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Gatekeeping Practices of the Blue Chip Leadership Experience at the University of Arizona

The Blue Chip Leadership Experience at the University of Arizona is a leadership development program that has existed since 1999, founded by the Office of Student Engagement and Career Development. Its primary mission is to "equip students with leadership competencies and experiences that will enable them to lead meaningful lives and contribute to their communities" (University of Arizona). The program offers mentorship, community service, professional development, and networking opportunities to prepare students for future leadership roles. As one of the university's flagship programs, it is often promoted as a pathway to success for motivated students across all disciplines. I chose this group because it highlights a common issue in higher education, where programs intended to promote success unintentionally exclude marginalized students. Despite its commitment to inclusivity, the program contains hidden financial, physical, and social barriers that limit full participation for many students. These barriers are often invisible but still play a critical role in determining who can participate in the program. In this paper, I will critically examine how financial, physical, and social/cultural barriers function as gatekeepers within the Blue Chip Leadership Experience, and I will explore how these factors intersect to restrict access. Finally, I will propose recommendations on how the program can become more inclusive and accessible for students from all backgrounds.

One of the most prominent barriers in the Blue Chip Leadership Experience is financial. The program requires students to pay a \$500 participation fee, not including additional costs such as transportation, event fees, and professional attire. Moreover, participation in optional enrichment activities, such as leadership conferences and networking retreats, often requires out-of-pocket spending that can amount to hundreds of additional dollars. These financial demands, while intended to cover the program's operational costs, serve as a significant hurdle for students from lower-income backgrounds. According to a 2024 report by *Inside Higher Ed*, nearly 40% of students considered dropping out or leaving college programs due to financial difficulties (Palmer). This demonstrates the critical impact that financial barriers have on students' educational opportunities. For students who are already struggling financially, these costs may be prohibitive, excluding them from the valuable experiences and leadership development that the Blue Chip program offers. Despite the program's commitment to inclusivity, financial constraints disproportionately affect students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, limiting their ability to engage fully. The Blue Chip Leadership Experience could mitigate this financial barrier by offering scholarships, sliding scale fees, or fundraising initiatives. Additionally, the program could collaborate with local businesses and alumni networks to sponsor students, creating a community-supported model of financial accessibility. A more flexible financial structure would make the program more accessible to a broader range of students. For instance, the program could partner with university financial aid offices to provide funding options for low-income students or host fundraising events to subsidize fees. These changes would allow students who may not have the financial resources to participate otherwise to engage in leadership training, fostering a more diverse group of participants and ultimately creating a more equitable program for all students.

Alongside financial barriers, physical limitations within the spaces where the program's activities take place also prevent some students from accessing the program. While the Blue Chip Leadership Experience is held in various locations around the University of Arizona, including conference rooms and off-campus venues, some of these spaces may not be fully accessible to all students. For example, the conference rooms in the Student Union, while spacious, may not adequately accommodate students with mobility impairments. The room configurations and limited seating options can create difficulties for students who require extra space or specialized accommodations. Furthermore, transportation to off-campus events poses an additional challenge for students with mobility restrictions or those who rely on accessible transit services. In addition, students with sensory disabilities may not have access to the necessary resources, such as assistive listening devices or Braille signage, which limits their participation. These physical barriers hinder the inclusivity of the program. Students with disabilities are particularly affected by this lack of accessibility. A report by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) emphasized the significance of physical access in higher education, noting that students with disabilities face an increased risk of exclusion if accommodations are not proactively provided (PennAHEAD). Creating universally accessible environments not only benefits students with disabilities but also enhances the experience for all participants by promoting comfort, safety, and inclusivity. Therefore, to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to participate, the Blue Chip Leadership Experience must invest in improving its physical spaces. This could include installing ramps for wheelchair access, providing assistive technologies, and making seating arrangements more flexible to accommodate students with different physical needs. These changes would not only make the

program more inclusive but also demonstrate the University of Arizona's commitment to providing an equitable educational experience for all students.

In addition to financial and physical barriers, social and cultural factors also play a significant role in determining who feels comfortable participating in the Blue Chip Leadership Experience. The program emphasizes leadership styles that align with Western ideals of assertiveness, individualism, and self-promotion. While these leadership traits are valuable in many professional settings, they may not resonate with students from different cultural backgrounds. For example, students from collectivist cultures, where humility and teamwork are prioritized over individual achievement, may struggle to adapt to the program's leadership style, which places a high value on self-assertion. Such students may feel pressured to adopt behaviors that conflict with their cultural upbringing, leading to internal discomfort and disengagement from program activities. Similarly, students who are introverted or socially anxious may feel alienated in an environment that places so much emphasis on public speaking, networking, and self-promotion. These cultural and social dynamics can create an atmosphere where certain students feel excluded, even if the program's leaders have no intention of excluding them. For instance, a student from a non-Western culture may feel uncomfortable with the individualistic style of leadership promoted by the program, or they may struggle to integrate into the group due to language barriers or different communication styles. Language barriers can also limit students' ability to form meaningful connections, leading to feelings of isolation and reduced engagement. In fact, research by the University of Pennsylvania found that nontraditional students often face systemic barriers such as cultural mismatches, which hinder their access to and success in higher education programs (PennAHEAD). To address these social and cultural barriers, the Blue Chip Leadership Experience should make an effort to recognize and value diverse leadership styles.

This could involve offering cultural competency training for mentors and program leaders, as well as fostering an inclusive environment where students can express their leadership in ways that align with their cultural values.

These social and cultural barriers are often compounded by financial and physical challenges. A student who is financially disadvantaged and socially introverted, for example, may feel excluded. Financial constraints would prevent them from attending important networking events, while the social dynamics within the program would make it difficult for them to integrate. Similarly, a student with a disability who also comes from a different cultural background may face multiple layers of exclusion due to both physical accessibility issues and cultural differences in leadership expectations. Intersectionality theory, as described in contemporary social science literature, highlights how overlapping identities such as race, disability, and socioeconomic status amplify the effects of marginalization. These intersecting barriers exacerbate the challenges faced by students who are already disadvantaged in multiple ways, making it harder for them to access the leadership development opportunities that the program offers. In fact, surveys indicate that many students experience gaps in leadership credentials due to the compounding effects of such barriers (Knox).

To address these compounded barriers, the Blue Chip Leadership Experience must take several key steps. First, the program should expand its financial aid options to include scholarships, sliding scale fees, and fundraising initiatives. This would help alleviate the financial burdens that prevent many students from participating. Second, the program should prioritize accessibility by ensuring that all event spaces are equipped with the necessary accommodations for students with disabilities. This could include providing assistive listening devices, Braille signage, and wheelchair-accessible seating arrangements. Third, the program

should actively promote inclusivity by embracing diverse leadership styles and cultural perspectives. This could be achieved by incorporating cultural competency training for program leaders and offering students the opportunity to express their leadership in ways that align with their personal values and experiences. By implementing these changes, the Blue Chip Leadership Experience can become a truly inclusive program that offers leadership development opportunities to all students, regardless of their financial situation, physical abilities, or cultural background. These changes would help the program fulfill its mission of empowering all students to become effective leaders, while also promoting diversity and inclusion within the University of Arizona community.

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