The Aspire Project: An Application of Self-Leadership in an Undergraduate Leadership Course

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Abstract

Purpose – This purpose of this paper is to discuss the application of a goal-oriented project— The Aspire Project—in an undergraduate leadership course emphasizing self-leadership. Undergraduate students at a specialized institution with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM)-related majors take the course as an unrestricted elective. The psychology of leadership course was first presented as a special topics course during the Spring 2020 semester, and it has been running as a full course since the Spring 2022 semester.

Design, Methodology, and Approach – The Aspire Project is presented, followed by a review of related literature that aligns with the project's foundational approach and objectives. Results from a review and subsequent thematic analysis of 42 Aspire Projects from the Summer 2024 and Fall 2024 semesters were reviewed for this paper.

Findings – Overall, results suggested a positive impact experienced by students in working on the Aspire Project in the psychology of leadership course. The outcomes indicated that the Aspire Project, through the use of goals and systems, encouraged students to become more self aware, thereby promoting aspects of self-leadership.

Originality – This paper provides readers with the opportunity to review a self-leadership-based, semester-long project in an undergraduate leadership course at a specialized institution. Self leadership-based projects in academic courses may offer deeper learning opportunities for undergraduate students and leadership educators.

Keywords: Undergraduate students, higher education, self-leadership, effective leadership **Paper type:** Research paper

Introduction

Evolving conditions across the global organizational landscape require leaders to be capable of helping employees become self-leaders and followers with interest in sharing leadership responsibility (Stewart, Manz & Sims, 1999). This employee support can help to encourage leader actions and behaviors that discourage the use of moral disengagement tactics in favor of more ethically centered leader actions and behaviors (Bandura, 1999; Newman, Le, North-Samardzic, & Cohen, 2020). There is a growing significance in knowing oneself as a leader, which Graham and Blanchard (2012) referred to as one's *leadership ID*, or the way leaders become aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and the importance of actionizing their values.

Leadership of self is an essential component of leading others effectively (Neck, Houghton, & Manz, 2024). *Self-leadership* has been defined as a process of defining, making meaning of, and influencing oneself (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011; Goldsby, Goldsby, Neck, Neck, & Mathews, 2021). Research on self-leadership has considered the interaction of thought, behavior, and environment and explore how this interaction can lead to better contemplation of ethical dilemmas and decisions (Goldsby, Goldsby, Neck, Neck, & Mathews,

2021). Organizational empowerment strategies have rarely provided any direct attention to the individual self-leadership skills required of employees to perform successfully under autonomous working conditions (Manz, 1992).

Bandura (1978a) discussed how people enable environmental reactions apart from how they behave by their physical characteristics, such as an individual's perceived race or physiognomy. This differential social treatment affects recipients' self-conceptions and actions in ways that either maintain or alter environmental biases,

a concept referred to as *reciprocal determinism* (Bandura, 1978b). Thus, the need exists to help individuals develop effective self leadership skills, and the undergraduate academic environment can provide an opportunity to engage in this effort. Educators use self-leadership as a useful skillset and mindset to help students excel in the classroom and prepare them for future careers by improving innovation performance via highlighting the perseverance needed to withstand the demands of reaching creative breakthroughs (Goldsby, Goldsby, Neck, Neck, & Mathews, 2021). Assisting students with their self-leadership development can also help develop their entrepreneurial mindset through efforts to encourage learning through failure (Naumann, 2017). Exposing future leaders to these ideas can assist in the development of their self-leadership skills.

The Aspire Project is an individual semester-long, self-leadership-based assignment in the psychology of leadership course. Undergraduate students at a specialized institution with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM)-related majors take the course as an unrestricted elective. This paper aimed to answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of a self-leadership-based, individual semester-long project on undergraduate students in a leadership course?
- What, if any, relevance does a self-leadership-based, individual semester-long project have to leadership education and for leadership educators?

This paper provides readers with the opportunity to review a self-leadership-based, individual semester-long project in an undergraduate leadership course in higher education at a specialized institution.

Review of Related Scholarship

The following section represents a review of relevant literature in the areas of the action based effective leadership development and influence (ABELDI) framework, goals and systems, self-leadership, self-efficacy, ethical leadership, ability, and motivation.

ABELDI Framework

Leadership is an active process for all involved and requires a cadence of action between leader and followers (Rosari, 2019). Effective leadership occurs when the person being led acts as a reflection of their leader, in that they are inspired and aspire to become leaders themselves (Bass, 1960; Payne, 2024a). As a core component of the psychology of leadership course, the ABELDI framework emphasizes taking *action* and demonstrating *potential* for *self* and *others*, and it assumes the following: (a) leadership begins with action, (b) actions beget a demonstration of potential, and (c) both action and potential have a self and others dimension (Payne, 2024a). The Aspire Project was named after one of the areas of the ABELDI framework; the four areas

are *aspire, inspire, model,* and *persuade* (Payne, 2024a). Table 1 is a textual representation of the ABELDI framework, inclusive of leadership development and leadership influence. Appendix A includes a graphical representation of the ABELDI framework.

Table 1

The ABELDI Framework: Four Areas

	Area	Definition
Leadership development		
1.	Aspire	Taking action and demonstrating potential for self.
2.	Inspire	Taking action and demonstrating potential for others.
Leadership influence		
3.	Model	Taking action for self and demonstrating potential for others.
4.	Persuade	Taking action for

others and demonstrating potential for self.

Note. From "The Action Based Effective Leadership Development and Influence Framework: From Program to Full Course" by A. Payne (2024a). *West East Journal of Social Sciences*, *11*, 8–24. (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4723174)

The ABELDI framework purports that effective leadership begins with *aspire*; this area represents a time of dedication and training, with emphasis on developing the self (i.e., the cultivation of skills as a player before becoming a coach; Lord & Hall, 2005; Payne, 2024a). The *aspire* area represents hours of intense commitment to learning, practicing, and then performing and refining to reach a level of mastery through which aspiration can become actualized, and the first steps toward effective leadership are then taken (Greene, 2012; Payne, 2024a). For example, a musician can become a more effective instructor by obtaining knowledge and wisdom through their own experiences of aspiring; this knowledge is transferable and can be of immense value to people who aspire across different occupations and industries (Payne, 2024a). Students in the psychology of leadership course work on their Aspire Project, and, regardless of whether they complete their objective, they remain useful to others working toward success in their respective efforts by sharing strategies and approaches—many of which apply toward the accomplishment of almost any objective. Figure 1 is an overview of the aspire area.
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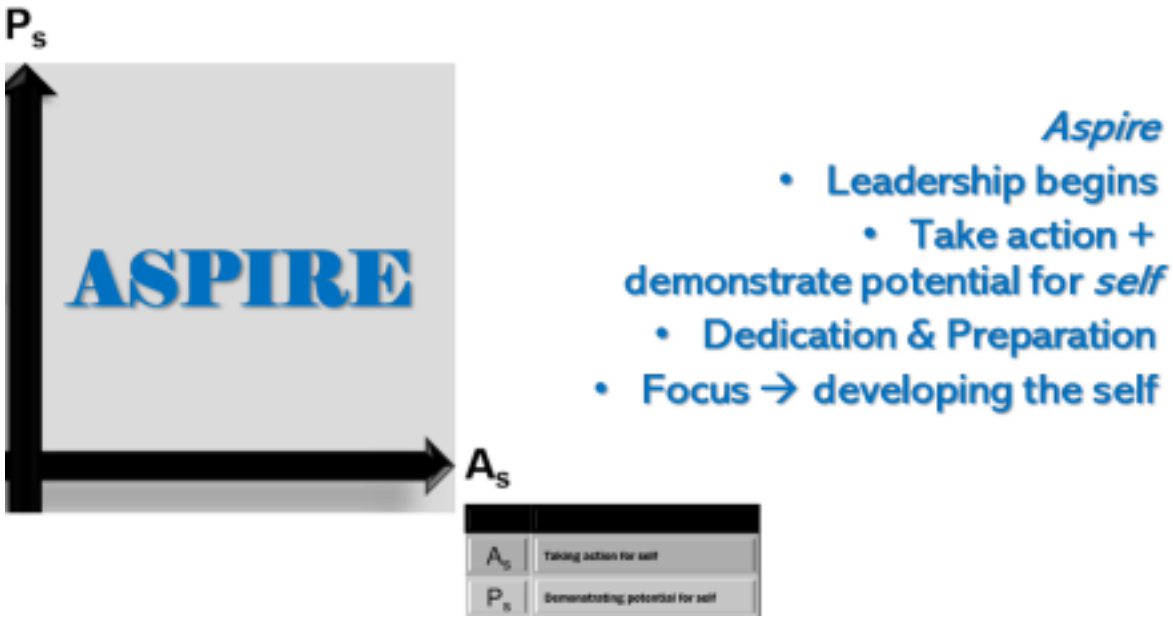
Figure 1

ABELDI Framework: Aspire



Source: Author's own work.

Goals and Systems

Self-awareness guides other self-leadership behaviors, such as self goal setting, which includes setting specific, challenging, but achievable goals for facilitating motivation to increase individual performance (Locke & Latham, 1990; Manz & Sims, 1990; Neck & Manz, 2010). Researchers have noted that systems do well to accompany goals by serving as more immediate actions aimed at making attainment of the goal possible, thereby

helping a person move forward in a broad direction that is valued and respected (Adams, 2013). The Aspire Project focuses on setting a goal and developing systems to accomplish it by allowing individuals to focus on efforts in their control (Adams, 2013; Locke & Latham, 1990; Neck & Manz, 2010). The ultimate goal of the ABELDI framework is to help students explore ways to maximize their demonstration of potential for self and others, and the Aspire Project serves as a key course deliverable to help guide this process.

Self-Leadership

Self-leadership has been defined as a self-influence process by which people achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform, and is part of a broader research stream of self-development (Day & Lance, 2004; Lord & Hall, 2005; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Neck, Manz, & Houghton, 2019). The ABELDI framework, and, more specifically, the Aspire Project, relies on the concepts of self-direction and self-motivation through emphasizing taking action for

self (e.g., developing a mindset) and demonstrating potential for self (e.g., achieving some level of results), respectively (Neck *et al.,* 2019; Payne, 2024a).

Norris (2008) described three strategies of self-leadership, as noted in the leadership literature: behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought strategies. Behavior-focused strategies heighten self-awareness and facilitate personal behavioral management through methods such as self-goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment, self observation, and self-cueing (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Natural reward strategies facilitate incorporating pleasant and enjoyable features into activities so the tasks themselves become naturally rewarding and increase overall feelings of competence (Norris, 2008). Constructive thought strategies create positive habitual ways of thinking, which can positively impact outcome expectations (Boss & Sims, 2008). The Aspire Project observes Norris's (2008) three strategies of self-leadership in the following ways: behavior-focused strategies take the form of goal setting and systems development, natural reward strategies encompass making progress toward accomplishing a goal, and constructive thought strategies are employed by applying what is learned through the Aspire Project toward future efforts involving self-leadership and the leadership of others.

Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2019) contended that self-leadership is an ongoing process. As such, helping undergraduate students who are enrolled in a leadership course that emphasizes self-leadership can be of great benefit as they move into advanced academic or career-focused pursuits. DiLiello and Houghton (2006) presented a self-leadership model that posits individuals with strong self-leadership will consider themselves to have more innovation and creativity potential than individuals with weak self-leadership. Self-leadership has been described as a modified form of self-management that focuses on how to influence oneself to achieve goals but also embeds that pursuit with higher meaning and purpose (Manz, 1992). Providing undergraduate students enrolled in a leadership course the opportunity to apply course deliverables, such as the Aspire Project, to aspects of higher meaning and purpose, can aid in augmenting their practice of self-leadership.

Self-directed learning also involves individuals taking initiative without assistance from others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating learning outcomes (Manning, 2007; Merriam, 2001). R. T. Brown and Fields (2011) defined *self goal setting* as identifying specific end states describing the regularity, intensity, or duration of desired behavior. Self goal setting creates deadlines, provides motivation, and aligns activities with one's purpose (R. T. Brown & Fields, 2011). The Aspire Project promotes self-leadership by way of self goal setting in a self-directed learning format that spans the entire semester and allows for individual and collective growth by sharing experiences with others in the process of working to accomplish a goal (R. T. Brown & Fields, 2011; Manning, 2007; Merriam, 2001).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a term Bandura (1978a) coined that refers to an individual's confidence and their overall perception of their ability to achieve an intended goal or outcome. The concept came from Badura's work on social learning theory and is influenced by one's behaviors, cognitive factors, and the environment (Bandura,

1982, 1985). Self-leadership represents an
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individual's ability to exercise self-efficacy over their choice of situations in which to participate and to provide intrinsic rewards typically associated with achieving goals (Ross, 2014). Research has indicated it is better for an individual to have self-efficacy greater than their current ability to complete an outcome (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Educators should provide learners with means to develop their self-efficacy, which has been shown to improve the learner's performance with the
additional benefit of the teacher not needing to monitor the learner as frequently (Tumapon, 2020). Norris (2008) purported that employees who possess personal attributes (e.g., a need for autonomy, general self-efficacy) may be more likely to take responsibility, participate in decision making, and practice self-leadership strategies. Managers operating with high levels of self efficacy have been shown to better support their direct reports, and they are more likely to create an environment where employees, as well as the manager, are able to thrive (Ghandehari, Abesy, Alvedari, & Hozoori, 2022).

The psychology of leadership course includes a section on self-efficacy in an effort to allow students to reflect on their perceptions of their ability to achieve certain goals. The Aspire Project serves as a course deliverable using self-directed learning and requires the development of self-efficacy to work toward accomplishing the goal (Manning, 2007; Merriam, 2001). Assisting undergraduate students with their self-efficacy development is beneficial for meeting the demands of their educational and work-related commitments.

Ethical Leadership

Many inhumanities operate through a supportive network of legitimate enterprises run by otherwise considerate people who contribute to destructive activities by a disconnected subdivision of functions and diffusion of responsibility (Bandura, 1999). This point underscores the importance of helping individuals learn about ethical leadership principles and approaches, and encourages taking action with benevolent intentions, or doing the "right thing" (Northouse, 2018). Cronin (1984) noted that leaders should not be captured by peer pressures, protocol, mindless traditions, or conventional rules, but should rather work to see above and beyond normal constraints and discern proper and desirable ends. Doing so can help individuals to resist the power of others by fending off their unwanted demands effectively (Hollander & Offermann, 1990). The claims of leadership theories such as the ethical leadership approach fundamentally support the notion of integrity, or the quality of honesty and trustworthiness (Bauman, 2013; Northouse, 2018). These principles of ethical leadership are reinforced by the idea of integrity, which connotes moral quality and the essentials of good and bad in terms of moral values and norms (Huberts, 2018). Integrity represents the degree to which a person's behavior is consistent with their values; if a person's behavior is not in line with their values, they are likely out of balance in some form (Payne, 2022, 2024b). Values are part of what influences individuals' behavior, and values matter because one is likely to feel better when living according to their values and likely to feel worse when not doing so (Fritzsche & Oz, 2007; Payne, 2022). Graham and Blanchard (2012) purported that actionizing one's values helps with the development of an individual's "leadership ID." The Aspire Project highlights taking action toward a practice of effective leadership through self-efficacy and integrity development; these concepts are discussed frequently in the psychology of leadership course throughout the semester (Bandura, 1978a; Payne, 2022, 2024a).
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Ability

The Aspire Project uses the term ability in a general way to encompass an individual's skills. The skills approach, created by Katz (1955), posits three main types of skills are needed to be an effective leader or manager: technical skill, human skill, and conceptual skill. The following quotation illustrates the essence of each of the three skills:

> The administrator needs: (a) sufficient technical skill to accomplish the mechanics of the particular job for which he is responsible; (b) sufficient human skill in working with others to be an effective group member

> and to be able to build cooperative effort within the team he leads; (c) sufficient conceptual skill to recognize the interrelationships of the various factors involved in his situation, which will lead [them] to take that action which achieves the maximum good for the total organization. (Katz, 1955, p. 42)

The Aspire Project focuses on technical skill primarily but incorporates human skill by having students share their respective Aspire Projects with the class at the beginning and end of the semester. The Aspire Project also encourages the development of conceptual skills through having students analyze and apply their learning to their personal and professional leadership journey. Overall, the Aspire Project uses the skills approach as a means to encourage students to engage in self-leadership practices (Katz, 1955; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Neck *et al.,* 2019).

The job analysis method, used in industrial and organizational psychology, groups jobs in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to perform them (Primoff, 1975). Knowledge refers to credentials and overall understanding of principles; skills refer to specific behavior, such as working with tools; and abilities represent the general capacity to do something (Riggio, 2013). For example, the *ability* to type is a general way of describing specific metrics associated with the *skill* of typing a certain number of words per minute, whereas knowledge suggests a person's overall understanding of typing, often represented by a credential such as a certificate or degree (Primoff, 1975). The Aspire Project includes KSAs as a broad category for each student's selected project goal (Primoff, 1975; Riggio, 2013).

Motivation

Motivation is defined as an individual's willingness to fulfill an unsatisfied need (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Alderfer's (1972) ERG model is a motivational theory of broad relevance with roots in Maslow's hierarchy of needs and was intended to expand its implications. ERG stands for existence, relatedness, and growth, and each term describes a type of need (Arnolds & Boshoff, 2002). Existence needs are safety centered and include basic material necessities, relatedness needs include significant relationships and are socially centered, and growth needs include the need for self-development and personal and professional advancement (Alderfer, 1972). The ERG model has been commonly applied to the study of human motivation in the workplace as a tool for increasing morale and productivity (Acquah, Nsiah, Antie, & Otoo, 2021). The focus of the ERG model works well with setting goals and developing systems, as these actions can be tied to any of the three needs. The Aspire Project makes use of Alderfer's (1972) ERG model as a way to categorize the types of projects students worked on during the psychology of leadership course. The ERG model of motivation highlights the notion that the perception of an individual's needs matters more when working to set and achieve goals (Acquah

et al., 2021). In other words, someone who might be assumed to have their existence needs met may very well find a reason to focus on these needs to achieve a certain objective. As such, it is important to balance perceptions of what needs must be fulfilled with the wisdom to distinguish between when "enough is enough" and when to "Keep It Moving" (A Tribe Called Quest, 1996).

Through the use of self-leadership, the Aspire Project is intended to assist students with working to fulfill unsatisfied needs by (a) developing and refining new and existing skills, (b) establishing consistency of effort in setting and achieving goals and systems, and (c) building confidence in their ability to accomplish the goal of their respective Aspire Projects (Adams, 2013; Alderfer, 1972; Bandura, 1978a; Katz, 1955; Locke & Latham, 1990; Payne, 2022).

Description of Practice

The purpose of the psychology of leadership course is to introduce students to the theories, concepts, and applications of leadership, with ethical implications of these concepts woven throughout the course (Payne, 2024a). Learning outcomes for the psychology of leadership course state that students who complete the course will have the opportunity to: (a) identify and apply theories, approaches, and styles of leadership; (b) develop and analyze effective leadership development plans; and (c) apply course content to various sources through the lens of their own experiences.

The Aspire Project is a semester-long assignment in the psychology of leadership course. Undergraduate

students at a specialized institution with STEM-related majors take the course as an unrestricted elective. Essentially, students declare a goal at the beginning of the semester during class and then proceed to work to accomplish that goal over the course of the semester. Results are discussed at the end of the semester during class, and students are responsible for turning in their Aspire Projects online, with responses to questions about the project and evidence to show progress toward accomplishing the goal. The Aspire Project was first introduced in the psychology of leadership course during the Summer 2023 semester, offered as an optional extra credit assignment. It became a required course deliverable during the Fall 2023 semester and continued into the Spring 2024 semester. The Aspire Project was refined between the Spring 2024 and Summer 2024 semesters to include an additional self-reported question on taking action and demonstrating potential with a 10-point rating scale. As such, data collection for this paper focused on the Summer 2024 and Fall 2024 semesters.

Discussion of Outcomes

Aspire Projects from the Summer 2024 and Fall 2024 semesters of the psychology of leadership course were reviewed, and thematic analysis was used to look for emergent themes. During data collection and analysis, identifying information was removed from the data. Remaining data were coded into categories based on emergent themes using content analysis (Weber, 1990). A total of 42 Aspire Projects were reviewed for this paper. The following questions were asked of each student who completed the Aspire Project:

1. Describe your Aspire Project. What did you work on?
2. Provide evidence for working towards accomplishing your Aspire Project.

3. What did you learn through working on this project?
4. Did you accomplish your goal?
5. How can you apply this project toward your efforts to inspire, model, and persuade? 6. Rate yourself on this project on taking action (A) and demonstrating potential (P). Use a 0–10 rating scale (0 = *poor*, 10 = *excellent*).

Each question is analyzed next.

1. Describe your Aspire Project. What did you work on?

Results of this question showed students in the psychology of leadership course selected a variety of goals for their Aspire Projects, which were categorized into the following: sports/fitness, competency development, arts/leisure, and school/work/life balance. Table 2 is an overview of the Aspire Project categories.

Table 2

Aspire Project Categories

Aspire Project category	# Aspire Projects	% of total sample
Sports/Fitness	17	41
Competency Development	11	26
Arts/Leisure	9	21
School/Work/Life Balance	4	10
Career	1	2
Total	42	100

As noted previously, the Aspire Project includes KSAs as a broad category for each student's

selected project goal (Primoff, 1975; Riggio, 2013). Aspire Project KSAs were categorized as Learning a New Knowledge, Skill, or Ability and Refining an Existing Knowledge, Skill, or Ability, with 23 Aspire Projects categorized as Refining Existing Knowledge, Skill, or Ability (55%), and 19 Aspire Projects categorized as Learning New Knowledge, Skill, or Ability (45%).

The skills approach (Katz, 1955) was used as a point of analysis for the categories of Aspire Projects. Most Aspire Projects focused on either learning new or refining existing technical skills (37 of 42, or 88%). Four Aspire Projects (10%) focused on human skill, and one Aspire Project (2% of the sample) focused on conceptual skill. Alderfer's (1972) ERG model was also used to analyze the Aspire Projects, with the majority (37 out of 42, or 88%) focusing on growth needs. Four Aspire Projects (10% of the sample) focused on relatedness needs, and one Aspire Project (2% of the sample) focused on existence needs. These outcomes are consistent with research on undergraduate students, where growth needs are typically rated highest (Alderfer, 1972).

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2. Provide evidence for working toward accomplishing your Aspire Project. All Aspire Projects included narrative text and/or descriptive video outlining the goal and systems used, along with progress made; many projects included more than one form of evidence. A total of 57 pieces of evidence were gathered among the 42 Aspire Projects analyzed. Screenshots were the most common form of evidence used for the Aspire Projects, though video, schedule, and photos were also well-represented. A small amount of audio evidence was used. Table 3 provides a breakdown of evidence used for Aspire Projects.

Table 3

Aspire Project Evidence

Type of evidence	# of Aspire Projects	% of total evidence
Screenshots	23	42
Video	12	22
Schedule	9	16
Photos	8	15
Audio	5	9
Totals	57	100

3. Did you accomplish your goal?

Student responses for this question were grouped into two categories: *Yes* indicated that significant progress was made in accomplishing the goal, or that the goal was completely accomplished, whereas *no* indicated that the goal was not accomplished. The point of the Aspire Project did not rest on full completion of a goal, given the limited amount of time allotted (i.e., 1 semester), so responses were framed in this manner. Overall, 31 students (74%) indicated either making significant progress toward their Aspire Project goal or having fully accomplished it. Eleven students (26%) indicated they did not accomplish their Aspire Project goal. The overall objective of the Aspire Project was to assist students in increasing their self-efficacy and ability (i.e., technical skill development) by incorporating aspects of ethical leadership (e.g., integrity) and an assessment of motivational needs (Alderfer, 1972; Bandura, 1978a; Katz, 1955; Payne, 2022).

4. What did you learn through working on this project?

A content analysis was conducted to identify emergent themes from student responses (Weber, 1990). Overall, 24 themes emerged from the data. From this list, 10 were selected as representatives of these themes. Appendix B includes the 24 themes that emerged from the initial analysis. The 10 emerging themes were as follows: advocacy, confidence, consistency, discipline, goals, motivation matters, overcoming perfectionism, perseverance, resilience, and skill development. Advocacy connotes the ultimate goal of the ABELDI framework (Payne, 2024a).

Confidence is an integral aspect of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1978a). Consistency, discipline, and perseverance align with integrity, which refers to consistency between values and

behaviors (Payne, 2022). Goals relate to the aspire area of the ABELDI framework, and to the Aspire Project overall.

Because goal setting and systems development were significant aspects of the Aspire Project, students were guided to set clear goals (Adams, 2013; Locke & Latham, 1990). Additionally, mindset development represents the essence of taking action, as noted in the ABELDI framework (Payne, 2024a). Overcoming perfectionism involves the need to take action and highlights perfectionism as an inhibitor of taking action, and consequently, demonstrating potential (Payne, 2024a). Motivation matters is likely to be a reference to the motivation required to complete the aspire project (Alderfer, 1972), whereas resilience is suggestive of the course topic of dealing with setbacks (Payne, 2024b). Skill improvement reflects the skills approach as a course topic and is overall representative of ability, as outlined in the review of relevant literature (Katz, 1955). Table 4 includes a list of the thematic areas of the Aspire Projects with regard to student learning reviewed for this paper.

Table 4

Aspire Project Learnings Thematic Areas

Theme Area
1 Advocacy
2 Confidence
3 Consistency
4 Discipline
5 Goals
Setting clear goals
Systems
Mindset development
6 Motivation matters
7 Overcoming perfectionism
8 Perseverance
9 Resilience
10 Skill improvement

5. How can you apply this project toward your efforts to inspire, model, and persuade? Responses were categorized based on the recipients' intended application (i.e., self, others, self and others, and none). Many Aspire Projects included more than one of the aforementioned categories in their responses. Most notably, the "others" category accounted for 70 responses (55% of total responses for this question). Table 5 provides a breakdown of responses to this question. These results suggested learning from the Aspire Project can be applied to assisting others with their efforts through advocacy, mentorship, or other forms.

Table 5

Aspire Project Responses

Area	Inspire	Model	Persuade	Total
Self	6	5	5	16
Others	29	19	22	70
Self and others	5	11	4	20
None	2	7	11	20
				126

6. Rate yourself on this project on taking action (A) and demonstrating potential (P). Use 0–10 rating scale (0 = *poor*, 10 = *excellent*).

Results for this question showed for the 42 Aspire Projects reviewed, the average self reported rating for "taking action" was 7.4, and the average self-reported rating for "demonstrating potential" was 8.2. Most self-reported responses rated taking action regarding their Aspire Project as 6 and above. Response ratings for demonstrating potential regarding the Aspire Project were also 6 and above. The lowest self-reported rating for taking action and demonstrating potential was 3 and 4, respectively. There was one instance of a 10–10, a self reported rating for taking action and demonstrating potential, respectively. It should be noted that although self-reported ratings are subjective and come with myriad potential biases, self-reported ratings have also been shown to assist raters (i.e., students) in future work to make progress on the same goal, or to work to accomplish a different goal (Anvari *et al.*, 2023). Figure 2 includes a breakdown of the self-reported ratings of their efforts in taking action and demonstrating potential regarding their respective Aspire Projects.

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Figure 2

Self-Reported Ratings on Overall Aspire Project

Source: Author's own work.

Reflections

The Aspire Project, as mentioned previously, relies on the concepts of self-direction and self-motivation through emphasizing taking action for self (e.g., developing a mindset) and demonstrating potential for self (e.g., achieving some level of results), respectively (Neck *et al.*, 2019; Payne, 2024a). The review of literature on self-efficacy, ethical leadership (e.g., integrity), ability (e.g., skills) and motivation highlighted the essence of the ABELDI framework, and the Aspire Project serves as an example of how these factors can be actionized toward the

development of self-leadership acumen (Alderfer, 1972; Bandura, 1978a; Katz, 1955; Northouse, 2018; Payne, 2022, 2024b). Setting goals and developing systems may require a sufficient amount of confidence (e.g., self-efficacy) in one's ability to achieve them (Adams, 2013; Bandura, 1978a; Locke, 1968). Acting with integrity involves consistency between one's values and behavior (i.e., actions), which is to say that an individual is doing what they said they would do (Fritzsche & Oz, 2007; Payne, 2022). A sufficient degree of confidence (i.e., self-efficacy) and consistency (i.e., integrity) may be required for an individual to take action (Bandura, 1978a; Payne, 2022, 2024a). In a similar manner, a sufficient degree of ability and motivation might be required for an individual to demonstrate potential (Alderfer, 1972; Katz, 1955; Payne, 2024a). Based on these reflections, the results from this study suggested that taking action requires some degree of confidence and integrity, whereas demonstrating potential requires some degree of ability and motivation. The Aspire Project, and other goal-oriented projects, can help to spotlight the essence of taking action and demonstrating potential for self and for others, and to overall champion aspects of self-leadership development (Goldsby *et al.*, 2021; Payne, 2024a).

Most Aspire Projects reviewed for this paper focused on technical skills (Katz, 1955). STEM-related majors at a technical undergraduate institution may have skewed these results given the likelihood of students choosing to attend specialized institutions for technical skill development, which can be influenced by student experiences in high school promoting STEM related learning (Dawes, Long, Whiteford, & Richardson, 2015). With regard to Alderfer's (1972) ERG model of motivation, *growth needs* represented the majority of Aspire Projects reviewed for this paper. Goals are representative of opportunities to experience growth, development, and progress (Manz & Sims, 1990).

The frustration–regression principle states if a person is unable to meet a higher level need, they may focus on lower level needs that are easier to satisfy (Elujekwute, Aja, & Abrachi, 2021). For example, the goal of training for an upcoming marathon is likely to switch to something more attainable, such as running and completing a 5k race, after considering what is most doable given other demands such as school, work, or life. This principle relates to the Aspire Project, as some students switched their goal during the semester to something more realistic to their current circumstances (Elujekwute *et al.*, 2021).

Limitations of qualitative data interpretation should be noted (Ratner, 2002). Future researchers should consider creating projects for the other three areas of the ABELDI framework (i.e., inspire, model, and persuade) to underscore what each area is attempting to convey about effective leadership (Payne, 2024a). The Aspire Project is an opportunity for students to work toward achieving a goal. Therefore, all projects could fit under the *growth needs* area of Alderfer's (1972) ERG model because all are representative of personal and professional development, and future researchers should take this consideration into account. Although self leadership remains, in general, a valid concept, its understanding and application are likely to differ across cultures (Alves, Lovelace, Manz, Matsypura, Toyasaki, & Ke, 2006). Future research would be well-served to incorporate aspects of these cultural factors and how they play out in relation to the collective understanding of self-leadership.

Recommendations

Overall, results suggested students experienced a positive impact in working on the Aspire Project in the psychology of leadership course; self-leadership-based projects in academic courses may offer deeper learning opportunities for both undergraduate students and leadership educators (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). Additionally, outcomes suggested that the Aspire Project, through the use of goals and systems, encouraged students to become more self aware, thereby promoting aspects of self-leadership (Adams, 2013; Goldsby *et al.*, 2021; Locke & Latham, 1990; Manz & Sims, 1990; Neck & Manz, 2010). It is recommended that more research be conducted to yield substantial claims about the effectiveness of this project as reflective of goal-oriented projects intent on emphasizing self-leadership practices and strategies (Neck *et al.*, 2019; Norris, 2008).

As stated previously, leadership of self is an essential component of leading others effectively (Neck *et al.*, 2024). By aspiring, individuals can serve as advocates and help others to achieve their goals by helping them to develop systems by which to achieve a particular goal. In other words, by working to accomplish a goal, individuals can be of service to others in their efforts to achieve their goals. Therefore, it is recommended that leadership educators

include
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self-leadership-based projects and case studies in the leadership education literature to provide a blueprint for ways in which to incorporate self-leadership-based deliverables in their undergraduate academic courses.

Self-leadership consists of specific behavioral and cognitive strategies designed to influence personal effectiveness positively (Goldsby *et al.*, 2021). This definition gets at the core of what the Aspire Project seeks to convey in the psychology of leadership course. Leaders need
to establish direction through creating a vision, and they need to shape that vision in relation to the context and culture in which they are situated, to inspire others to bring forth their talents toward the accomplishment of a collective objective (L. M. Brown & Posner, 2001). The Aspire Project represents the first of four areas of the ABELDI framework (Payne, 2024a). As a class project, Aspire helps students to think about their experiences as a prequel to what will most likely be more traditional leadership-oriented experiences in the future. The Aspire Project emphasizes goals and systems (Adams, 2013; Locke, 1968). By sharing experiences around setting and, to some degree, achieving goals by way of adhering to systems, individuals can inspire others to take action; model ways to set and achieve goals for others; and, ultimately, create a vision for themselves and potentially others who could, at some point, assist in guiding a person or people toward a common goal.
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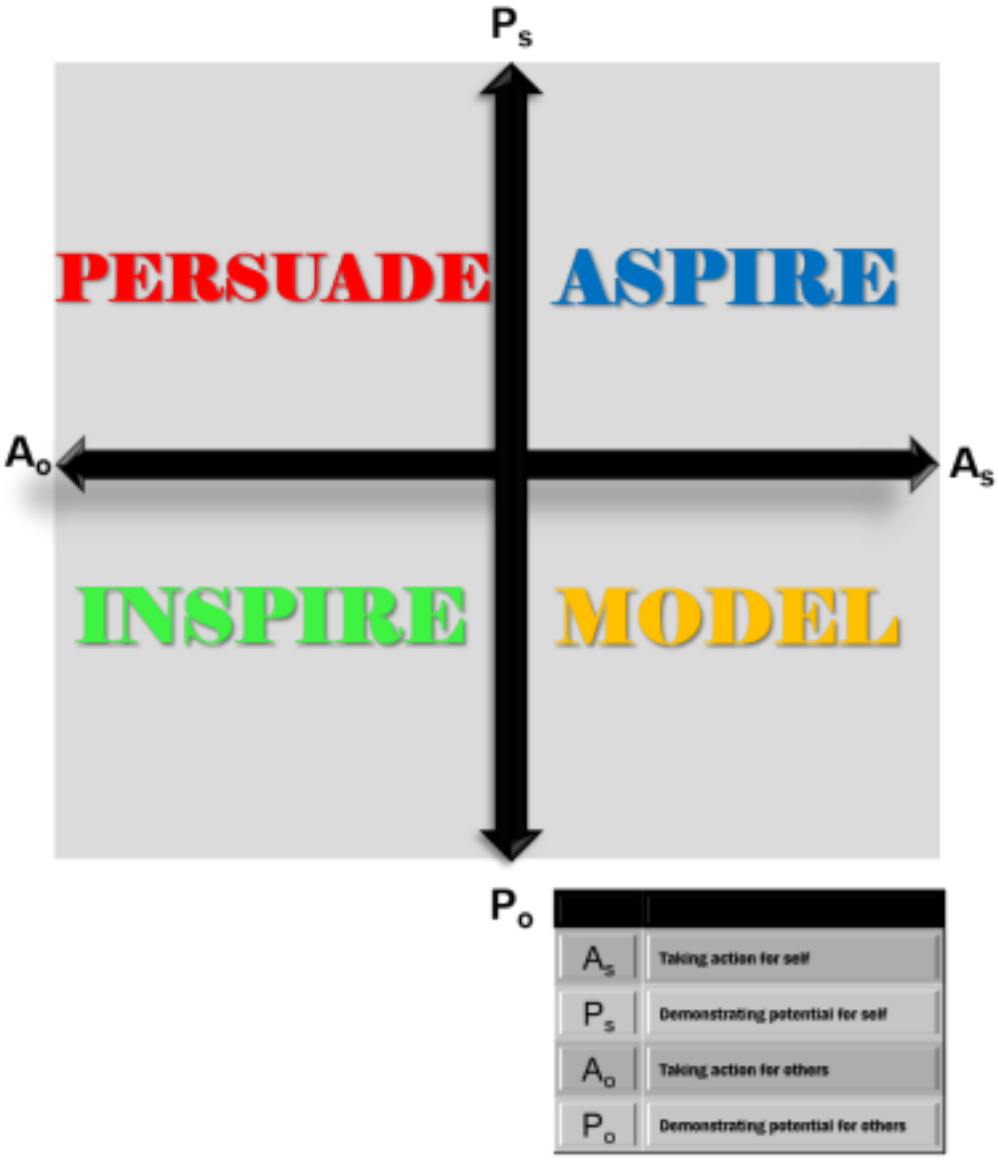
Appendix A

ABELDI Framework: Four Areas With Action, Potential, Self, and Others



Appendix B

Emergent Themes From Initial Analysis of Aspire Project Question

Question: What did you learn through working on this project?

THEMES (24)

ACCOUNTABILITY
ADVOCACY
BEING ADAPTIVE
BEING ORGANIZED

BEING PREPARED

CELEBRATE SUCCESSES

CONFIDENCE

CONSISTENCY
ACTIONS ALIGNING WITH VALUES

DISCIPLINE

GOALS & SYSTEMS

HONESTY

MINDSET DEVELOPMENT

MOTIVATION MATTERS

OVERCOMING PERFECTIONISM

PATIENCE

PERSEVERENCE
RESILIENCE

PERSISTENCE

PRIORITIZE HEALTH

SACRIFICE

SCHOOL/WORK/LIFE BALANCE

SELF-REFLECTION
SELF-LEADERSHIP/SELF-DEVELOPMENT

SKILL IMPROVEMENT

TIME MANAGEMENT

UNLEARNING/RELEARNING
PROCESS IS DIFFICULT