



Rethinking Leadership Educator Preparation in Student Affairs

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Leadership development is a cornerstone of student affairs practice, yet the professionals tasked with facilitating this growth often lack the formal preparation to do so effectively. A study published in *New Directions for Student Leadership* critically examines this disconnect, highlighting the need for intentional training of student affairs practitioners as leadership educators. Conducted by Katherine L. Friesen, Ph.D., Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership and Research Methodology, Trisha S. Teig, Ph.D., Teaching Assistant Professor, University of Denver, and Claire E. Painter, Associate Director of Student Leadership, University of Central Oklahoma, the research examines key literature to develop a conceptual analysis that effectively illustrates significant gaps in current practices.

Although many student affairs professionals engage in leadership training through co-curricular programs, such as student government, residence life, and service-learning, most graduate preparatory programs in Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) do not offer structured coursework or experiential learning focused on leadership education. Consequently, emerging professionals may struggle to develop a leadership educator identity, resulting in perceived under-preparedness and overwhelm early in their careers.

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Insufficient identity formation is compounded by inconsistent curricular offerings across HESA programs. While some institutions have integrated leadership educator development into their curricula, these remain isolated instances rather than widespread practice. For example, professional development opportunities, such as the Leadership Educators Institute collaborative with the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), College Student Educators International (ACPA), and the National Clearinghouse of Leadership Programs (NCLP), the Leadership Education Academy offered through the International Leadership Association (ILA), and the Leadership Trainer organization.

While these programs offer valuable resources for skill development, their reach and impact are often limited, since they are not embedded within formal graduate education. Instead, HESA programs must critically evaluate and revise their curricula to include leadership educator development as a core component.

Friesen and co-authors provide a framework of competencies for professional development initiatives, including experiential learning, cultural competence, group facilitation, and ethical decision-making. Strategies for building these leadership competencies comprise leveraging existing resources, fostering leadership educator identity, and ensuring that student affairs professionals are equipped to deliver culturally relevant, learner-centered leadership training. Without such reforms, the field risks perpetuating a cycle of underprepared practitioners and missed opportunities for meaningful student leadership development.