

# **Using a Theoretical Framework as Infrastructure to Strengthen and Align Program Learning Outcomes and Assessments of an Online Leadership Program**

**A. Greg Bowden**  
**California Baptist University**

**S. Jeannette Guignard**  
**California Baptist University**

**Dirk Davis**  
**California Baptist University**

*Despite growth in online programs in general, and leadership programs in specific, uniform underlying infrastructure or theory models for the basis of leadership programs is lacking (Jones 2005). This paper journals the process undergone by a university faculty as they redesign courses of an online BA in Organizational Leadership. Seemiller's (2014) Leadership Competencies provided the theoretical framework for each of the leadership courses. The process of selecting and integrating these competencies is explained: the value judgements made to connect the competencies with the design of courses, integration of similar or corollary competencies, and the philosophical reasons for these decisions are discussed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **History of CBU OPS**

The Division of Online and Professional Studies (OPS) at California Baptist University (CBU) began as a separate division within the university in the Fall of 2010. CBU believes that each person has been created for a purpose (school motto is *Live Your Purpose*), and integrates academics with spiritual and social development opportunities. Graduates are challenged to become individuals whose skills, integrity, and sense of purpose will distinguish them in the workplace and in society at-large. Further, the mission of OPS was to be more responsive to non-traditional students who are balancing professional and family responsibilities while advancing their education. Utilizing the latest technologies in distance education, and collaborating with faculty who were committed to student's academic, professional, and spiritual success was crucial for the new startup. Initial offerings included eight programs (seven bachelors, one masters) that had been delivered in a traditional face-to-face (f2f) medium as a degree completion program model serving approximately 500 students per semester. The initial faculty employed to teach in

OPS consisted of five full-time professors and approximately 100 adjuncts, with most of the adjuncts consisting of traditional CBU professors teaching in an overload capacity.

### **Current Status**

As of 2017, OPS now offers 38 distinct degrees (22 bachelors, 14 masters, 2 doctorate), some with multiple concentrations. Most programs primarily utilize the asynchronous distance learning deliver medium, along with some hybrid offerings. OPS serves almost 4,000 students per semester and currently employs 57 full-time faculty with an adjunct pool of approximately 300 faculty.

### **OPS Leadership Programs**

The Bachelor of Organizational Leadership program, launched in Spring of 2013, was developed to satisfy the need for providing current and future leaders, in all industries, with the skills that they need to effectively lead in their organizations.

The purpose of the online Bachelor of Arts in Organizational Leadership degree program is to equip working professionals with highly sought after skills by employers. Exercising influence, complex problem solving, teamwork, critical thinking, sound judgment and decision making, communication, and conflict management are covered in courses which comprise a valuable and practical degree. Students in the program will also learn to excel and manage in the workplace while integrating ethical principles and integrity to strengthen the foundation of companies in both private and public sectors (CBU OPS 2018).

This program is unique because in addition to teaching leadership theory, it emphasizes ethical and spiritual leadership. With all the rapid growth the division has experienced, and with program developing and all course design been done in-house, faculty selected to build the courses did not always have either the appropriate aligning degrees in the subject-matter, and/or adequate time to detail the theoretical framework supporting the course(s) they were developing. Adding to this complexity, courses are delivered in an accelerated eight-week format, and in addition to fulfilling WSCUC standards for distance education, they require the inclusion of faith integration as part of the student work.

The Master in Organizational Leadership was launched in Fall 2014. Similar to the Bachelor's degree, was launched to satisfy the need to provide current and future leaders, in all industries, with the skills that they need to effectively lead their organizations.

The online Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership degree program provides specific training, growth and development in decision-making, communication, conflict and change management, strategic management, human resource management, and approaches to leadership across cultures. The program reviews motivation, ethics, creativity, strategic planning and vision, group development, teamwork, technology, and organizational development. It exposes students to theories and application of effective leadership in a variety of organizational contexts. Students learn how to manage and motivate individuals and teams and discover how to use strategies and models to effect change within a variety of leadership and organizational structures (CBU OPS, 2-18). The focus of this study is the Bachelor of Arts in Organizational Leadership, however it is planned that the findings and best practices learned will be applied to the Master's program in the near future.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED SCHOLARSHIP**

### **Background**

Instructional design is a strategic plan created to ensure that the pedagogical development of courses is organized and coherent (Moreira-Mora and Espinoza-Guzman, 2016). In an ideal situation, a leadership program design follows a coherent, rational process that begins with the adoption of a theoretical underlying framework to align course content and outcomes. Caine and Caine (1994), posit that a framework enables the teacher to be an 'orchestrator of experience' and allows us to "to organize and make sense of what we already know (p. viii)". Leveraging students' experiences is essential for a student body comprised of adult working professionals.

Despite leadership programs being a rapid area of growth for many colleges and universities, there is a lack of uniform underlying infrastructure or theory model for the basis of leadership programs (Jones 2005). Further, due to a lack of underlying infrastructure which provides uniformity, programs need to be repeatedly revised and “fine-tuned” over time. Posner (2009) argues that there is not much known about the best approach for this approach to program design. This university is not alone in facing the challenge of leadership program design, as there are an increasing number of leadership programs in universities and colleges in North America fueling dialogue to propose “clear processes, content, and designs for providing academic leadership education” (Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017, p. 92).

### **Need for Competency-based Curriculum**

The study of competencies was promoted by David Clelland’s (1973) research, which asserted that testing an individual’s competencies was a more effective predictor of job success than testing their intelligence. Competency based education promotes faculty and academic leaders to focus on learning outcomes based on mastery of competencies which prepare learners to succeed in varying and complex situations (Feiman-Nemser, 1990). Explicitly identifying the key competencies that will be focused on in the writing of the course achieves transparency and clarity in both course design, as well as in course delivery (Baumgartner and Shankararaman, 2013). This is not only beneficial for those teaching the course, but also for students’ ease of tracking their own skill development (Gottipati and Shankararaman, 2017).

Today, many organizations, including for-profit, nonprofits, and public organizations have begun to rely on identifying competencies needed for workplace success (Burns, Smith & Ulrich, 2012). Identifying needed competencies for leadership offers a theoretically grounded approach to leadership curriculum development. According to Seemiller (2018), adopting a competency-based model as an underlying infrastructure for the leadership program provides:

- Consistency in the terms used to refer to specific competencies across the department and among the faculty. The same terms can be used from course to course.
- Alignment with the use of competencies within the workplace and in professional expectations
- Reduction of ambiguity and facilitates measurement of student learning
- Allows curriculum developers to make defensible choices

In short, by adapting a competency-based infrastructure for the Bachelor’s in Organizational Leadership, it enhances the integrity of the program design, as well as better prepare students of the program for workplace success.

### **Theoretical Framework Selected for Program Design**

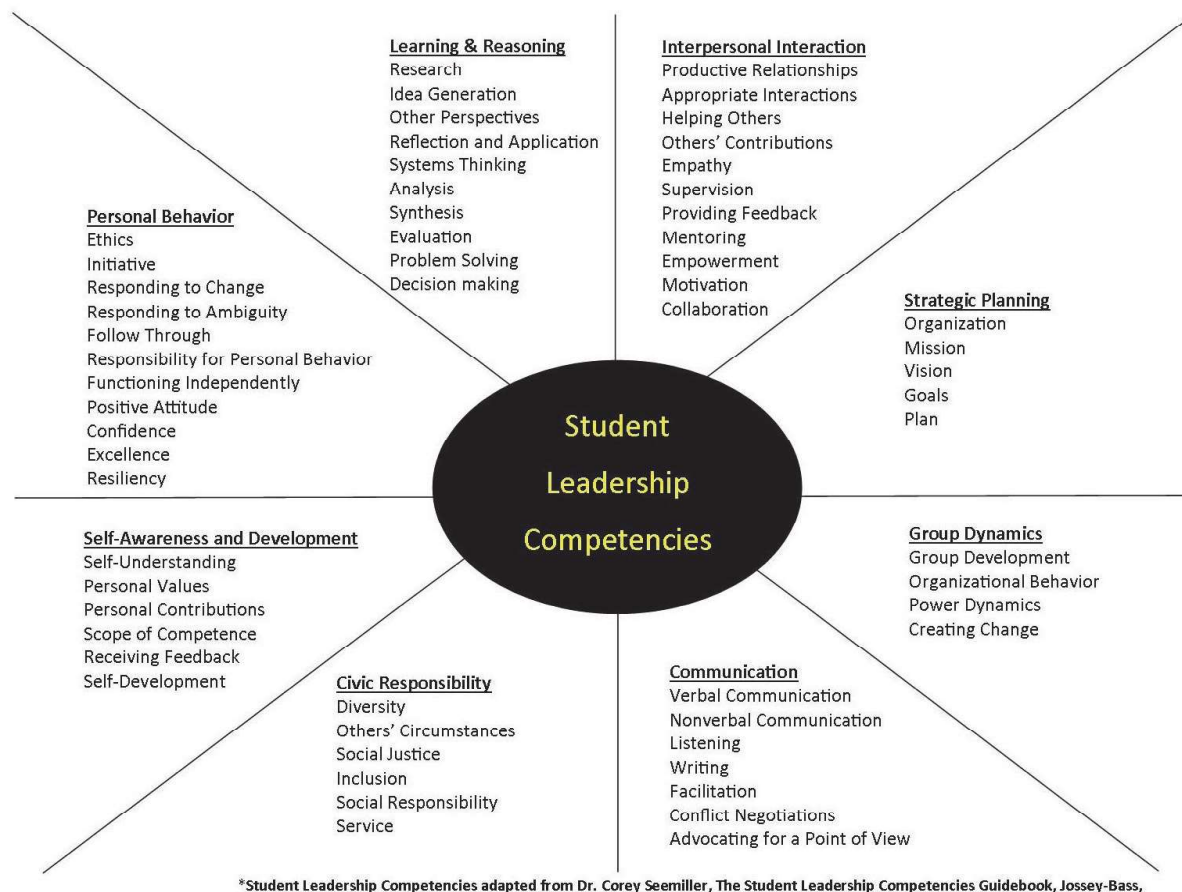
While the need to establish and implement a theoretical framework to address alignment issues was readily apparent, the process of identifying a cogent unifying framework was an arduous journey with few apparent choices. Fortunately, the team was able to identify Dr. Corey Seemillers’ (2014) *The Student Leadership Competencies Guidebook* (referred to as SLC). Designed to guide the intentional development of curriculum for leadership development programs, Seemillers’ SLC thoroughly identifies and defines 60 Essential Leadership competencies for the 21st Century.

These competencies were identified and developed by Seemiller after five years of research analyzing learning outcomes in over 500 accredited higher education academic programs (Seemiller & Cook, 2014). Through the use of Seemiller’s model as the underlying infrastructure, along with our dedication to spiritual development, the BAOL program is able to more effectively prioritize curriculum content for accelerated courses, assess competency learning, and assist students with reflecting on their own learning in order to promote application of the competencies in real-world contexts.

Seemiller (2018) has provided a robust argument for the use of competencies in leadership education, noting the smooth transition to competency based education (p. 39). One of the real advantages of the use of competencies in online education is that it can help address the gaps found in students caused by

diverse education and experiential backgrounds. Seemiller also posits that connecting specific leadership competencies to specific career paths can enhance career readiness.

**FIGURE 1  
STUDENT LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES**



## DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

Beginning in 2016, several BAOL courses had reached the time for their 3-year review, and by this time OPS had hired faculty with leadership specific doctoral degrees whom were better suited for writing the courses. Faculty determined that as part of the review, the courses needed to be aligned using a research validated theoretical framework to underpin and connect their content and outcomes. Reliance on a practical leadership model, such as Seemillers' (2013) Leadership Competencies also helps ensure that the leadership curriculum is relevant for leaders to succeed in the workplace. The Associate Vice President of Academics and the Program Lead worked together to research possible theoretical models and selected the Seemiller Leadership Competencies model. The decision was based on the comprehensive nature of the skills included, and that they could be applied to leadership roles regardless of the industry.

In addition to the real-world relevance of Seemillers' (2013) model, the inclusion of the Student Leadership Competencies systematically informs the course outcomes for each of the BAOL courses, which in turn supports the opportunity to more specifically assess student learning at a program level. This data will demonstrate how students perceive each of the courses have changed their perceived skills in each of the identified leadership dimensions. Further, the data that will be collected from the use of the

SLC will provide insight into the students' level of understanding of their growth in these areas, as well as providing information to inform both the program student outcomes and the course student outcomes. By focusing on the outcomes, we can ensure that student-learning is centered on enhancing critical leadership skills needed for effective leadership in the real-world.

Thus far, three courses have been re-written to align to this new format which includes the Student Leadership Competencies. The first of these courses was taught in Spring term, 2018 the second was taught in Summer 2018. Two more are currently under revision using this new alignment model. The goal is to complete the revision of the entire program by Spring term, 2019. Metrics of the course design process continue to be collected as refinements continue, and will inform the revision of the other courses moving forward.

## **DISCUSSION OF ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES**

As assessment result data becomes available, there will be insights on the need for further refinements and course mapping of the program. The findings can then be applied to the Masters in Organizational Leadership program as well, which supports the development of leaders at a more advanced level.

This project will strengthen and lend credibility to the leadership program at the school in the following ways: 1) the inclusion of a theoretical framework will ensure there is consistent alignment between and among the courses, 2) the focus of each course will be more clear and directly aligned with real-world leadership issues, and 3) further the inclusion of the SLC will allow for assessment using a validated instrument, and 3) inform the use and revision of the Program Student Outcomes and the Course Learning Outcomes. The Bachelors in Organizational Leadership offered by CBU-OPS is designed for current leaders, aspiring leaders, and practitioners in all types of organizations and industries; incorporating the comprehensive scope of the Student Leadership Competencies into the curriculum will help better prepare leaders for success in a variety of fields.

### **Reflections of the Practitioner**

Effective course design requires attention to a number of strategies, which foremost are rigor and relevance. Students value learning more when it is connected in concrete ways to the work world. They also know that while “Cs get degrees”, differentiating themselves through academic excellence can make a difference when they are looking for promotion or a new position.

### **Implementation Challenges**

Including the Student Leadership Competencies in the courses has challenged the course designers and lead faculty to test the essential components they should focus on in the 8-week accelerated online courses. However, having clarity on the underlying theoretical model that aligns with course objectives has provided guidance and greater discernment in making the selection of what is to be included, and that the key course concepts are relevant to real-world organizational challenges being faced by leaders in the 21st century.

### **Adaptations Made**

The process of aligning the courses with the Leadership Competencies was a recursive and iterative process. The first attempt was made to align and include each of the competencies in an exclusive category into specific courses. Implementation of this strategy quickly became problematic, as there was a wide disparity in the number of competency areas in each category, ranging from a low of four competencies, to a high of eleven competencies. After several attempts to integrate all the relevant competencies into the courses along with the other instructional materials, it became apparent that in the cases of topics with a high number of relevant competencies, there was too much information to include in a meaningful way, and doing so and would result in reduction of the degree of coherence and the amount of mastery in an eight-week course.

In the second attempt, efforts were made to “match” the individual leadership competencies to the course overview and learning objectives. This strategy became quite chaotic due to the number of competencies, and also had the potential effect of diminishing the coherence in the overall competency structure for the students.

Finally, to provide the maximum impact for students, it was determined that the best route going forward was to limit the number of weekly themes, ranging between seven to eight competencies. In some cases closely-related competencies were combined, in other cases limiting the competencies to those we determine to be most relevant to the students and their future work positions. The record of this process is summarized in Appendix 1, the Implementation Progress Record.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Program and course development are complex and engrossing tasks, fraught with value judgements. Decisions made during this process have long-lasting implications and repercussions, and can shape the quality and direction of university programs for years to come. For these reasons, it is important for online startup organizations to consider the following recommendations:

- 1) Review the existing theoretical frameworks in the subject matter area, this will provide options as you move forward with course development.
- 2) Review other university course offerings in programs similar to yours. This form of “benchmarking” will provide insight into what is being offered, and allow you to frame the conversation you have with your course developers.
- 3) Carefully select faculty who will author the courses, paying specific attention to the educational background and professional experience they bring to the table.
- 4) Start with the end in mind - use the theoretical framework to guide your development of program outcomes.

This process has challenged each of the participants to deeply engage with their values and understanding of the significant components of quality leadership. In providing a coherent, sequential, data based set of competencies to guide program design, course design, and student activities; we will be able to more accurately assess the impact of the program on the future leadership of our students.

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**APPENDIX**

**IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS RECORD**

<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Course Description</b>	<b>Competency Category</b>	<b>Competency Areas First Cut</b>		<b>Competency Areas Second Cut</b>
LDR310- Intro to Lshp	The purpose of this course is to equip students with skills necessary for successful leadership in public, private, and non-governmental organizations. Emphasis is on assessment of personal growth needs and enhancement of administrative skills including communication, decision-making, motivation, leadership styles, and team building. Experiential class work will be utilized in conjunction with classic and current organizational literature so that students can appreciate the bridge linking theory and practice.	Learning and Reasoning	Research, Other Perspectives, Reflection and Application, Systems Thinking, Analysis	Synthesis, Evaluation, Idea Generation, Problem Solving, Decision Making	Other Perspectives, Reflection and Application, Systems Thinking, Analysis, Problem Solving,
LDR330 - Personal Leadership	This course introduces the student to the concepts of personal leadership and helps identify the skills and strategies that the student may employ to effectively lead.	Interpersonal Interaction	Productive Relationships, Appropriate Interaction, Helping Others, Empathy, Mentoring, Motivation	Others' Contributions, Empowerment, Providing Feedback, Supervision, Collaboration	Productive Relationships, Appropriate Interaction, Helping Others, Empathy, Mentoring, Motivation, Others' Contributions, Empowerment, Providing Feedback, Supervision, Collaboration
		Personal Behavior	Initiative, Functioning Independently, Follow-Through, Responsibility for Personal Behavior, Ethics	Responding to Ambiguity, Responding to Change, Resiliency, Positive Attitude, Confidence, Excellence	Initiative, Functioning Independently, Follow-Through, Responsibility for Personal Behavior, Ethics, Responding to Ambiguity, Responding to



Course Title	Course Description	Competency Category	Competency Areas First Cut		Competency Areas Second Cut
					Change, Resiliency, Positive Attitude, Confidence, Excellence
LDR350-Communication for Leadership	This course provides an analysis of the principles of communication in the workplace. Students will learn basic communication theories, strategies, and processes as they relate to the modern organizational structure. We will be examining the nature and process of communication in modern organizations, including pragmatic implications of organizational communication theories as they relate to understanding organizations, and implementing change strategies. The course will also compare contemporary principles of leadership with the contemporary literature on communications.	Communication	Verbal Communication, Nonverbal Communication, Listening, Writing	Facilitation, Conflict Negotiation, Advocating for a Point of View	Verbal Communication, Nonverbal Communication, Listening, Writing, Facilitation, Conflict Negotiation, Advocating for a Point of View
LDR410-Ethical and Biblical Principles	This course evaluates the principles for practicing ethical judgments and behavior that confront those in leadership positions. Students will evaluate various ethical frameworks and survey the Bible to explore and develop principles and habits for Biblically based leadership practices. The course will also compare Biblical principles of leadership with the contemporary literature on leadership and ethics.	Interpersonal Interaction	Productive Relationships, Appropriate Interaction, Helping Others, Empathy, Mentoring, Motivation	Others' Contributions, Empowerment, Providing Feedback, Supervision, Collaboration	Empathy, Mentoring, Motivation, Others' Contributions, Empowerment, Providing Feedback, Collaboration

<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Course Description</b>	<b>Competency Category</b>	<b>Competency Areas First Cut</b>		<b>Competency Areas Second Cut</b>
LDR430 - Decision Making and Leadership	This course explores various biases, common heuristics, and social dynamics that often lead to faulty decisions and evaluates strategies and tactics to safe guard the decision making process so as to enhance the probability of implementing good decisions. Students will also study the creative process and models for making wise decisions that optimize personal and collective outcomes.	Strategic Planning	Mission, Vision, Goals	Plan, Organization	Mission, Vision, Goals, Plan, Organization, Social Justice, Social Responsibility, Service, Synthesis, Evaluation, Decision Making, Research, Idea Generation
LDR450 - Culture and Leadership	This course deepens the student's understanding of principles of collaboration, modeling positive behavior, and mentorship in relation to diverse groups, communities, and individuals. Students will evaluate various effective strategies for fostering and nurturing diversity best practices. The course will also have students appreciate the differences of individuals and how to capitalize on those differences as strengths.	Civic Responsibility	Diversity, Others' Circumstances, Inclusion	Social Justice, Social Responsibility, Service	Diversity, Others' Circumstances, Inclusion, Supervision,
LDR470 – Group and Leadership	Effective groups and teams are critical in modern organizations, yet there are often dysfunctional dynamics and processes within the group. This course will provide the student with a fundamental concepts relating to group dynamics, group decision making, and interpersonal conflict. Special attention will be paid to diversity in this class. Students will gain a better understanding of dynamics of group	Group Dynamics	Organizational Behavior, Power Dynamics	Group Development, Creating Change	Organizational Behavior, Power Dynamics, Group Development, Creating Change, Productive Relationships, Appropriate Interaction, Helping Others

Course Title	Course Description	Competency Category	Competency Areas First Cut		Competency Areas Second Cut
	interaction in professional and social settings. Understanding the dynamics of small group interaction and having an understanding of some of the techniques for solving conflict and improving communication toward future benefits. This course will provide the platform necessary for the student to engage in accurate communication of ideas which can influence other behavior.				