

# An Exploratory Qualitative Study of Student Pharmacist Perspectives on Leadership



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## Introduction

- Leadership education and skills development play an important role in developing student pharmacists, with the Curriculum Outcomes and Entrustable Professional Activities (COEPA) 2022 listing leadership as an educational outcome for pharmacy curriculums.<sup>1</sup>
- Leadership definitions and assessments used within pharmacy education vary, with recent calls to explore how colleges and schools of pharmacy can consistently define leadership and leadership competencies, in addition to the development of a consistent framework for leadership operationalization.<sup>2,3</sup>

## Objectives

- The objectives of this study were to (1) explore student pharmacists' knowledge and perceptions of leadership characteristics and behaviors, and (2) identify where students have opportunities to observe and exhibit leadership.

## Methods

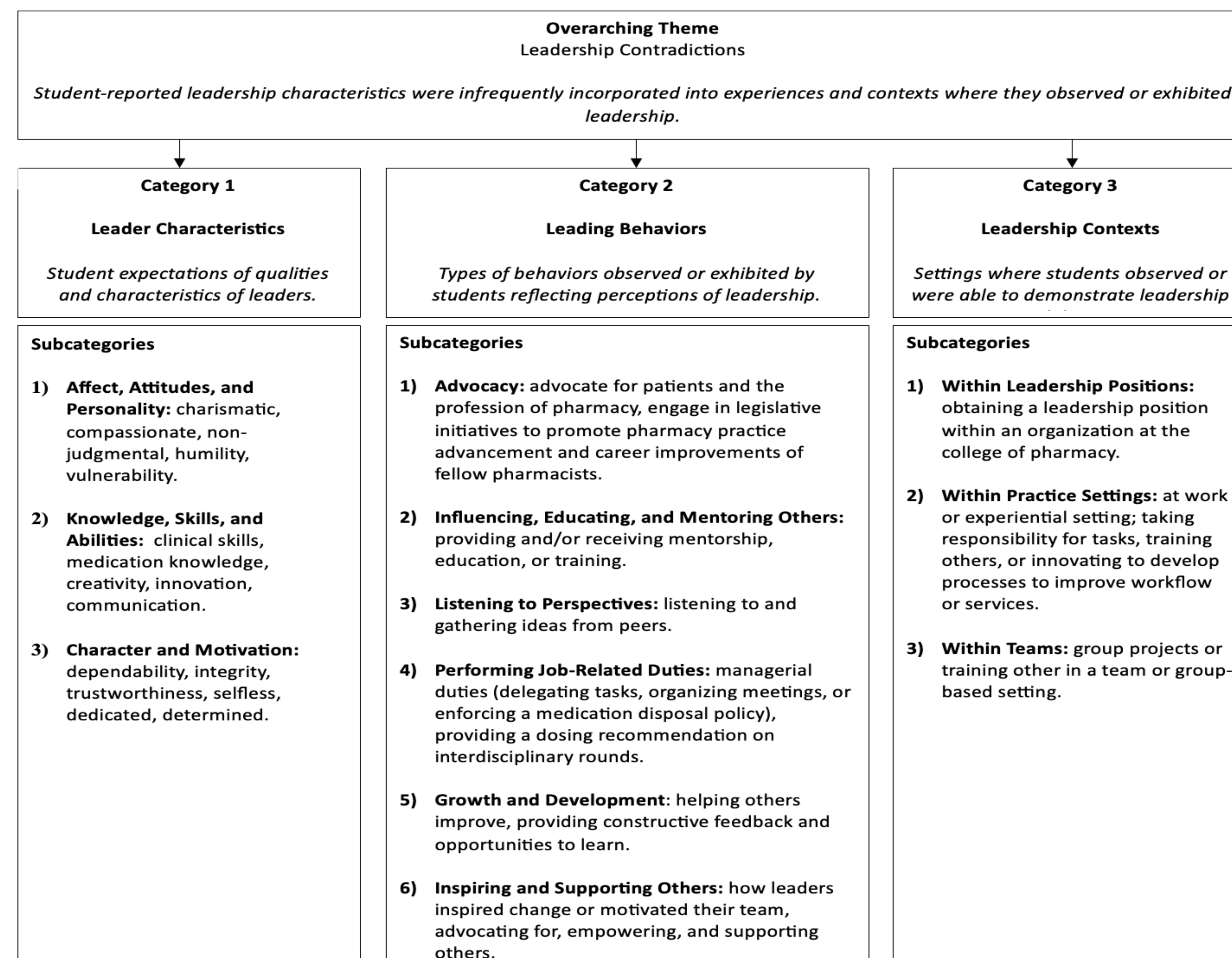
- This was a qualitative study with data collected from a reflection activity for 32 student pharmacists in two cohorts of an elective leadership course in the Fall of 2021 and Fall of 2022.
- Students responded to four open-ended prompts about leadership prior to the first day of class: (1) Describe what being a leader in the pharmacy profession means to you. (2) What are the most important characteristics or traits of a pharmacy leader? (3) Describe a time when you have witnessed a pharmacist, classmate, peer, or other healthcare provider exemplify leadership. What was this individual's role, what was most memorable, and why did you feel that the action or behavior exemplified leadership? (4) Describe a time when you felt like a leader.
- Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo 1.7.1 (Lumivero; Denver, CO).
- Constant comparative analysis was used to analyze the data, with two study authors independently assigning open codes to text segments and using axial coding to organize codes into categories. A third study author reviewed the codes and narrative to support the validity of the qualitative research.<sup>4</sup>

## Contradictions exist between how students describe leadership characteristics, behaviors, and contexts and how they have observed or exhibited leadership.

### Results

- In total, 31 of 32 student reflections were included for analysis, with data missing from one student.
- Constant comparative analysis resulted in three categories (Leader Characteristics, Leading Behaviors, Leadership Contexts) which contributed to one overarching theme: Leadership Contradictions.
- Leadership Contradictions involved students commonly conflating leadership with obtaining a leadership role or positions and effectively completing management responsibilities or job-related tasks.

Figure 1. Description of overarching theme, categories, and subcategories from qualitative analysis.



## Discussion

- While students demonstrated several leadership competencies related to describing characteristics, behaviors, and practices of effective leaders, only a few students described specific behaviors they observed or exhibited which extended beyond holding a leadership position or completing management or job-related tasks.
- Only a few students described that leadership comes from those with and without titles through motivating and influencing others.
- When assessing student leadership and expected competencies related to leadership development, using a multimodal approach including self-assessment and other-report measures (e.g., follower ratings, faculty ratings) may provide more information on leadership knowledge, characteristics, and behaviors exhibited by students which can be used by students and faculty to align activities and courses designed to facilitate leadership development with intended curricular outcomes described in COEPA 2022 and ACPE Standards.
- Colleges and Schools of Pharmacy could consider reviewing expectations surrounding leadership development, specifically if the expectation is to understand and describe leadership or exhibit leadership behaviors. Changes to curricular and co-curricular activities and assessment methods may be necessary to help students develop and exhibit leadership skills and behaviors.

## Limitations

- Student reflections were collected from students enrolled in a leadership elective and may have had different perceptions of leadership compared to the rest of the student population.
- Data were collected from a single institution, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other institutions.

## Conclusions

- In this study, most students could describe leadership but reported holding positions or titles and performing job-related and managerial duties as examples of observed or exhibited leadership.
- If students are expected to demonstrate leadership behaviors, reviewing coursework, activities, and assessments related to leadership may help students understand and exhibit leadership to achieve curricular outcomes described in COEPA 2022 and ACPE Standards.

## References

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