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# **Cultivating Exemplary Leaders: A Theoretical Analysis of How an Experiential Learning Program with The Ritz- Carlton Impacted College Student Leadership Development**

**Prof Dr. Matthew Ohlson**

*University of North Florida, USA*

## **Abstract**

**Background:** Experiential learning is widely considered to be a high- impact practice in higher education. Yet, it is less understood how and why these experiences contribute to positive student outcomes.

**Purpose:** This study investigated the impact of an experiential learning opportunity at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on leadership development among university students.

**Method:** Drawing upon experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and exemplary leadership theory (Kouzes & Posner, 2017), the researchers analyzed student and external stakeholder reflective data to determine the extent to which the program aligned with tenets posited in experiential learning and exemplary leadership theories.

**Findings:** Three themes (1) Experiencing Exemplary Leadership in Action, (2) Forming Connections Through Reflective Observations, and (3) The Humanized Experience revealed insight into how and why the Leadership Excellence Apprentice Program (LEAP) experience facilitated student learning through experiential learning cycles aligned with key principles of exemplary leadership.

**Implications:** The study identified areas for improvement in the design and delivery of experiential learning opportunities to enhance student outcomes. Key insights from this research can inform and guide the development of effective experiential learning programs across various academic disciplines and institutions.

### **Significance of Research Statement**

This study contributes to experiential education scholarship by demonstrating how an intentionally designed, theory-informed experiential learning partnership facilitates undergraduate leadership

development. By theoretically examining a university–industry collaboration, this research offers practical insight for educators seeking to design high-impact experiential learning programs that bridge leadership theory and practice.

**Keywords:** Experiential Learning, Leadership Development, High Impact Practices