Can leadership be taught? The answers vary widely, even among experts at Duke and alumni working in the field of leadership training.

Last spring, freshmen in Alma Blount's public-policy class "Civic Participation and Community Leadership" had to demonstrate what they'd learned by preparing to lead class discussions themselves. Four student teams were each assigned broad topics ranging from democracy and the media to grassroots political organizing. Cathy Fisher of Boca Raton, Florida, says the course, part of Duke's Hart Leadership program, showed her that "leadership can't be taught by a text like most Duke courses. It is a process."

Throughout the course, students read the daily op-ed pages of The New York Times and prepared to debate the issues of the day in class, with Blount often playing devil's advocate. By the end of the term, Fisher says, she and her classmates were ready to lead the conversation themselves. "I would define leadership," she says, "as engaging people in what you're doing, learning to involve different points of view, and then being willing to compromise sometimes."

Meanwhile, in Gerald Wilson's history seminar "Leadership in American History," students spent the spring semester examining larger-than-life historical and contemporary political figures, along with fictional accounts of leadership gone awry in such classics as All the King's Men and Lord of the Flies. Wilson, senior associate dean for Trinity College, focuses his course on the ethical dilemmas in decision making and the various characteristics that might define a leader, while debunking some myths along the way.

On the graduate level, 2004 marked the kickoff of the Fuqua/Coach K Center of Leadership and Ethics--a brand new enterprise in the business school designed to connect a host of courses, conferences, research projects, and training events on leadership and ethics already under way or being developed. Duke men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, author of The New York Times' business best seller Leading with the Heart, will teach at the center during the off-season.

The variety of approaches offered at Duke could be viewed as a microcosm of the way leadership is viewed and taught around the country. The schools of thought on the subject--its true nature and whether it is an innate characteristic or a teachable skill--are legion. A raft of books on the topic has emerged in the last decade and a half, and a burgeoning demand for how-to workshops, seminars, retreats, and immersion programs for both for-profit and nonprofit leaders and would-be leaders has created a veritable leadership industry. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)--for the last three years,
named as the top source for leadership education on the planet by Business Week—is now a $60-million operation with some 500 staff members and offices in La Jolla, Colorado Springs, Brussels, and Singapore, in addition to its headquarters in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Nevertheless, the terms of the game remain elusive, and the answers to the question, Can leadership be taught? vary widely, even among experts at Duke and alumni working in the field of leadership training. Recent theorists have come to focus less on the personality characteristics and traits that make a good leader (the leaders-are-born-not-made theory) in deference to a more relationship-based outlook that suggests it is the attention and care leaders bring to their interactions with followers that define effective leadership.

"Leadership is 90 percent people skills and about 10 percent functional skills," says Barbara Demarest '83, a CCL executive. "A leader must be a learner, and, increasingly, he or she must know what other people in the organization bring to the table and be able to create relationships among them, so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Demarest says that CCL does not have a party line on what makes a good leader. "It's more complex than a simple list of characteristics," she says. "We work out of an adult-education model, focusing on developing the leader and the organization's capacity for leadership. Most of our work is with people who consider themselves good leaders, and our job is to help them become better."

CCL is probably best known for the series of diagnostic tests, interviews, and feedback tools that it employs to help individual clients and leadership teams assess their strengths and weaknesses. The organization has worked with Fortune 100 companies; federal agencies, including the military and the CIA; large nongovernmental organizations; school systems; and the governments of Canada and Scotland, among others.

Nancy Cardwell '69, who writes books on leadership, also subscribes to the idea that a good leader is someone who takes the time to listen and learn from his or her colleagues. "What leaders do is teach," she says, "and they must be constantly learning at the same time. You can't send in consultants to get the feedback or engage in the dialogue with staff. You have to be there." Cardwell, a former news editor and assistant managing editor at The Wall Street Journal, served as project manager and writer for The Leadership Engine: How Winning Companies Build Leaders at Every Level and The Cycle of Leadership--both books based on the research of Noel Tichy, a professor of organizational behavior and human-resource management at the University of Michigan Business School.

Cardwell argues that the relentless demand for learning and rapid adjustment in contemporary organizations has fundamentally changed our understanding of what leadership is. "The world is moving so much more quickly, particularly with technology. In the past, a company could thrive on a single good idea for fifteen or twenty years. Now any good idea can be copied almost instantly. You can't leave people sitting in place. A leader must have a plan and a way to describe it that keeps people moving."
CCL's Demarest confirms that trends in leadership training have reflected the changing times, along with certain developments in the social sciences. In the 1970s, she says, the emphasis was on improving the individual leader's self-awareness; in the 1980s, a team-building approach took precedence. In the 1990s, many trainers and coaches turned toward helping corporate leaders deal with the challenge of blending organizational cultures following a merger or acquisition, while also helping them to consider the implications of doing business in international markets. Likewise, nonprofit organizations began to take notice of the need to be more inclusive of diverse groups in their leadership teams, in an effort to be more representative of the populations they serve. "Now we are looking at the connectivity among all these factors to build a leader's capacity," Demarest says.

At Duke's Fuqua School of Business, connecting the dots among the many factors that shape a successful leader has always been a schoolwide concern, but, until recently, the effort lacked focus and cohesion. "At Duke we found that we were teaching management under the guise of leadership, but we really didn't know enough about how to teach leadership," says Sim Sitkin, an associate professor of business administration. Part of the challenge, Sitkin explains, has been the lack of scholarship on the topic. "Lots of the leadership literature out there is sexy but not very well grounded in research, while the research that is careful is largely irrelevant."

Enter Coach K, who, in his book Leading with the Heart reveals some simple leadership principles: truth-telling, trust, risk-taking, accountability, and discipline--elements that he says have served as the ethical grounding for his successful teams at Duke. Ready with basketball as operative metaphor and his phenomenal record as empirical proof, Coach K and the athletics department approached Fuqua with the idea of an annual conference on ethics and leadership. The first conference, in 2002, left students, alumni, administrators, and the school's corporate clients clamoring for more. Fuqua dean Douglas Breeden pressed for more courses on leadership, more visiting scholars to speak on the topic, and additional leadership training opportunities for M.B.A., doctoral, and post-doctoral students.

In response, Sitkin and his colleagues agreed that the best way to approach leadership would be in the context of ethics. "Ethics without leadership has no legs, and leadership without ethics has no heart," he says.

While simultaneously working to ramp up research and develop a curriculum of specialized, skill-based courses on such topics as group facilitation, coaching, and improvisational leadership, Sitkin and Allan Lind--now co-directors of the Fuqua/Coach K Center of Leadership and Ethics--have also devised an elegant, integrative model of leadership along six dimensions that serves as the basis for their teaching and for a book in progress. Sitkin believes that leadership is eminently teachable.

"It doesn't mean that personal attributes don't count," he says. "But leadership is a behavior, and behaviors can be learned." The model that he and Lind have developed not
only defines the most useful behaviors for a leader to exhibit, but also considers the function and impact of the behaviors on the organization and individuals being led. According to Sitkin and Lind, a successful leader will: communicate his or her vision and values and come across as authentic; demonstrate genuine concern and understanding for others in the organization; foster a sense of coherence and community in the midst of complexity and constant change; create confidence and enthusiasm so that individuals will want to do what's difficult; give people what they need to succeed, including criticism and support, while also encouraging them to exercise their own best judgment; and, accept the mantle of leadership, recognizing that advancing the organization, not the leader, is fundamental.

"This is not a superhero model of leadership," Sitkin stresses. Different people have different strengths, and any one of the six dimensions can move in and out of prominence over time. Strong leaders will build teams that exhibit all these qualities and then determine which aspect they most need to emphasize in the moment, depending on the demands of the situation—whether the organization is in a start-up phase or in crisis, or is undergoing a major change such as a merger or acquisition, he says. Researchers at Fuqua also are exploring how different professions tend to spawn different leadership styles and comparing how those styles manifest themselves in health care, sports, and the military.

Working with seasoned business executives and Ph.D. and M.B.A. candidates on leadership skills for future application in a business context is one thing, but working with undergraduates who are still exploring what might become a life's work requires another kind of approach. Duke's Hart Leadership program emphasizes opportunities for students to wrestle firsthand with leadership dilemmas—in the classroom and in the field.

Hart program director Alma Blount says she doesn't even like the word very much. "Leadership is an abstraction," she says, "and the word 'leader' keeps the focus on a person rather than the work. Leadership is an activity—it is getting people to engage in a learning process, to pay attention to what is in front of their noses, and to confront the discomfort and resistance that comes when we try to tackle the tough social issues that affect our work places and communities." By this definition, Blount explains, leadership is an activity that rocks the boat, destabilizes the status quo, and requires collective, fresh thinking about common problems.

"It doesn't matter what your politics are in my classes," says Blount, who teaches the "Civic Participation and Community Leadership" freshman course. "It is about engaging across our differences. I dare students to take a stand in class, but I tell them, 'If you are just pontificating from your position, you are not exercising leadership. A leader has to listen and understand the other side.' " To this end, Blount has her self-identified liberal students read conservative political journals and vice versa, "so that they might begin to see the aspects of truth in an opponent's argument rather than demonize the Other," she says.

"Alma holds the class in a trustworthy way while shaking them up and making them

"Alma Blount has developed an exemplary approach to the formation of leadership skills," says Parks. "She challenges her students to marry their passion to strategic wisdom. Other undergraduate programs tend to work only with top students and give them certain skills enhancements, but the Duke program gives students a rightly timed challenge in class and in the field." Cathy Fisher, now a sophomore, says, "before taking Professor Blount's course, I lived in a bubble. I had no idea of what was going on in the world around me." Now Fisher reports that, as a direct result of the "Civic Participation and Community Leadership" class, she has registered to vote and, this August, attended the Duke Student Leadership Retreat in Beaufort, North Carolina.

Beyond introductory courses on leadership theory and civic participation, the Hart program offers immersion experiences in communities around the world, so that students may quickly confront the complexity of social problems such as youth violence, AIDS, and inequality in education and health care. Negotiation, collaboration, and working across cultural, racial, and economic differences are central to these experiences. The summer after his freshman year, junior Hirsh Sandesara worked as a medical assistant in a clinic for the homeless in Albuquerque, New Mexico; he says he was surprised how quickly his stereotypes of the homeless were contradicted.

Jennifer Farrell '04 interned at the Amy Biehl Foundation in Cape Town, South Africa, and developed a program to train youth offenders in emergency medical techniques as an alternative occupation to their violent pasts. Farrell was profoundly challenged by the limited prospects of the young prisoners she taught. In her journal, she wrote about her horror upon learning that the boys she was working with had been raped while in prison. "I knew this kind of thing happened, but now I was looking at fifty faces who were real people, and on top of that, only children," she wrote. "I felt embarrassed that I was even there, the only woman in the room, only a few years older than they were."

Reflecting on her experiences now, Farrell says, "I went to Africa feeling pretty powerless to help with the big problems that I saw every day. I used to think leadership was about being a person in a powerful position, but I came home believing that anyone can be a leader by taking action. I did something while I was there. Now telling about it, writing about it, is also a form of leadership. Being informed is a tool of power." Based on her Africa experience, Farrell has decided to defer medical school for at least a year and is shadowing a physician in Scotland to learn more about socialized medicine.

Examining the lessons in these internships is a key component of the Hart program. Back
on campus, students are required to devote significant time to the hard work of reflecting critically and writing about their positive experiences and the limits of their ability as individuals to effect change. They are required to "make meaning" of what they've witnessed. The goal is to have students be able to examine any leadership challenge from what Heifetz calls "the dance floor" (a detailed, on-the-ground observation of the particular situation) and from "the balcony" (a wider view of the issues and players in context).

As a Hart Fellow in India working with a social-service agency, Laura Thornhill '03 wrote in her journal about a growing awareness of cultural obstacles to addressing discrimination and violence against women: "While things at home are of course far from perfect, at least there is an awareness of gender issues and the space and vocabulary to discuss them."

For these students, coping with discomfort, clarifying personal values, and questioning the relative privilege that has characterized their lives are other critical parts of the Hart leadership training. It's a given, Blount says, that a major research university such as Duke is educating the next generation of leaders, but the task is not just to help them prepare for success in their careers and private lives. "They need to learn what it means to be a public citizen, to articulate their own moral compass, and to go public with what they have discovered and what they believe. Too many Duke students have been programmed not to rock the boat," she says. "They are rewarded for knowing the answers and for not stirring things up, not making people feel uncomfortable."

Tony Brown, one of Blount's primary colleagues in the Hart program, works with students to create specific leadership projects that are more local--to apply their emerging social values in organizations and communities around Durham. Through Brown's Enterprising Leadership Incubator, teams of Duke students have taught financial planning to middle-school students, launched an after-school basketball camp, raised a whopping $500,000 to equip and provide coaches for inner-city youth athletic teams in Durham, and provided cost analysis and planning to improve the traffic pattern around the Durham School of the Arts (the proposal was accepted by the city and endorsed by Durham voters in a bond referendum).

In working on these projects, Brown says, students learn that there is a place for ambitious, competitive, market-oriented people to act on their social values. "Mastering knowledge here is not the main thing," he says. "It is how to analyze a situation, do the critical thinking, and figure out what you can and can't change." Brown argues that the old business-school model of "plan, organize, motivate, and control doesn't work any more as a leadership style." In his classes, students have to master the task of building collaborative relationships with people in the community to get their projects done.

For his part, Brown doesn't believe leadership can be taught. "I'm suspicious of recipes," he says. "What we are doing is creating opportunities for learning, but the students are responsible for the outcomes. Enterprising leaders say, 'Because I can do something about this problem, I will.' That's what leadership is--not running a company, but seizing
opportunities to make a difference in the communities where we live and work."

Nevertheless, Brown has to disabuse his students of certain preconceived notions. "Duke students tend to use the 'E' word, as in, 'Can you tell me exactly how to get an A in this class?' I tell them we are not in the 'exactly' business."

In a similar vein, David Guy, the writing coach on the Hart program staff, works with students in finding their own public voices to speak to the issues they are passionate about. Guy '70, M.A.T. '77 tells his students: "Get out of the performing mode. Tell me what you really see and think!" And in class discussions around difficult social issues, Alma Blount is quick to point out to students when they are only demonstrating that they have read the assigned text and not moving the conversation into a genuine exchange of competing perspectives on the topic. The goal of the program, Blount says, is to launch a process of analysis, reflection, and action that students will use and refine over a lifetime.

Another leadership training experience that emphasizes civic participation and experiential learning is a North Carolina-based program for young professionals who are at least five years into their careers. Founded in 1995, the Wildacres Leadership Initiative selects a diverse group of twenty-five promising young leaders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors across the state to become William C. Friday Fellows in Human Relations, named in honor of the longtime president of North Carolina's public-university system. Leslie Takahashi Morris M.P.P./M.E.M. '87 was selected for the first class of Friday Fellows. After finishing her own fellowship, Takahashi Morris was invited to become the initiative's executive director and charged with continuing to refine and improve the curriculum.

Like the Hart program, the Friday Fellows experience emphasizes the formation of values and is constructed to challenge participants to reflect on their leadership roles in the context of the multiple cultures represented today in North Carolina. In an intensive, two-year sequence of seminars and individual projects, each class of fellows explores a range of leadership theories. In collaborative teams, they are also forced to experience and reflect on the ways in which their own differences in race, class, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, and cultural backgrounds might offer important data for each person's future leadership styles and strategies. The long-term goal of the program is to create a network of rising leaders in North Carolina that will trump old hierarchies of traditional power and privilege.

"I'm still not sure that leadership can be taught," Takahashi Morris says. "I think you can give people some management tools, help them understand themselves, and invite them to focus on their sense of purpose, their core values and intentions in their work."

Even so, she says that the Friday Fellowship program has resulted in some seismic changes in individual fellows' perspectives on how to work together in a pluralistic society. "I think the two biggest challenges facing all of us are the reality of the changing demographics of leadership in North Carolina, the nation, and the world, and what that means for leadership theory," she says. "After World War II, we had to face the end of a
certain idealism as we dealt with the horror of the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bomb. People are not as trusting anymore of authority or that 'might makes right.' We don't have a whole lot of heroes anymore."

Trinity dean Gerald Wilson says he agrees. But he also notes that we continue to idolize those leaders from the more distant past, "because we didn't know as much about their foibles. We long for that idealized leader--the 'I-cannot-tell-a-lie' stories that are present in children's historical biographies." Americans still suffer from "the Log Cabin Syndrome," which, in turn, prompts candidates--North Carolina senator and vice-presidential hopeful, John Edwards, for example--to promote their humble origins and endlessly recount the drama of a bootstrap rise to leadership, he says. But this nostalgic view ultimately has little to do with an individual's ability to lead in rapidly changing times.

Her interest in helping to develop new models of leadership that buck tradition is partly what led Leslie Takahashi Morris to leave her position with the Friday Fellowship and enter a Unitarian-Universalist seminary. She was already deeply involved in church polity along with her husband, who is also a clergyman.

In religious institutions, perhaps more than in any other field, upheavals in leadership have tested tradition at every turn. "As mainline Christian denominations have allowed more people of color and women in leadership roles, and some churches have begun to deal with the sexual orientation of clergy and congregants, it has become a much more complex picture," says Takahashi Morris. She is particularly interested in how churches might experiment with new forms of democracy in their congregational decision making. "Leading requires a more facilitative and listening style in order to handle the complexity and paradox of the times," she says. "After all, what we have now was designed long ago by white men for white men and landowners. The world looks very different today."

Sharon Daloz Parks, the leadership-study author, concurs, adding, "There's a great deal that passes for the formation of leadership that does not help us in grappling with the hardest problems, especially those that require new learning. We live in a time of profound change at every level, and our hunger for strong leadership is deepened in these times. We tend to look at people in positions of authority for leadership, and they always disappoint us. We expect them to lead us through change while also holding us in equilibrium, which they can't do.

"We are working on so many unknown conditions in this new era of human life, and we have to think more deeply about life itself--what matters, what's at stake--all of which opens us to a deeper dimension."

Eubanks '76 is a frequent contributor to the magazine.

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Published Bi-Monthly by the Office of Alumni Affairs.