Chapter 11
Design Thinking:
Pulling Back the Curtain on Student Leadership Learning and Development

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ABSTRACT

Design thinking is a process that student affairs practitioners can learn to support students in developing practices of leadership. The design thinking tool builds from ideas of transformative learning and leadership-as-practice. Deployed as an intervention for problem posing, design thinking is a tool and an opportunity to reframe how students learn. In design thinking, students are moved to problem solving through intentional practice. In this chapter, the author will explore design thinking from the lenes of transformative learning theory and leadership-as-practice. Moving through each stage of the process, she will share examples of how to use the practice with students.

INTRODUCTION

Design thinking is a model of processing ideas that offers a pathway to dovetail student development with student leadership learning and development. Higher education practitioners should integrate the design thinking model into student development and leadership learning and development to effectively achieve goals of preparing students to contribute meaningful to society. Student affairs practitioners have a professional obligation to understand and engage in the development of students throughout their educational career. Leadership educators focus on the development of students' capacity to practice leadership. Building bridges between student development and student leadership learning development is a natural move for higher education practitioners. Design thinking as a model is one way to bridge these two areas of student development and emphasize practices and processes for leadership learning.

BACKGROUND

Practitioners across the fields of student affairs and in leadership learning and development focus on how students learn and develop. They work to identify mechanisms to support students in their development through practical opportunities on campus. This work organizes higher education as the practice field for students to learn and develop the dispositions and tools required to engage in their communities and ultimately in democracy. This is a stated goal of public education.

One effective approach to student development is through introducing and processing transformative learning experiences. In transformative learning experiences students develop their capacities to change and to lead (Mezirow, 1997). This transformative learning is predicated on practitioners' abilities to shift perspectives in how we structure, assess, and frame our thinking and experiences and support students in doing the same (Mezirow, 2009). Cultivating transformative learning experiences has been a hallmark of how significant learning is designed in student leadership development. Design thinking offers an avenue for higher education practitioners to use in order deepen processes and practices of transformative learning. The design thinking model can be leveraged as a model and as a tool to enrich transformative student leadership learning and development. With design thinking practitioners can develop student's capacity to own a mechanism and creatively build a process to design, shape, and advance their own leadership development.

"Design thinking is generally defined as an analytic and creative process that engages a person in opportunities to experiment, create and prototype models, gather feedback, and redesign" (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). This process when used in leadership learning and development can enrich students' understanding of the processes and outcomes they seek to achieve. The design thinking model allows us, higher education practitioners, to actively invite students to join us in this process. Here we pull back the curtain on leadership development processes to engage students in not just the outcome of the experience but also the process.

In this chapter, I offer ways in which student development practitioners can use design thinking as a model and as a tool to support the leadership learning and development of students in curricular or co-curricular programs. I will offer practices for how we can integrate this approach into our daily work with student leadership development. These practices build on existing frameworks from student development, (Transformative Learning Theory) and in leadership studies (Leadership-As-Practice). Integrating design thinking with these existing approaches of, and orientations to, student leadership learning and development can enrich and cultivate practices of creativity and experimentation. I will build on those frameworks to focus on elements of process and practice that can be achieved through the design thinking model. I will refer to student affairs professionals and leadership educators as practitioners throughout this work.

STUDENT LEADERSHIP LEARNING and DEVELOPMENT

Highlighting the intersection of student affairs, student development, and student learning, Calhoun (1996) offered perspective on the imperative for higher education and for student affairs practitioners to link processes and outcomes of student learning to the student development mission,

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