

Faculty Views of Leadership in Student Culture, Spring 2002
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Interviews were held in April 2002 with 28 members of the faculty. The stratified random sample included 8 from humanities, 10 from social studies, and 10 from science. The 8 assistant professors, 10 associates, and 10 full professors represented 15 departments. There were 17 males and 10 females interviewed.

Faculty members were asked how they thought Grinnell students perceived leadership, how they might account for the tendency in survey data for Grinnell students frequently to appear less interested in leadership than their peers at similar institutions, and whether they thought this was an accurate representation of Grinnell student culture. The available survey data are presented in the tables at the end of this report (but were not presented during the interviews).

First, here is a composite description of leadership, as defined by those interviewed.

(1) Have a vision of some goal. This requires being able to analyze a social situation in a way that is satisfying, enlightening, and appealing to a portion of the population. It needs sensitivity to what the current task demands.

(2) Communicate the vision. This takes the ability to represent, or at least convey the impression of representing, others. Formulate and articulate the vision in an appealing way. One needs skills for communication, negotiation, and persuasion. The vision needs to generate enthusiasm. One also needs the ability to step in when necessary, to assert oneself when one has the skills the situation needs.

(3) Motivate other people around the vision. This needs the ability to persuade or inspire others to do something, to influence other people, to inspire them to take action and/or change their way of thinking. Motivating people to feel good about doing something requires organization in both conceptualizing a process and in getting people to buy into it.

(4) Organize other people; facilitate activities that move things toward the realization of that vision. This stage requires action and effort; simply reaching a consensus does not ensure that anything will happen. Leaders have followers, and part of the task here is get others to act as a collective rather than as individuals. The leader neither does everything, nor farms out tasks, but rather mobilizes the talents of other people by enabling everyone to contribute. This takes social and diplomatic skills, task knowledge, contextual ability, and sometimes the appropriation of existing structures and resources.

There was general agreement that, as a group, Grinnell students are not very interested in leadership. However, there were two very different perspectives presented as to why this is the case. Both views appear to be fairly widely held, though slightly more of those interviewed subscribed to the first perspective.

Perspective #1: Grinnell students have the potential to become leaders but don't see themselves that way, because they misunderstand leadership and underestimate themselves.

Grinnell students don't, people said, have a good idea of their own abilities and they underestimate their own leadership potential. A few attributed this to their experience of high school leaders being the "popular" people, at a time when they themselves were nerds instead of jocks, and possibly late developers socially, as many bright kids are. One person tells his students that they will emerge as leaders, but they don't believe him. A few said that some will eventually move into leadership positions, but they aren't planning on it now, and it won't happen because they are ambitious. One person thought they might consciously be avoiding the messiness of politics at the top. Someone else argued that our students had

wanted to be high school leaders but were told that they weren't, so they don't think they have this kind of strength. Once they act on that self-image, others don't respond to them as leaders.

Students appear to equate leadership with things they disapprove of: egoism, self-aggrandizement, corruption, coercion, being a powerful despot, dictating things to others without consulting them. They associate it with competition and hierarchy, especially in the business world, and they avoid leadership so as not to be tainted with these qualities. They see leadership as opposed to the democratic ideal of decision-making by consensus and persuasion, not knowing that leadership can be more consensual than coercive. One person suggested that maybe the group is so important in their minds that there's a conflict between the importance of being a group member and the individuality of being a leader. The students are suspicious of individuals co-opting the group's ability to be powerful as a group.

The college, some people suggested, needs to show students that their egalitarian values can make them good leaders, that very effective leaders get other people to want to do things. One quoted Joe Rosenfield as saying, always make the other person think he got the best part of the deal. Another expressed frustration with students' antipathy toward power, saying she thinks taking on power and leadership roles is how to be responsible. She noted that students often become campus leaders in areas where they have particular interests, but they avoid settings in which there is actually something at stake – resources, money, power, access – so they don't learn useful strategies and techniques.

Several people commented that students don't see leadership as a way of getting things done. They want to have strong ethical voices, and would like to make a mark on the world, by organizing people to achieve ends they care about. They want to do something in the world, but they want to be someone who's totally lacking in power while they do it. Social service is seen as "helping," being a follower, not as making decisions. Students are so full of zeal to help people, they don't realize there are a variety of ways to do this. Many think that if you can just get a consensus on something, it will happen. Eventually they back into leadership roles later in life, out of a desire to get something done, instead of seeking leadership roles from the beginning because they have a social conscience and an agenda. We need to get them to realize, one person said, that the reason to be a leader is having confidence that you have a contribution to make. They need to know that leadership can be a way of empowering others, not just taking charge oneself. One suggestion was that the college should identify ethical community leaders and bring them here, to show our students how they further social causes by taking responsibility.

People taking this perspective tended to point out that, with so many student groups and activities, there are many opportunities for students to exercise leadership here. The culture does foster spontaneous organizing, in a way that resembles regular community life. These opportunities provide a setting in which initiative and self-confidence can develop. Several people noted that Grinnell seniors show much more self-confidence and responsibility than do entering students. Certain components of the academic program were identified as encouraging the development of skills relevant to leadership. Lab work in groups, and other collaborative work for classes, was one such thing, though faculty members who teach labs reported different experiences with how well the students are able to organize themselves to get things done in this setting. Upper-level analytical work, it was said, helps promote decision-making skills and also rhetorical skills, because at this level one has more complex things to express. Acting, and oral presentations generally, were mentioned as things that build poise and self-presentation skills. Off-campus study was mentioned as formative because it forces students to make it on their own, such that they can return to campus with renewed confidence.

Perspective #2: Leadership requires a number of qualities our students don't have or don't like.

Many of these qualities are related to having the self-confidence to take risks, assume responsibility, and experience discomfort. Several people mentioned Grinnell students' low self-confidence, how they constantly need it shored up. They need, some said, to learn to assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions; no one enjoys that, but that's what leaders do. Leaders have to be willing to fail, and to be criticized. Our students, many said, are not risk takers. To learn what they are capable of, they have to take a risk and try doing it.

They carry their desire to recognize “the other” to a fault, not wanting to alienate anyone or make anyone else (or themselves) uncomfortable. Comfort is compromised by leadership activities, because leadership requires confidence, claiming knowledge, etc. Leaders have to stake out a position; they can't just support everyone. Leadership is uncomfortable, and "we all want to be comfortable here." They don't want to step on others' toes, and while leaders don't always have to do this, they must be willing to do it. There's a hesitation to be the one who says "this is what's going to happen." There's some willingness to make decisions, but not to lay things out for others. They need to grow in independence. They think they already are independent, but they're not. Leaders need to be able to say, "No one else is doing this, BUT..."

The other set of leadership qualities seen as lacking in many Grinnell students relates to the willingness to be visible, especially to have that prominence related to exceptional achievement. Grinnell students, it was said, are underachievers, smart but not ambitious. They don't have much respect for individual initiative to achieve things. Students don't want to take responsibility even for their own achievements; they're willing to share the credit even when they did all the work. Maybe they just don't want to stand out.

Grinnell students, one person said, try mightily to fit in with the crowd. On the one hand, they don't want to be singled out as better at something than others, as really good at something. On the other hand, they want to be noticed as different. But they'd rather be distinctive than exceptional. It's almost as if they feel that since they can't be really good at something, they can at least be unique. For example, the men's basketball team has a long-standing offense strategy in which they score the most points, but it doesn't, in this person's opinion, result in them being the best team. Another example given was the student film show, where the goal was said to be the making of a distinctive film, not a really good one. If students thought of themselves as leaders, this person argued, they would want to be really good at things. Instead the attitude is "I can't be a good leader but I can make you sit up and take notice of me." The students don't push each other, and may even hold each other back. It's a bad combination: talented students who don't want to stand out (especially for doing really well), so they under-perform. There are some exceptional international students with great problem solving skills, who relish the opportunity to grapple with a challenge. They are puzzled by US students who just want to understand the basics and do reasonably well, but not engage with a serious challenge.

Grinnell students, it was said, self-select in ways that minimize the presence of leadership qualities and desires, attracting students who are bright but unfocused. They don't want to stand out in a crowd. Also, they are scared of competition and don't want to deal with it, often having an inferiority complex. They participate in clubs because it makes them part of the group, which feels comfortable. Their academic skills made them visible in high school in ways they found unpleasant, so they like the invisibility of fitting in and being followers.

One person analyzed this situation in the following way. In high school, there's a top tier of students who are very accomplished and happy about it; these go to the top colleges. (Another person described the same group by saying "The kids who are movers and shakers go to Carleton.") There's a second tier that are also good but somewhat less accomplished. Some of these still think they're pretty good, and go someplace less prestigious and do well there and in later life. The others are the ones that come to Grinnell. They maintain that they're just as good as the top group but are different, having faced unfair problems that held them back. They feel wounded in their academic and personal lives, and are unable to get beyond this. They believe competition is bad, and are not willing, able, or inclined to be leaders. A few of these grow out of it, discovering a need to accept failure in order to succeed; most don't accomplish this and remain risk-averse.

People taking this perspective tend to be very aware of aspects of Grinnell's culture that do not support the development of leadership qualities. To being with, Grinnell's egalitarian ethos is seen as such an obstacle. It's widely perceived as un-Grinnell to claim to be interested in leadership; being anti-leadership is seen as part of the left-wing, liberal, Democratic mindset here. The anti-establishment culture here may see itself as "too democratic" to have leaders. Students are very skeptical of any power distinctions. They grow up questioning authority, but don't move on to asking when authority might pass the test and be some kind of good thing. They are anti-hero, and tend to admire people who define themselves as marginal. Students who express a lot of leadership on campus are perceived as bossy. The focus on equity and consensus, a

concern with not leaving anyone out, diffuses responsibility and acts against leadership. (It was, however, noted that a good leader can bring everyone in.) Student groups appear to have very dispersed leadership structures. Members of several departments noted that it's hard to tell who is the chair of their SEPC.

The content of the curriculum feeds this, always looking at society from the perspective of the underdog, teaching the faults of capitalism but not its strengths, etc. Students get the idea that winning is morally reprehensible, that it's good to be a critic, and that a leader is the person you blame for everything.

The way students spread themselves very thin across many pursuits makes it hard to develop the necessary focus to be effective leaders. The college is a smorgasbord of options, and we encourage everyone to sample everything. Admission practices have generally selected for this approach, by looking for students with many activities rather than excellence in one. A related comment noted that internships are seen here as late-stage career exploration, whereas at places like Brown and Chicago students start with a good internship the first summer to start building credentials and positioning themselves for later life.

It's unfortunate, one person said, that many faculty members denigrate athletics; those students are out there risking failure in public, which is something all Grinnell students need to learn how to do. This person also thought it would be good to put more resources into promoting exercise, since taking care of one's health is one step in the direction of accepting the consequences of one's actions.

Another person noted that there are no authority figures in Student Affairs, so each residence hall is a little anarchy. [Note: a previous study of student views of self-governance revealed their anarchic bias; self-governance was equated with the absence of rules, and was described as "you govern yourself and I'll govern myself."] One person who had been a member of the alcohol task force said it's clear that students let each other get smashed, with no sense of being responsible for each other. The students have no role models, because role models would be authority figures and authority figures are considered bad.

Grinnell, it was said, holds a therapeutic model of behavior in which nothing is really wrong. There's an attitude of everything being okay. You can't disagree or criticize, but must conform to the view that everybody and everything is equally valid. Healthier discussion between different points of view, one person said, might create a need for group leadership

In an important caveat, several faculty members noted that not all Grinnell students share the anti-leadership bias. Students of color, they remarked, are more likely to see themselves as leaders; many have been in programs at church or school that tell them they will and should be leaders. Also, they can more easily see leadership, the actions of a courageous individual, as linked to positive things like civil rights, whereas whites more often see it as a personal selfish agenda. Foreign students are also different; they are likely to be ambitious and intend to end up in leadership positions. [Note: these points are supported by student survey data, in which students of color and foreign students are far more likely than white students to express an interest in leadership roles and to rate their own leadership skills highly. See the table below.] Among white American students, economics and chemistry majors were mentioned as more interested than most in assuming leadership positions. One person noted that those Grinnell students who do understand leadership tend to just grin and bear the culture here, waiting to graduate and get on with that part of life.

Grinnell First-Year Student Survey Data by Ethnic/National Background, 2001 and 2002 averaged

	US White Students	US Students of Color	International Students
Self-rated leadership ability above average	55%	70%	50%
Have administrative responsibility very important life goal	8%	30%	30%
Become a community leader very important life goal	28%	44%	30%

First-Year Student Survey Data – collected during New Student Orientations

% rating own leadership ability above average – CIRP Freshman survey							
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Grinnell	50%	56%	61%	60%	58%	56%	55%
Very highly selective colleges	62%	63%	64%	65%	64%	64%	65%
Very important life goal to have administrative responsibility for the work of others - CIRP							
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Grinnell	18%	13%	13%	14%	13%	15%	14%
Very highly selective colleges	28%	28%	28%	27%	26%	26%	28%
Very important life goal to become a community leader - CIRP							
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Grinnell	32%	33%	37%	31%	33%	28%	32%
Very highly selective colleges	39%	38%	39%	35%	34%	36%	37%

Senior Survey Data – collected late in spring semesters

% rating own leadership ability above average – CSS Senior survey							
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Grinnell		61%					64%
Nonsectarian colleges		65%					65%
Very important life goal to have administrative responsibility for the work of others - CSS							
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Grinnell		23%					14%
Nonsectarian colleges		36%					36%
Very important life goal to become a community leader – CSS							
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Grinnell		34%					40%
Nonsectarian colleges		35%					37%
% reporting much stronger leadership abilities than as first-year students – CSS/HEDS							
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Grinnell	32%	16%			26%		24%
Nonsectarian colleges		25%					26%
HEDS Colleges	32%				31%		
% rating leadership opportunities as satisfactory or very satisfactory - CSS							
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Grinnell		56%					69%
Nonsectarian colleges		66%					70%
% rating leadership potential as very important or essential when considering a career - HEDS							
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Grinnell					52%		
HEDS colleges					60%		