

## **How Are We Developing Student Leaders? A Qualitative Examination of a Peer-to-Peer Program at a Historically Black University**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the impact of Peer Assisted Leadership Program (PALP) on 40 doctoral students' leadership development and persistence. PALP is a structured peer leadership program designed for doctoral students in leadership studies. The goal was to foster continued learning experiences of the students. The program was designed with adult learning model (Boyd & William, 2010; Caffarella, 2002) with the potential for transformative learning based on the structure, purpose, and the learning experiences from the program. Using multiple data collection and analytical methods, the findings show that PALP was instrumental in developing transformative student leaders. The findings have practical, policy, and leadership implications.*

**Keywords:** Student development, student leadership, leadership development.

### **Introduction**

A common problem for higher education institutions offering advanced degrees is doctoral student persistence and retention. According to the Council on Graduate Schools (CGS, 2008), about 41% of students enrolled in doctoral programs successfully complete their degree within seven years, while 57% complete it within a ten-year period. Previous studies have shown that different factors like family issues, health, income, and integration influence degree completion (Lovine, 2001; Tinto, 1993), but none focused on the impact of peer assisted learning programs on doctoral students' leadership development, skills and persistence. This research was intended to bridge this gap in research

Goldie (2000) emphasized that research is needed on doctoral students as they represent the most educationally advanced students in higher education and factors that impact their attrition and growth, so, the findings of this study has policy and practical implications for higher education, professional and leadership. Leadership development has been defined as a process of continuous growth (Conger, 1999) a necessary component of personal development (Day 2001; Day, Zaccaro & Halpin, 2004), and as a change process (Posner, 2009), Schertzer & Schuh, 2004), Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (1999) emphasized that Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (1999) concluded that participation in specified leadership interaction results in deeper sense of personal and societal values. Other research by Dugan and Komives, (2007) found that participation in a structured leadership program resulted in higher scores of leaderships efficacy and practice. Topping, (2005) defined peer learning as the acquisition of skills and knowledge via active helping and supporting among companions or status equals. The peer learning process involves the practice of people helping others to learn while learning themselves. Models of peer learning emphasize the inclusion of learners in the development of the instruction. Peer assisted learning programs are often highly structured and include measures of program evaluation. Research indicates several benefits in peer learning approaches impacting both the learner and the facilitator. A major benefit of peer learning as noted by Tosey & Gregory (1998) is student commitment to personal development. Newell, (2004) asserted that peers learn from and with each other in formal and informal ways.

According to Topping (2005) peer learning is a metacognitive process by which the efficacy of both the helper and the helped increases as both become more confident in their ability to achieve, and belief that they will be successful. Research by Arendale (2014) asserts that students enrolled in the peer assisted learning program at Minnesota State University have higher academic performance than their counterparts. In addition, peer learning was identified in assisting the development of self-regulated learning which is considered another measure of metacognition, Arendale (2014).

This qualitative study was conducted at a historically black university in the Southeastern region of the United States. The Peer Assisted Leadership Program (PALP) began in January 2014 and has experienced great participation among doctoral students enrolled in the leadership studies program. The peer assisted leadership program (PALP) was structured and intended as a transformative leadership program to develop leadership skills among doctoral students as peer presenters and mentors providing support and encouragement assisting student persistence and program completion.

Students collaborate in the design and instruction of content based on the needs of the participants. PALP was designed with adult learning model (Boyd & William, 2010; Caffarella, 2002) with the potential for transformative learning based on the structure, purpose, and the learning experiences from the program. Students and alumni of the program serve as presenters of scholar sessions designed to provide additional information and resources related to course, program and graduation requirements. Presenters and attendees voluntarily participate in the scholar sessions scheduled and coordinated by a graduate assistant. Scholar sessions are presented in workshop or seminar style and designed to be interactive one hour long sessions.

### ***Theoretical Framework and Literature***

In this study, the researchers developed a discourse of leader transformation through the lens of transformative learning theory and leader development within the implementation of a peer assisted learning program for doctoral students. A number of research on transformative learning seems to agree that it is the process of affecting change in the learner's frame of reference (Cranton, 2002; King, 2005; Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2000) describe transformative learning as a "process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7-8). The author also asserts that transformative learning is a learning process that leads to perspective transformation in adulthood. King (2005) postulate that constructivist meaning making is the core of transformative learning and must be included in transformative learning opportunities. Taylor (2009) emphasized the importance of relationship and collaboration in student's transformative learning and experiences. Hans (2007) and Cranton (2006) emphasize that building relationship and as well as mentorship are integral part of transformative learning.

Keeling (2004) define learning as a "comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development processes that have often been considered separate and independent" (p.22). The author also emphasize that a true transformative learning and education must expose students to multiple opportunities for intentional learning. This statement aligns with the purpose of PALP.

Mezirow and Associates (2000) introduced the ten tenets of transformative learning: (a) a disorienting dilemma; (b) self-examination; (c) critical assessment of assumptions; (d) self-recognition of the transformation process and sharing; (e) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; (f) planning a course of action; (g) acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementation of one's plans; (h) provisional trying of new roles; (i) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationship; and (j) reintegration based on new perspectives. So, transformative learning occurs when students transform their assumptions and become open to alternative and new ways of thinking and leading.

Cranton (2008) added six transformative learning strategies that include: (a) articulating assumptions; (b) critical self-reflection; (c) openness to alternatives; (d) engaging in discourse; (e) revision of assumptions and perspectives; and (f) acting on revisions or experiential learning. These strategies also align with the strategies utilized in PALP. King (2005) provided ten practical strategies that promote transformative learning that include: (a) case studies; (b) collaborative learning; (c) collaborative writing; (d) critical incidents; (e) discussions;

(f) interviews; (g) Round-Robin discussions and circle of voices; (h) student presentations; (i) journals; and (j) research papers. Some of the strategies outlined by the author were also implemented in PALP.

Literatures have shown that leadership is robust, however, existing literature falls short of imparting extensive, in depth understanding of leadership development (McCall, 1998; McCauley et al., 1998; Northouse, 2006; Ulrich, Zenger, & Smallwood, 1999). Nonetheless, it is evident from existing literature that just as theories of leadership have developed and progressed over time, so too have the concept and approach to leadership development. Leadership development can be thought of as an integration strategy by helping people understand how to relate to others, coordinate their efforts, build commitments, and develop extended social networks by applying self-understanding to social and organizational imperatives (Day, 2001, p. 586).

Leadership development as defined by Olivares (2008) is a type of human development that takes place overtime. It is incremental in nature, accretive, and the result of complex reciprocal interactions between the leader, others and the social environment. Leadership development is an active, intentional forward-looking process that seeks to enhance the collective capacity of organizational members and the organization through human-centered, goal inspired relationships (p.531).

Inventiveness of Leadership development is imperative and has a positive impact on leaders and organizational effectiveness. In this context, to participate effectively and to demonstrate mastery role, leaders can embrace the philosophy of lifelong learning to actively seek and engage in opportunities to enhance knowledge and skills. The result of such individual efforts shapes the organization's communal leadership aptitude and competence. Participating intraining programs are common developmental activities receiving attention in today's organizations.

Saleh, Williams, & Modinat (2004) studied the impact of leadership development within a public health setting and concluded that leadership development training contributed to the enhancement of competencies that were critical for the success of a public health professional. Leadership development is critical to the future of higher education; in fact, Kezar (2009) called the development of leaders one of the most important conditions to sustain the vivacity of higher education.

#### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the transformative learning that occurred in a structured peer assisted leadership program with doctoral students. The following research questions guided the focus of the study:

1. What is the impact of PALP on doctoral students' persistence,
2. What is the impact of PALP on doctoral students' learning outcomes? and
3. What are doctoral students' attitudes toward the PALP program?

#### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The participants were selected through purposive sampling and required to be available and willing to attend workshops during the semester in which they were admitted to the program. Students collaborated on the design and delivery of content based on the need of the participants. Program leadership was rotated through a voluntary model. By the end of spring 2014, over 70 doctoral students had participated in PALP, but only forty (40) volunteered to participate in the study.

A triangulated data collection strategy was employed. At the beginning and end of the semester, participants completed pre-and-post leadership open-ended questions that aligned with the research questions. The survey questionnaire included demographic and open-ended questions on leadership skills development and persistence (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006). Participants were also interviewed to determine their program and research interests, needs, the impact of the PALP, and whether the program had increased their leadership skills and knowledge.

Data were reviewed, coded, and analyzed using standard data analysis procedure recommended by Creswell's (2014) which included (a) organization and preparation of data for analysis, (b) reading and looking at all the data, (c) coding the data, and (d) use the codes to generate themes (p. 197-200). Demographic data revealed that among the 40 participants, 45% were full-time students and 55% were females.

### ***Findings and Implications***

Key themes were identified and quantified as a result of the data analysis to include empowerment 88%, self-competence 85 %, engagement 81% and knowledge level, 90%.

Approximately 95% of the participants indicated that they were extremely satisfied with the program and would like to continue to participate beyond their matriculation from the program. Overall, all the participants had positive attitudes towards the PALP program. The students reported that they were empowered to follow their plan of study with self-confidence. Other students stated that they feel like scholar leaders help conquer their fear of comprehensive exams. Some students remarked that their level of involvement has increased because of their participation in the PALP program. Data obtained from participant's interviews indicated that they gained critical thinking, communication, and leadership skills.

Research indicates several benefits in peer learning approaches impacting both the learner and the facilitator. A major benefit of peer learning as noted by Tosey & Gregory (1998) is student commitment to personal development. Newell, (2004) asserted that peers learn from and with each other in formal and informal ways. According to Topping (2005) peer learning is a metacognitive process by which the efficacy of both the helper and the helped increases as both become more confident in their ability to achieve, and belief that they will be successful. Research by Arendale (2014) asserts that students enrolled in the peer assisted learning program at Minnesota State University have higher academic performance than their counterparts. In addition, peer learning was identified in assisting the development of self-regulated learning which is considered another measure of metacognition, Arendale (2014).

Peer learning promotes leader development and growth as individuals become aware of their interpersonal strengths and weaknesses before facilitating change in others, Tosey & Gregory, (1998). This is supported in this study as well as a study by Capstick, Fleming &Hurne, (2004) as student in this study reported that their participation in the peer assisted learning program (PALP) increased their study skills, confidence with course assignments, awareness of course expectations and direction, as well as understanding of subject matter. They also reported that their participation increased their confidence, communication skills.

This study presents extensive implications for academic planning for the leadership studies program as well as other higher education programs. The research supports the validity of peer assisted learning programs and indicates the benefits of providing these programs to assist student persistence, growth, and skill development.

### ***Limitations and Recommendations***

The PALP was intentionally developed for doctoral students in the leadership studies and students from other doctoral programs were not invited to participate. The sample size in this study is very low and further studies are recommended for similar analysis with increased sample size. An in-depth qualitative analysis is also recommended to determine the impact of transformative learning and focus on specific leadership development skills of doctoral students. Future studies comparing outcomes and attitudes of participants involved in the PALP with those not participating would be beneficial to determine impact.

### ***Discussion***

The findings from this study indicate that the program presents great merits for transformative learning and leadership development for the participants involved in this study. Data from this study is useful in an effort to increase student participation and effectiveness. The data suggests that student participation can become a required component of the program rather than optional. This would require a more structured plan such as a course requirement or program requirement and would impact resource allocation and management. The implementation of PALP as a course requirement would involve faculty involvement and oversight in the administration of the Program. While the usefulness and benefits of peer assisted learning programs are supported in the research as well as this study, the inclusion of a peer mentoring component to PALP is also a consideration for future modifications to this Program.

## **Conclusion**

The results from this study show that the implementation of the structured program PALP was successful in assisting students in their development of leadership skills. It also empowered them and increased their self-confidence. Students indicated that their participation in this program increased their persistence in the department. The findings from this study not only impacted the students in terms of their leadership development skills, but will contribute tremendously to our knowledge of peer assisted study programs and literature in the field of leadership development.

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