

# Followers' actions affect organization's leadership capacity, study finds

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Members of an educational organization contribute to its leadership and can blend personal and social needs to help leaders encourage cooperation, a Wayne State University researcher has found.

Administrators of college preparatory programs—which are aimed at [high school students](#) but housed in colleges or universities—typically have been viewed as leaders, with students seen as followers. Recent scholarship, however, has begun to focus on the impact of followers on educational organizations' [leadership](#) and leadership practices.

Michael Owens, Ph.D., assistant professor of educational leadership and policy studies in the College of Education, used grounded theory to try to understand leadership from a follower's perspective. Grounded theory builds inductively from research data rather than formulating a hypothesis first and then testing it.

"Having a formal academic description of leadership may not be as important for the success of educational organizations as having a comprehensive understanding of constituents' knowledge and expectations of leadership and the [leadership roles](#) they play," Owens said. "This study makes a unique contribution to the field by using [empirical data](#) to describe concepts and relationships that define participation in educational leadership from the perspective of the led."

Owens questioned 20 students in a western-U.S. university's Upward Bound program—which prepares high school students from low-income

families and families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree to attend college—about how they participate in program leadership practices and what that participation implies for themselves and for leaders.

The results, titled "The Feeling's Mutual: Student Participation in Leadership as a Cooperative Effort," were published recently in *The Review of Higher Education*. Participants saw themselves in a take-then-give interaction, Owens said, meaning that over time their participation changed from primarily receiving behaviors to a mix of giving and taking leadership practices.

"As they went through the program, students said they felt a sense of belonging and that the program could provide help for them," he said. "At that point, they made a shift in their sense of confidence, and then helped mentor younger students and moved the program along.

"They went from thinking, 'What's in it for me?' to 'How can we make this program even stronger and better able to carry out its mission?'"

Taking behaviors included signing up, receiving support and taking advantage, and demonstrated students' emerging confidence that the program would be willing and able to deliver what it promised. While students reported resisting program staff at times, Owens said such resistance constitutes a leadership behavior and can help an organization clarify its goals and develop tactics for influencing students.

Giving actions included taking advantage in a positive way (such as recognizing the program's value or seeing it as an opportunity), showing respect, taking the program seriously and making an effort.

Owens said understanding how students influence educational leaders is vital in understanding how to prepare those leaders for their roles in

schools and other educational organizations. He believes his study lays the groundwork for further research in similar settings, saying that a better understanding of students' influence on leaders can empower organizations to develop leadership practices that reflect the wants and needs of those they serve.

Provided by Wayne State University

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