



**Transformational Leadership Academy:
Creating a Programmatic Infrastructure for Student Success**

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Today, more than ever, retailers need transformational leaders who are inspirational, visionary, collaborative, and resourceful. Empirical evidence suggests that leaders affect work motivation, impacting performance and profitability (Kahn, Rehmat, Butt, Farooqi & Asim, 2020). As retailers emerge from the impacts of a global pandemic, leaders are called upon to improve all of humanity while also getting the right product or service to the right customer at the right time and the right price. These challenges are perplexing even to the most seasoned leaders. While many colleges and universities offer leadership development programs at the institutional level, only a small percentage of students take advantage of these opportunities. Our goal was to provide a college-level infrastructure offering students opportunities to develop and hone their leadership skills. It was clear to us that students are more apt to become deeply engaged when the leadership development opportunities are at the college level where they have close connections with faculty and industry partners.

Program Development. To align with industry standards, we solicited input from the college's three advisory boards (n=79). Members (n=31) responded to the brief survey and results were discussed during follow-up meetings. Ethical practice, decision making, relationship building, strategic thinking, and initiative topped the list. Other important competencies included oral communication, emotional intelligence, written communication, conflict management, content knowledge, self-reflection, and flexibility. What we learned from this initial benchmarking is that companies experience a 'skills-transfer gap.' That is, what students learn is rarely applied at the level in which they experience the situation, problem, or challenge in the workforce. Thus, we set out to create a pathway for students across our college with the goal that all students would graduate with mastery of leadership competencies at some level. A faculty committee, representing two departments, reviewed current curriculum, incorporated industry input, and developed the program framework. To assure that all students in the college receive basic leadership skills, four required courses were identified to integrate specific competencies and learning outcomes.

Advanced levels of professional achievement are offered through the Transformational Leadership Academy. The mission of this cohort-based program is to bridge the gap between the classroom and the corporate boardroom through strategic, industry-aligned programming. Incoming freshmen and transfer students, as well as continuing students, are eligible for admission. Students submit their application through an online portal, and applications are reviewed by a faculty committee. The academy is founded on three pillars: Learn, Lead, and Connect. Using a personalized approach, students map their own leadership journey. Learn activities focus on building knowledge in a specific area (i.e., networking, negotiation) achieved

through workshops, guest lectures, book discussions, and/or online coursework (e.g., LinkedIn Learning). Lead activities require students to plan and execute an event, participate in a service learning activity, and/or serve as an officer in a student organization. Connect activities provide opportunities for students to work with a faculty coach, serve as a peer mentor, and/or engage with an industry mentor.

To achieve the designation of Leadership Champion, students attend an annual leadership retreat, participate in the bi-annual leadership summit, and complete six activities in the Learn, Lead and Connect curriculum each semester. In addition to these requirements, students seeking the Leadership Scholars designation must earn the Transformational Leadership Certificate by completing two additional courses beyond their degree requirements (i.e., Effective Leadership Communication and Seminar in Leadership). To engage faculty across the college, the academy offers those interested in leadership and student's professional development the designation of Affiliate Faculty. These faculty members (n=17) mentor students, attend events, and conduct research related to leadership. A faculty member serves as the director.

Program Execution. Thirty-three students comprise the inaugural cohort. A few examples of our professional development programming include, but are not limited to: Rules of Work Book Club, Creating a Leadership Mindset, Dining Etiquette 101, How to Work a Room, and Career Mapping. In efforts to increase our executive presence, we offer programming in board rooms across campus and interesting venues within our local community. Perhaps most exciting has been the leadership and collaboration demonstrated by academy members as they develop dynamic, meaningful programs. One such example is our successful Sustainable Saturdays, a monthly campus beautification project, led by one of our academy members. An integral part of the academy is our industry mentor program which matches students with representatives from our boards. To guide their discussions, a monthly topic is assigned by the academy director.

Program Evaluation. A mid-year evaluation revealed positive outcomes as students demonstrated leadership growth and development. Their presentation skills, ability to network during a business social, attention to volunteerism, confidence and formation of soft skills have matured. Board members have commented that these students have developed professional savvy and polish that sets them apart from their peers. One board member claimed that he, "wants to hire all of them when they graduate." Our academy also distinguishes itself from similar units on campus because of the valuable input, financial support, and mentor commitments from our industry partners. Beyond the immediate benefits to students and industry, faculty have leveraged the academy in their grantsmanship efforts, providing an innovative infrastructure for their research.

Program Continuation. The execution of professional programming requires associated expenses. A new endowment was launched in Spring 2022 to provide ongoing financial support. The grant was funded with generous support of both faculty and industry partners. In addition, our advisory boards recognize the strength of the program and provide space and meals for

students to host off-campus retreats. Going forward, the Transformational Leadership Academy will continue to build on its first-year successes. In Spring 2022, a call was distributed to solicit student applications for our second cohort beginning in Fall 2022. A faculty committee will review the applications to assure that the student meets the criteria and clearly shares how they think their participation in the academy will impact their career path. No doubt, the future of our industry relies on great leadership. Through intentional and strategic programming, the leadership academy transforms students into visionary leaders who are confident, articulate, ethical, and adept in relationship building and problem solving.

Kahn, H., Rehmat, M., Butt, T., Farooqui, S. & Asim, J. (2020). Impact of transformational leadership on work performance, burnout and social loafing: A mediation model. *Future of Business Journal*, 6(40). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-020-00043-8>