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"I Belong Here": The UCLA Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders

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Cover Page Footnote

The team wishes to acknowledge the contributions of our state and federal partners (USC and UC-Davis UCEDDs, CA State Council on Developmental Disabilities, Disability Rights California) and our disability rights advocates to the development and implementation of this project.

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Plain Language Summary

The UCLA Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders is a program made to help disabled people become strong leaders and advocates. The program teaches useful skills like how to tell your story, speak with government representatives, and lead others. This paper shares what we learned from the first group of participants, called "Fellows." Most Fellows finished the program, came to most classes, and said they gained skills and felt more confident. We also interviewed people who finished the program and who came back the next year to help coach new participants. These participants are called "Senior Fellows." They said that the classes helped them feel more confident, gave them new job goals, and helped them feel like they belong to the disability rights community. These results show that the program is helpful and could be used by other places to help more disabled people in becoming leaders.

Abstract

The UCLA Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders was developed to address the gap between advocacy training and systems-level leadership opportunities for disabled people. Rooted in the principles of co-production, accessibility, and relevance, the Leadership Academy equips participants with advocacy, storytelling, and testimony skills through a structured, interactive curriculum supported by coaches and program graduates with lived experience. This paper presents findings from two phases of evaluation: (1) a pilot study with the first cohort, examining the program's feasibility and acceptability through retention, attendance, and participant satisfaction data; and (2) interviews with program graduates who returned in a mentorship role as "Senior Fellows" for the second cohort. Results from the pilot study indicated that the Leadership Academy is both feasible and highly acceptable to participants, who reported growth in

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leadership capacity, confidence, and professional development. Senior Fellows emphasized the value of mentorship, peer support, and belonging, highlighting the importance of centering lived experience in leadership training. This pilot study offers a scalable model that can be used by University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs), Developmental Disabilities (DD) Network partners, and other organizations seeking to build inclusive leadership pipelines. The findings affirm the critical role of disability-led programs in advancing equity, belonging, and self-determination.

Introduction

Belonging is a guiding value for disability rights, calling for the full inclusion of disabled¹ people in leadership, policy, and systems change (Garcia-Lee et al., 2024; Reeves et al., 2023). While the field has made progress toward inclusive service delivery, structural barriers continue to limit opportunities for people with lived experience, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD), to grow into leadership roles (Powers et al., 2002; Wilson-Kovacs, 2008). University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) were established to help close this gap through research, training, and community engagement; however, the development of clear, supported pathways, from self-advocate to peer leader, remains largely underdeveloped.

The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act

The Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (DD Act) serves as the legislative foundation for UCEDDs and other national programs in the Developmental Disabilities Network (DD Network) aimed at promoting the independence, productivity, integration, and self-determination of individuals with developmental disabilities (Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000). Originally signed into law in 1963, and most recently reauthorized in 2000, the DD Act affirms a national commitment to ensuring that individuals with developmental disabilities and their families have access to services and supports that enable full participation in community life. The Act calls for disabled people to be actively involved in the design and delivery of services that affect them, an early call for what is now recognized as a contemporary framework of co-production and leadership that centers the lived experience of disabled people.

The Role of UCEDDs

UCEDDs, authorized by the DD Act and administered by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), were first established under Title I, Part B of Public Law 88-164. These university-affiliated programs were created in direct response to recommendations from The President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities (PCPID), which called for

¹ In accordance with the disability rights community, identity-first language (e.g., “disabled person”) is used to describe participants of the study throughout the manuscript (Best et al., 2022).

university-based facilities to lead the way in research, clinical service, and training to meet the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities (PCPID, 2004). Today, the UCEDD network includes 68 centers across every U.S. state and territory, functioning as bridges between academic institutions and the broader disability community.

As hubs for interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation, UCEDDs operate under four core functions: (1) interdisciplinary preservice preparation and continuing education, (2) research and public policy analysis, (3) information dissemination, and (4) community services such as model demonstrations and technical assistance. Through these activities, UCEDDs are uniquely positioned to build inclusive leadership pipelines where disabled people not only receive services or training, but also participate as co-educators, peer mentors, and advocates.

Gaps in Disability Leadership Development

Despite this framework, leadership development for disabled people often stalls at the level of self-advocacy. Leadership programs may emphasize speaking up for oneself and making individual decisions, but they stop short of equipping participants to teach, lead, and replicate those skills in others. Yet, progress in the neurodiversity movement—a social movement that recognizes neurological differences like autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia as natural variations of the human condition—has been made possible precisely because of the contributions of disabled advocates within the autistic and broader disability community (Kras, 2009; Singer, 2016). Self-advocacy skills, such as knowledge of rights, self-awareness, communication, and leadership, are often developed through targeted programs (Test et al., 2005), and recent calls for focused research and training in policy, employment, healthcare, and financial self-advocacy have emphasized the importance of amplifying the voices of individuals with lived experience (Schena et al., 2022). These domains reflect critical issues within the neurodiversity and disability rights movements and underscore the importance of designing programs that not only teach advocacy but also create supported opportunities for disabled people to lead. A more intentional approach is needed, one that follows the implementation science principles to ensure that disabled perspectives are embedded at every level of leadership development (Fixsen et al., 2005.)

Lived Experience and Leadership

Recent disability studies literature has emphasized the importance of centering the lived experiences of disabled individuals in leadership and equity initiatives (Feldner et al., 2022). As Ryan and Guthrie (2023) note, mainstream leadership programs often ask disabled participants to “overcome” or minimize their disability, thus reinforcing harmful ableist norms. In contrast, disability-led programs validate lived experience as a source of leadership strength. Additionally, qualitative interviews allow for a deeper understanding of experiences at personal, institutional, and systemic levels, providing insights that are too often excluded from traditional leadership development approaches. To build this kind of sustained and inclusive leadership pipeline, it is essential to examine models that support progression from learner to leader, consider longstanding calls for investment in leadership development, and ensure that disabled voices

are integrated at every stage, from program design to evaluation.

The UCLA Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders

The UCLA Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders (“Leadership Academy”), was developed through a collaboration between the UCLA Tarjan Center UCEDD, UC-LEND, and the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD). The Leadership Academy was designed to respond to the need for leadership training programs that teach advocacy and prepare people with intellectual and developmental disabilities for leadership roles. The program was structured to support participants in building advocacy and leadership skills through interactive sessions on policy, storytelling, and testimony. Importantly, the most recent cohort of the Leadership Academy included a structured Coaching Academy, which empowered graduates of the pilot cohort to serve as mentors for new participants, thereby formalizing a pipeline of lived-experience leadership. In designing this program, sustainability and scalability were considered from the outset, aligning with principles from implementation science that emphasize embedding new practices within existing systems, engaging end-users early, and supporting replication with fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2005).

This paper presents an evaluation of the pilot cohort of the Leadership Academy, examining how the program has impacted individual participants' ability to advocate, mentor, and lead. Through surveys, interviews, and thematic analysis, we explore how UCEDD-affiliated leadership programs can serve as effective training grounds for disability leadership by supporting participants in developing advocacy skills and preparing them to become teachers and changemakers. We reflect on lessons learned from our design, implementation, and evaluation, offering this pilot study as a model for building sustainable, inclusive leadership pipelines within the disability community.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to examine feasibility and acceptability of the UCLA Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders and (2) to highlight the success of a UCEDD in supporting, promoting, and centering leadership skills in disabled people.

Method

Participants

Participants of the initial cohort included 10 disabled adults with I/DD ($M_{age} = 26.6$, $SD = 7.6$) who enrolled in the Leadership Academy. Cohort 1 took place in Spring 2024, and cohort 2 took place in Spring 2025. Participants (“Fellows”) were nominated by DD Network partners, including the UCLA Tarjan Center UCEDD, UC-Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND), USC UCEDD, UC-Davis MIND UCEDD, Disability Rights California, and the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD). Eligibility requirements for

enrollment included: (1) at least 18 years old, (2) self-identify as disabled/having a disability, (3) ability to participate in the program's virtual format, and (4) fluency in English. Applicants submitted a brief application and were selected based on their interest in disability policy and advocacy.

The Fellows represented a diverse range of demographic characteristics across age, gender, and race/ethnicity (see Table 1). Most Fellows for cohort 1 ($n = 10$) were between the ages of 20 and 35, and one Fellow was between 36 and 45 years old. In terms of gender identity, six Fellows identified as female, three as male, and one as non-binary. Four Fellows identified as Hispanic, and six as non-Hispanic. Regarding racial identification, three Fellows identified as Asian (including Philippine Islands origins), one as Black or African American, and three as White (including origins in Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa). Three participants selected "Preferred not to answer" for race. Among the 10 Fellows, the most reported disability was autism spectrum disorder ($n = 6$). Other reported disabilities included cerebral palsy ($n = 2$), intellectual/developmental disability ($n = 2$), Down syndrome, ADHD, learning disability, and lupus (Systemic Lupus Erythematosus). Several participants reported co-occurring conditions, highlighting the diversity and complexity of disability experiences within the group.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Fellows

Demographic characteristic	Response categories	<i>n</i>
Age	20 - 35 years	9
	36 - 45 years	1
Identified gender	Male	3
	Female	6
	Non-Binary	1
Ethnicity	Hispanic	4
	Non-Hispanic	6
Race	American Indian/Alaska Native	0
	Asian ^a	3
	Black or African American	1
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0
	White ^b	3
	Multiracial	0
	Preferred not to answer	3

^a Includes Philippine Islands Origins.

^b Includes origins in Europe, Middle East, or North Africa.

Interviews were conducted with four participants who participated as Fellows in the Leadership Academy in cohort 1 and were invited as “Senior Fellows” in cohort 2. The role of Senior Fellow was created to provide graduates of the Leadership Academy with leadership opportunities, to support their continued interest in disability policy and advocacy, and to scale up the program.

The four Senior Fellows who participated in interviews ranged in age from 22 to 45 years and represented diverse gender identities, including two females, one male, and one non-binary individual. Two identified as Hispanic or Latino/a, and racial identities included White or Caucasian ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 1$), and one who preferred not to disclose (Table 2). All Fellows reported their disability status, with three identifying as being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and one reporting multiple disabilities, including autism, ADHD, and lupus SLE. Employment statuses varied, with two Fellows engaged in part-time paid work, one participating in part-time internship or volunteer roles, and one currently unemployed and seeking work. See Table 2 for demographic characteristics of the Senior Fellows.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Senior Fellows (N = 4)

Demographic characteristic	Response category	<i>n</i>
Age	20 - 35 years	3
	36 – 45 years	1
Identified gender	Male	1
	Female	2
	Non-Binary	1
Ethnicity	Hispanic	2
	Non-Hispanic	2
Race	American Indian/Alaska Native	0
	Asian ^a	1
	Black or African American	0
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0
	White ^b	2
	Multiracial	0
	Preferred not to answer	1

^a Includes Philippine Islands Origins.

^b Includes origins in Europe, Middle East, or North Africa.

Program Description

The Leadership Academy is a program to teach disabled people disability policy, history, and advocacy skills. The program consisted of weekly 2-hour sessions focused on different topics

and skills each week. The program culminated in a Showcase in which Fellows presented on an advocacy topic to the group and our UCEDD's state and federal partners. Cohort 1 consisted of 10 weeks. Sessions were led by doctoral-level instructors with experience leading groups and expertise in working with disabled people. Trained and supervised coaches (e.g., clinical psychology pre-doctoral interns, a graduate social work student, post-baccalaureate and undergraduate research assistants) assisted with practice of skills, providing performance feedback with coaching, monitoring homework compliance, and supporting the Fellows' learning needs. For cohort 2, coaches and Senior Fellows participated in a 5-week Coaching Academy prior to the start of the Leadership Academy to be trained in effective coaching and disability policy history. Coaches and Senior Fellows met with their Fellows during the week (i.e., outside of the Leadership Academy sessions) to practice skills and complete assignments.

The program curriculum was developed based on a needs assessment completed by disabled people ($N = 88$). Surveys were distributed via the state's developmental disabilities network partners including the State Council on Developmental Disabilities, the state Protection and Advocacy agency and the state UCEDDs. The needs assessment focused on identifying prioritized topics for leadership training, particularly related to disability history, policy, and advocacy. Results from the needs assessment identified a critical need for accessible leadership training focused on disability policy history and advocacy skills for disabled people. Session topics included history of disability rights, basic steps of advocacy, civics, storytelling, how to meet with representatives, how to testify, and other topics related to disability policy and advocacy. A complete description of sessions can be found in Table 3. In addition to didactic content, guest speakers presented each week to share about their experience with disability policy and advocacy. Guest speakers included individuals with lived experience and professionals in the field of disability. Fellows were taught to develop their leadership skills by "TEling" their story. The TEL (Trust, Emotion, Logic) model was created based on Aristotle's

Table 3

Curriculum Overview

Week	Curriculum
1	Introductions
2	<i>Crip Camp</i> Part 1 Screening
3	<i>Crip Camp</i> Part 2 Screening
4	History & Advocacy
5	Advocacy & Testifying
6	Introduction to Government & Politics
7	Storytelling Part 1
8	Storytelling Part 2
9	Advocacy in Practice
10	Showcase with the TEL Your Story Advocacy Pitch

rhetorical modes of persuasion (Ethos, Pathos, and Logos), often used in rhetorical analysis to describe effective communication (Aristotle, 1909). Utilizing the TEL model, Fellows were taught how to establish trustworthiness, make an emotional appeal (i.e., share their lived experience), and use facts and reasoning to support their advocacy topic. Using community stakeholder engagement, program curriculum was developed in close partnership with individuals with lived experience, who provided feedback on the curriculum, skills, and teaching methods. During weekly sessions, didactic content was presented by group leaders and co-led by individuals with lived experience utilizing PowerPoint slides. In-session practice of skills was facilitated by coaches in small group breakout sessions.

Fellows and Senior Fellows were compensated for their participation in the program. Fellows received a \$500 gift card, and Senior Fellows received a \$2,500 stipend through UC-LEND to support their participation in mentorship, coaching, leadership development and other training opportunities as LEND trainees.

Procedures

Participants completed the program's evaluation survey at the conclusion of the cohort 1 program. The survey was distributed electronically via Qualtrics. Questions pertained to the curriculum and skills taught. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Interviews were conducted with the four Senior Fellows who participated in cohort 2. Questions focused on the Senior Fellows' experiences and perspectives on the program. To promote accessibility, the Senior Fellows were given the option to complete the interview questions in multiple formats (e.g., Zoom-based interview, in writing) according to their communication preferences. Questions were provided to the Senior Fellows in advance of their Zoom-based interview. Zoom-based interviews were recorded with participant consent, auto-transcribed by Zoom software, and checked for accuracy by the research team. Written responses and transcribed responses were combined into a single dataset for qualitative analysis. Interviews and written responses were coded by doctoral trainees and faculty members with qualitative research experience who had not conducted the interviews.

Analyses

Feasibility of the program was evaluated based on program retention rates, attendance, and survey completion. Acceptability was measured through the program evaluation survey questions on satisfaction.

Interview responses were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coders first reviewed interview transcripts prior to identifying initial codes. Meaningful phrases and segments were highlighted inductively and then organized into broader themes through an iterative process of comparing and refining categories.

Coders independently reviewed and coded data before meeting for consensus discussions where themes were refined and consistency in themes was established. To support trustworthiness of the results, participants were asked to review the identified themes and provide feedback on accuracy. Themes were finalized following participant feedback.

Results

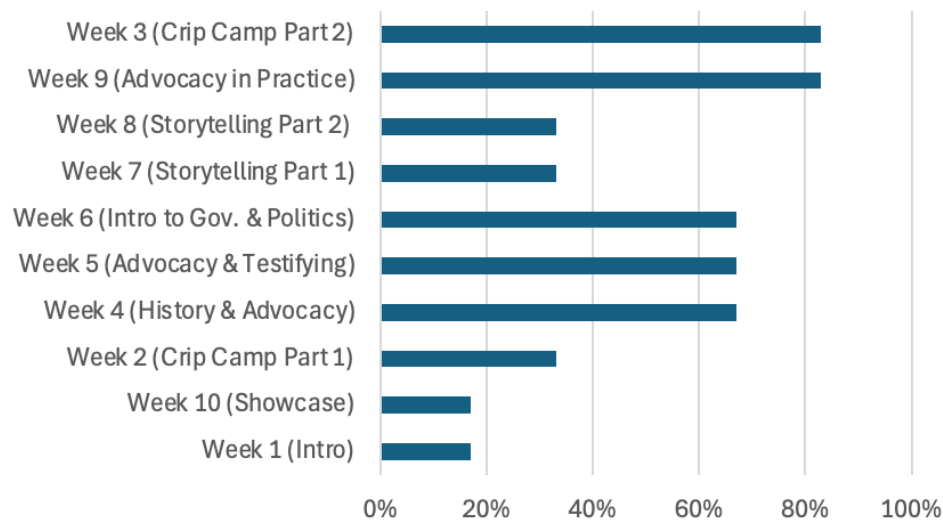
Feasibility and Acceptability

Overall results indicated high levels of satisfaction and feasibility for the program. Of the 10 Fellows who participated, 9 Fellows graduated, with a 90% retention rate. Regarding attendance, 77% of participants attended at least 8 of the 10 sessions. Of the graduates, six completed the program evaluation survey. Participants reported positive experiences with the program, with 100% of survey respondents indicating they agreed or strongly agreed that they gained knowledge about relevant advocacy topics, improved their advocacy skills, and that the structure and presentations of the program were effective and helpful. Participants were asked “Which session topic did you learn the most from?” then selected their five most helpful sessions. The sessions Week 3 “*Crip Camp* (Part 2)” and Week 9 “Advocacy in Practice” were selected as a most helpful session by 83% of respondents. The sessions Week 1 “Introduction” and Week 10 “Storytelling Showcase” were selected least frequently, by 17% of respondents. Respondents also reported improved advocacy skills with all agreeing or strongly agreeing that they have improved in their ability to “advocate for topics that are important to me.” All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they improved in their ability to “tell my story using the TEL model.” In their review of the structure and content of the program, all respondents reported high satisfaction with both the Leadership Academy content and the way the materials were presented and they agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to “apply the information and skills learned in the Leadership Academy.” Results can be seen in Figure 2.

The high retention rate, consistent attendance, and unanimously positive feedback indicate that the Leadership Academy was both feasible to implement and highly acceptable to participants, offering early evidence of a successful, scalable model for disability leadership development. While this preliminary quantitative evidence is important, themes garnered from interviews with Senior Fellows offered a richer understanding of the personal impact of the program and the leadership growth that followed.

Interview Themes

Analyses of interviews with the Senior Fellows identified several recurring themes. The Senior Fellows consistently shared about the impacts of the program with broad themes of: (1) Growth in Confidence and Leadership Ability, (2) Value of Mentorship and Peer Support, and (3) Professional and Career Development.

Figure 2*Percentage of Fellows Who Selected Each Session Topic as “Most Helpful”****Growth in Confidence and Leadership Ability***

All Senior Fellows described significant improvements in their confidence and leadership capacity. As a result of their participation in the Leadership Academy and Coaching Academy, they stated they felt better able to lead and be effective advocates. One Senior Fellow stated they felt more confident and participated more in discussions. Two other Senior Fellows described how they now lead meetings and can apply communication strategies to be strong leaders (e.g., delivering constructive feedback, problem solving). Senior Fellows also reflected on their personal growth and their transition from learner to leader through the program (e.g., “It’s just such a changing opportunity, and I think that more schools should offer this and have this be something that’s nationwide for people”). Participants described development as an ongoing process in which they continued to grow while coaching newer Fellows. A Senior Fellow stated, “It was a struggle to go from learner to a leader...we still learn as we try to lead our Fellows and help them. I feel like I’ve learned a lot from the Fellows just as much as I hope they learned from me.”

Value of Mentorship and Peer Support

The Senior Fellows highlighted the importance of helping others find their advocacy voice. They also reflected on how their previous experience as Fellows in cohort 1 was valuable in guiding others through the program (e.g., “being able to essentially guide our Fellows...[in] the ways I wish I would have been assisted”). Two Senior Fellows emphasized the importance of being part of the advocacy community and collaborating with others (e.g., “You aren’t just advocating for yourself. You’re advocating for everyone who falls into the issue that you are

passionate about.”). Two Senior Fellows also shared that they found fulfillment in mentorship and supporting their Fellows. Additionally, the Senior Fellows stated that peer support and having a sense of belonging was deeply impactful. A Senior Fellow stated, “I’ve always felt like an outsider for so long, and now I finally found a place.”

Professional and Career Development

The Senior Fellows also shared that the Leadership Academy aided in their professional and career development. Two Senior Fellows referenced new professional confidence and specific roles they have taken on. One Senior Fellow noted how their personal growth has led to a clearer idea of how advocacy can shape their career. Another Senior Fellow stated how their participation has expanded their network (e.g., “I’ve learned to fall into networking with other people...I didn’t know anyone who was a disability rights advocate and I’ve gotten close to [them]”). In terms of career, one Senior Fellow stated, “The Leadership Academy taught me that I belong here, and that it’s something I have skills for...and it’s all due to the Leadership Academy and what I’ve gone through. I’m broadening my knowledge and personal connections to allow both my peers and professional colleagues to see the potential that I have.”

Discussion

Findings from the pilot implementation of the Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders suggest that disability-led leadership programs can be both practical to deliver and deeply impactful for participants. As a pilot study, the present findings are intended to examine feasibility and acceptability of the program rather than demonstrate efficacy or long-term outcomes. Fellows reported meaningful growth in confidence, advocacy skills, and leadership identity, demonstrating that structured opportunities grounded in co-production and accessibility can support disabled people in taking on more advanced leadership roles. Rather than stopping at self-advocacy, the Leadership Academy positioned participants to step into teaching, mentoring, and systems-change efforts, a critical yet often-missing link in traditional programming. These outcomes reinforce the value of investing in leadership development models that center lived experience and are guided by the priorities of the disability community.

The success of the Leadership Academy also highlights the vital role of federally and state-funded programs, including UCEDDs, SCDDs, Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agencies, and LEND programs, in advancing inclusive leadership development. These organizations make up the DD Network and play a central role in promoting community living, inclusion, and self-determination for disabled people.

The high satisfaction rates, strong retention, and consistent attendance observed in the pilot cohort suggest that participants found the structure and content of the Leadership Academy meaningful, accessible, and aligned with their interests in advocacy and leadership development. The fact that 100% of participants reported growth in their advocacy knowledge and skills suggests that the Leadership Academy successfully filled a critical gap between traditional self-advocacy training and broader leadership preparation.

The strong reception to sessions like “Advocacy in Practice” speaks to a desire among Fellows to move beyond theoretical knowledge toward applied advocacy experiences. This echoes literature calling for a shift from self-advocacy as an endpoint to self-advocacy as a foundation for broader systems-level leadership (Schena et al., 2023). Notably, the interest expressed in applying these skills in workplace and career contexts further demonstrates the importance of integrating leadership development with real-world settings.

Moreover, qualitative responses from Senior Fellows highlighted the meaningfulness of having a space to explore leadership identity through the lens of lived experience. Respondents cited personal motivations to support their communities or challenge inequities they themselves have faced, reflecting disability studies frameworks that position lived experience as valid and essential to leadership (Feldner et al., 2022; Ryan & Guthrie, 2023).

Despite this, most existing leadership programs fail to support disabled learners in moving from participation to replication, that is, from “learning” to “leading.” The Leadership Academy begins to address this gap. However, sustaining and scaling such efforts will require additional attention to mentorship models, peer leadership roles, and opportunities for participants to teach and train others. Doing so would align with implementation science models emphasized in professional development and help formalize pathways for continued leadership growth within and beyond UCEDDs. To sustain and scale efforts like the Leadership Academy, it is essential to apply principles from implementation science. Implementation science principles emphasize the need for components such as ongoing coaching, fidelity monitoring, and adaptive leadership support to ensure successful program replication (Fixsen et al., 2005). These components align well with the Leadership Academy’s design, particularly the use of a Coaching Academy and peer mentorship as supports. Furthermore, embedding the program within existing infrastructure such as UCEDDs and LEND programs mirrors implementation strategies that focus on utilizing established systems to promote long-term integration and expansion (Juckett et al., 2022).

Amplifying the Role of UCEDDs in Leadership Development

Findings from the pilot implementation of the Leadership Academy underscore the unique position UCEDDs occupy in fostering inclusive leadership development for disabled individuals with IDD. By leveraging interdisciplinary training expertise, community partnerships, and longstanding mandate to promote self-determination, UCEDDs can support advocacy skills and actively cultivate pathways into teaching, mentorship, and systems-level leadership roles for people with lived experience.

This pilot also demonstrates how UCEDDs can align with multiple core areas of the DD Network’s mission. First, it reflects a direct impact on individuals, with participants gaining concrete skills, confidence, and community connection in ways that promote long-term engagement. Second, it supports workforce development, not only by training future self-advocate leaders, but by preparing staff, faculty, and peer facilitators to practice inclusive, strengths-based approaches to leadership training.

At a time when the future of the DD Network is uncertain, documenting and disseminating these kinds of inclusive, replicable models is essential. UCEDDs have the infrastructure and expertise to scale such programs while centering lived experience, which remains critical to dismantling structural barriers and ensuring disabled individuals are not only present at decision-making tables but also empowered to lead them.

Limitations and Future Directions

Because of the pilot nature of the Leadership Academy, the initial cohort was small and led at a single UCEDD site. While this allowed for closely monitored facilitation and intensive support, it limits the potential generalizability of findings to other UCEDDs, other states, or broader populations. Although DD Network partners were engaged during the pilot, future iterations could explore expanded partnerships with SCDDs and P&A agencies to increase reach and systems-level integration. Findings should be interpreted in the context of the small sample size. Survey findings were based on the responses of 6 program graduates and the qualitative themes were established from four interviews with Senior Fellows. While these findings are promising, they should be used to guide larger studies with more diverse samples.

The nomination of participants also presents a limitation to generalizability. It is likely that those who enrolled had a higher baseline interest in policy and advocacy than the general population of disabled people. While this may limit representativeness, the Leadership Academy was intentionally designed as a voluntary program for those seeking to grow their leadership capacity, making interest in advocacy an expected interest of participating Fellows.

Finally, efforts were made to recruit diverse voices reflecting a range of disability experiences. Even so, the pilot cohort did not fully represent the spectrum of communication preferences, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, or support needs within the disability community. Future cycles should aim to broaden outreach and co-develop content in collaboration with Fellows who reflect a wider range of intersectional identities and lived experiences.

Future research should examine larger samples of program graduates and include long-term follow-up surveys and interviews to examine outcomes associated with participation in leadership and advocacy roles within community organizations, academic settings, and government. Additional methods may help clarify long-term impacts derived from the program outside of attendance and satisfaction outcomes.

Conclusion

In sum, the flagship cohort of the UCLA Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders and subsequent inclusion of program graduates as Senior Fellows demonstrates that disability-led leadership programs are not only feasible but necessary. Programs like the Leadership Academy can be models for UCEDDs and other DD Network partners seeking to invest in meaningful leadership, policy, and advocacy training for and with disabled people. As

demonstrated, with adequate funding and support, UCEDDs and DD Network partners can effectively work with the disability community to provide vital leadership training. Moving forward, scaling these efforts will require continued support from the DD Network partners and continued funding. By centering disabled voices at every stage, from curriculum design to coaching and teaching roles, UCEDDs and their partners can build a future that truly reflects a sense of belonging.

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