity despite many calls by leadership educators to develop some guidelines and practices around the field of leadership (e.g., Kellerman, 2018; Kellerman & Lindsay, 2019).

The other force is that in order to solve the complex problems that leaders face in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and adaptive environment, it will take an interdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary, approach of the application of these combined bases of information within a changing context (Lattuca, 2001). The real challenge facing the field of leadership is how do educators approach this breadth of relevant leadership knowledge in order to best develop and prepare future leaders to address complex, interdisciplinary problems? If a solution is not found for this challenge, educators will not only be doing a disservice to developing leaders, leadership will continue to be a disjointed field that does not fully utilize and leverage the expertise present.

## Methodologies

The first step toward addressing this challenge is to get a sense of what is happening in the field, including how leadership educators are prepared and how problems that face leadership education efforts are understood. This must be done with an intentional approach that utilizes all of the skills that are needed to assess leadership and problems facing leadership efforts. As previously mentioned, this requires an understanding of interdisciplinary approaches through empirical analy-

sis to more deeply understand leadership education (Lattuca, 2001). Interdisciplinary scholarship identifies three approaches studying topics informed by many disciplines and fields: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinarity. Multidisciplinary is defined as the additive or cumulative approach to understanding and asking questions about leadership, foregrounding individual disciplinary contributions to a deeper understanding of leadership and leadership education (Klein, 1990). Interdisciplinarity requires the integration of many perspectives, highlighting the topic, issue, or problem to be addressed rather than individual perspectives (Klein, 1990). Unlike multi- and interdisciplinary, transdisciplinarity involves the study of underlying structures or relationships among disciplines, applying a theory or method to solve problems in individual disciplines (Lattuca, 2001). The differences in approaches provide structure for asking more deliberate questions and developing methodological practices that contribute to a more rigorous understanding of leadership development and leadership problems. The benefit of such approaches is that it leverages methodological approaches from many different disciplines to include, qualitative, quantitative, social network analysis, longitudinal, survey, and so on, in a cumulative, integrative, and applied manner. Interdisciplinary and methodological approaches contribute to an evolution of leadership informed by individual disciplines and fields and the integration of knowledge bases, revealing different outcomes, all which are needed to elevate the understanding of the development of effective leaders to solve complex problems in dynamic environments. In essence, disciplinary and field specific methodologies can be brought to bear to solve the previously mentioned challenge.

## Outcomes

With this approach in mind, what could result from such efforts? From an outcome standpoint, a more intentional, consistent, evidence-driven approach to leadership education and leadership practice, informed by individual perspectives that identify integrated or transcending approaches is possible. The rigorous study of leadership from individual disciplines and fields continues the development of leadership scholarship

grounded in methods, theories, and purposes, by developing theory and asking questions inherent in each of those perspectives. However, studying the integration and application of such knowledge is also imperative for practicing leadership that contributes to a greater understanding of our world for more concerted efforts to address the myriad of issues and opportunities the field is facing. Understanding this, approaches to leadership education can be developed that are informed by a robust body of literature that understands the developmental process and complex nature of the world. This integrated outcome is more effective, allows a greater ethical practice of leadership, in all sectors of society, across diverse perspectives, within a globally connected world, driving the change needed to address the most pressing issues being faced today (Kellerman, 2012).

To get to that outcome, what works must be leveraged, and not approach it not from the silos and territorialism that has plagued educators in the past, but in a unified and collaborative manner in many different forms. What that means is educators start to open the aperture about what it means to be a leadership educator. Traditional approaches are examined in new ways. For example:

- Grant processes that encourage and incentivize interdisciplinary approaches should be encouraged and in some cases prerequisite.
- Publications that encourage in their processes the use of not only domain specific perspectives and methodology, but also how traditional challenges may be viewed in innovative ways.
- Collaborations across journals, journal symposia, or the creation of new journals focused on the processes of interdisciplinarity and outcomes of interdisciplinary work.
- Conference proposal processes that encourage and value workshops and sessions focused on innovative ways to present interdisciplinarity findings in and approaches to leadership education.
- Consortiums to bring together different domains to solve problems and learn from interactions about how different perspectives approach similar challenges.

While it would be impossible to list all potential opportunities here, the above list highlights several mechanisms that are already in place that should be co-opted to further this interdisciplinary approach. It is likely that approaches like those listed above, will stretch paradigms and allow for newer and more innovative approaches to leadership education and the outcomes asserted.

### Future Considerations and Implications

With such an approach, what could be the expected impact from and for future leaders, leadership educators and leadership programs? Lattuca (2001) argued interdisciplinary teaching and research cannot be fully understood without empirical exploration. It is hoped that leadership educators and leadership programs take on the call to develop this interdisciplinary field more fully through empirical analysis and exploration using many interdisciplinary and methodological approaches. However, the call is not driven by a desire for theoretical or conceptual understanding, alone. If the learning cycle can be shortened employing an intentional approach, the ability to more efficiently create leaders with the capacity to practice effective leadership due to their deeper, integrated, and applied knowledge and skill base in leadership will result. Ultimately, this will lead to greater success in addressing complex, interdisciplinary issues and solving problems in the world, allowing for a shift of efforts to seizing ongoing opportunities to develop interdisciplinary innovations that drive society forward. It is intended that this will serve as a call to action for leadership educators to push beyond oneself and one's area of study to collectively push the field forward with a multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary understanding *and* application of leadership, leadership practice, and leadership outcomes. The pieces are here, and the approaches are sound. Thus, the call for leadership educators is to approach the study of leadership in the same way that leaders are expected to accept and approach their leadership positions. Leadership educators need to understand what tools are available (and they are significant), they need to leverage the resources and methodologies at their disposal, utilize the talent and expertise around them (other

disciplines and practices), and to practice and perfect their craft. To do so, creates a synergy of learning and development that moves the entire field of leadership forward in an integrated, intentional, and inspiring way.

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*Douglas Lindsay, PhD, is Executive Editor of the Journal of Character and Leadership Development published at the United States Air Force Academy. Doug spent 22 years in the Air Force and currently teaches at several institutions, is an executive coach, and publishes and presents widely on leadership and leader development. Communications can be directed to douglas.lindsay@usafa.edu.*

*Katherine L. Friesen is an Assistant Professor and the Director of First Year Academics at St. Thomas University, Miami, Florida. She received her Ph.D. in Education with a specialization in Higher Education from Iowa State University in spring 2020. Communication can be directed to katielfriesen@gmail.com.*

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