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Understanding Predictors and Formative Experiences of Females in Student Leadership

Dauthan Keener
Taylor University

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UNDERSTANDING PREDICTORS AND FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES OF
FEMALES IN STUDENT LEADERSHIP

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Professional and Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Dauthan Keener

May 2012

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTERS THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Dauthan A. Keener

entitled

Understanding Predictors and Formative Experiences of Females in Student
Leadership

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the
Master of Arts degree

in Higher Education and Student Development
May 2012

Tim Herrmann, Ph.D. Date
Thesis Supervisor

Scott Gaier, Ph.D. Date
Member, Thesis Hearing
Committee

Scott Moeschberger, Ph.D. Date
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

Tim Herrmann, Ph.D. Date
Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student
Development

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Thesis Supervisor: Tim Herrmann, PhD.

Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Committee Member: Scott Gaier, PhD.

Coordinator of Academic Enrichment Center, Assistant Professor

Taylor University

Committee Member: Scott Moeschberger, PhD.

Professor of Psychology

Taylor University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand what experiences and factors led female student leaders to pursue leadership and to understand whether or not the gender of a mentor or role model of a female student is significant. Six female student leaders were participants and were interviewed using a grounded theory qualitative methodology. Responses were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed to determine the central themes from the interviews. The strongest themes were the identification of organization and relational ability as important leadership traits to the participants, the influence of family and role models, the importance of the mentor, the value of being a mentor to peers, pre-college leadership experiences, self-perception in relation to male leadership, the recognition that males and females are equally adept at mentoring female student leaders, and the importance of balance. Recommendations for practice and future research are also included.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Women are outnumbered by men in upper-level leadership positions in the marketplace as well as within higher education (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). Moreover, the difference and its importance are highlighted by the fact that according to Cullen and Luna (1993), the ratio of female students to female faculty was seventy-to-one, and the ratio of male students to male faculty was fifteen to one. This is despite the fact that, according to Grebennikov and Skaines (2009), “[w]omen seem to take higher education more seriously than men” (p. 71). Still, issues such as the predominance of men among the faculty and administration, systemic resistance to change, and a hesitance to cater to the needs of its students in new ways mean that the university can still be a more challenging place for female students to maneuver than it is for their male counterparts. As women have made up a consistent majority of the university student body for many years, it has highlighted the need for institutions to help make the university experience a satisfactory one for female students.

Astin and Leland (1991) studied three chronologically divided groups of women who were active agents of change through the latter half of the twentieth century and found that those women cherished education, just as the contemporary college woman do (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009). This group also had influential adults in their lives when they were young women, such as parents or notable high school teachers who served as role models (Astin & Leland). In addition, these women tended to be firstborn children,

to have parents who cared about the rights of others and social justice, and, as they entered leadership positions, to have role models and mentors of either gender.

Mentoring offers an opportunity for students and faculty to connect outside of the classroom in a way that can be beneficial for students. Astin and Leland (1991) noted the importance of personal connections, such as mentoring or role-modeling, between successful women. Since mentoring has been linked with student satisfaction rates, implementing mentoring programs between faculty and students with specific goals in mind can be one way to offer assistance to a broad range of students (Strayhorn & Sadler, 2008). Women have consistently made up the majority of the university student body for several years; from the 1995-1996 school year through 2007-2008, women have made up about 56-58% of the population of undergraduates at American universities according to a report from the American Council on Education (Fuller, 2010). This highlights the importance of a university culture that is welcoming for both female students and female faculty and staff. Astin and Leland found that in higher education in the mid-20th century, the women they studied dealt with difficulties such as a dearth of financial aid for married women, the denial of passage of exams due to the assumption that women would only follow their husbands, and a lack of classes during evening hours or for non-traditional students. Thus, female faculty might have a deep understanding of the difficult issues still faced by female students and an understanding that conditions have improved for that population throughout the past half century. Mentoring might offer a forum for helpful communication between these two groups.

Due to the persistent nature of the gender gap of college students for more than a decade, understanding how to assist female college students toward effective leadership,

greater academic achievement, and student satisfaction would be useful for universities in aiding a large portion of the student population. These are also factors that would point to increased retention. Therefore, this study will aim to answer the following questions:

- What is the significance of the gender of a role model or mentor to a female student?
- How do female student leaders view their own leadership abilities?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentoring

In a study by Brown (2005), 68.6 % of female college presidents' mentors were male before the women achieved the presidency. Cullen and Luna (1993) also found that among 24 women who were in upper-level administrative and academic roles, 3 had no mentor, 5 had a female mentor, 8 had a male mentor, and 8 more had at least one mentor of each gender "but indicated the importance of the male as mentor for their career progression" (p. 129). In contrast, Casto et al. (2005) point out the importance of having a female mentor: "[W]omen who mentor women can help counter possible feelings of isolation or fears of failure that may be engendered in the course of pursuing higher education, especially in a male-dominated field" (p. 331).

Finding a female role model or mentor can be even more challenging for female students than it is for staff or faculty. One reason this is true is the aforementioned ratio of female students to faculty reported by Cullen and Luna (1993). Other participants in the study by Cullen and Luna said that some female administrators feel threatened by the presence of other female administrators. This could be due to a fear of tokenism, which occurs, according to Chandler (1996), when "accomplished women or minority-group members who, once selected into a commonly white, male inner circle, become labeled as the 'token' representative for their group" (p. 83).

Montgomery and Newman (2010) pointed to significant research on groups susceptible to tokenism, as well as its effects. They hypothesized that feelings of

tokenism would cause the female student leaders in their study to doubt their own effectiveness and be less satisfied than their male counterparts. Their hypothesis proved incorrect, as the study did not find difference by gender in either self-assessment of effectiveness or satisfaction. Still, if female administrators do feel threatened by the presence of other female administrators due to tokenism, and if mentoring prepares the mentee for professional advancement, then tokenism can create a disincentive for women to mentor other women. In a study regarding the role of mentoring among the female presidents in the Council for Christian College and Universities (CCCCU), Yordy (2009) found that mentoring – either formal or informal – was valuable in the professional advancement of the women interviewed. However, these mentoring relationships were part of a larger theme of the importance of relationships.

Facilitating mentorship for female students who desire a mentor takes on greater significance due to the scarcity of female faculty relative to male counterparts and relative to the number of female students. Matching female students who desired a mentor with female faculty members willing to mentor them could be especially valuable to women in male-dominated fields, such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). A study on the effect of college on students indicated that senior males with high grade point averages studying education or science had the highest scores in intellectual (Hassan, 2008). It stands to reason that being guided through a largely male field by someone who has navigated it before could have multiple benefits.

Strayhorn and Saddler (2008) found that there was a correlation between black students' college satisfaction and their participation in faculty-student mentorships. The study found that students in research-focused formal mentoring relationships saw

increased satisfaction, but those involved in informal mentoring relationships saw no statistically significant effect from such relationships. This only further highlights the problem of a lack of female faculty and administrators who could potentially enter formal mentoring roles with students. The study found no significant difference by gender with regards to college satisfaction and mentoring. However, the study makes no mention of the sex of the mentor in these relationships.

Female Leadership in Higher Education

In a study by Feibelman and Haakmat (2010) in which the heads of 548 different independent colleges or universities participated, only 26% were women. As of 2007, the percentage of female presidents within the CCCU was drastically lower than that, registering at 3.85 – only 4 out of 105 CCCU presidents were female (LaFreniere & Longman, 2008). According to the American Council on Education (2010), the proportion of women in higher education presidencies has increased from 10% in 1986 to 23% in 2006. This illustrates that in spite of the majority that women hold among the student population, men still hold a majority of college and university presidencies.

The lack of women in administrative higher education leadership is less drastic in non-presidential roles, though, according to the study by Feibelman and Haakmat (2010). Sixty-one percent of the 514 non-presidential respondents were females. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) also indicates that women are well represented elsewhere in higher education. According to NCES (2008), 46% of faculty members at American degree-granting institutions in the fall of 2007 were women. The same report (NCES) also indicated that women comprised 53% of “executive / administrative / managerial” positions in such institutions. According to another report by NCES (2009),

women also earned 51% of the doctoral degrees in 2007-2008. This indicates that there are a growing number of highly capable female students, faculty members, and administrators in the United States. Within CCCU institutions, women hold only 19% of leadership positions at or above cabinet-level. In contrast, over 50% of such positions are filled by women at other private, 4-year colleges and universities (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010).

At the undergraduate level, student government reflects a similar phenomenon. According to a survey of 21 higher education institutions by Miller and Kraus (2004):

Simple analyses showed that while women held nearly half (a mean of 47.9%) of the student government positions, the majority of student government leaders were male. In our sample, 71.4% (15 / 21) of the student government presidents and 71.4% (15 / 21) of the vice presidents were male. (p. 425)

This was true of the 5-year period Miller and Kraus (2004) studied on the whole, with only 27 female presidents chosen in 105 elections over those 5 years (25.7%). Female vice presidents were chosen at a higher rate, winning 47 of 105 elections over that span (44.8%). This illustrates that in both student government leadership positions as well as higher education administrative positions, women occupy roughly half of all positions, but are represented at a much lower rate in the highest-ranking positions.

Despite these issues, the percentage of female leaders in student government (Miller & Kraus, 2004) and in higher education faculty and administration (NCES, 2008) both still outpace the representation of women in the United States' House of Representatives (16.8%) and Senate (17.0%) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011).

Feibelman and Haakmat (2010) write that the paucity of female leaders “is directly connected to cultural attitudes toward women as leaders” (p. 82).

Resistance to female leadership is even more evident within some evangelical Christian communities. Such resistance is present both generally among female undergraduate college students and also in some on-campus ministries at higher education institutions. In their study of the impact of gender role ideas on career aspirations, Colander and Warner (2005) found a significant correlation between women holding an egalitarian position and having higher career aspirations. In the evangelical context, egalitarianism is the idea that the position of women is not hierarchically below men and that women are allowed to attain the same positions of leadership within the church that men are (Colander & Warner). Research by Colander and Warner also found that a very large number of female students who studied at an evangelical Christian liberal arts university represented complementarian views in their responses to protocol questions. For example, less than 10% of the women in the study felt that women could hold equal positions in the church and “201 out of 271 women believed that the wife was responsible to tend the domestic chores of the home” (Colander & Warner, p. 226).

Bryant (2006) studied a campus Christian fellowship that strongly reinforced specific gender ideas reflective of the belief of the director of the program, who admitted that Christians of good faith disagreed with his understanding of leadership and gender roles as prescribed by the Bible, but the director and program still operated from a complementarian framework. According to the director of the Christian fellowship program, such a framework posits “that men and women are completely equal before God, but I think their roles are to be slightly different. I don't want to say slightly...their

roles are just different” (Bryant, pp. 622-623). Other reasons given by the program members for this perspective included an innate desire for women to be led and in men to lead, or that the staff of the group lacked women simply because many of the women in the group were preoccupied due to the fact that they were mothers. Bryant's study makes no mention of women in the group who desired to lead or women who were not mothers; the author notes finding only one egalitarian among the women of the group but a “significant handful” (p. 626) of egalitarians among the men.

The Uniquely Female College Experience

Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) found ten items in their study at an Australian university that were significantly more important to female than to male students, including access to resources such as the library, computers, and copying and printing capabilities, as well as learning current information about what employers need and value. Strikingly, the gap in the study between female students' expectations and satisfaction exceeded the gap among male students. This difference suggests that improving the understanding of what matters to female students could go a long way to increasing satisfaction among females.

This seems to indicate that a collateral benefit of improving the college experience for females would likely be the improvement of the college experience for males, too. There were two themes in the research of Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) that emerged which all students felt needed improvement, but females significantly more so: “(1) efficient, accessible and responsive administration; and (2) relevance and instructional clarity of the course” (p. 83). This seems to indicate that females have

stronger ideas about how to improve the college experience, as might be expected given the added difficulties they face.

Kim and Sax (2009) found that females were more likely than males to correspond with faculty in person or via email about courses, while males were more likely to speak with faculty during class sessions. The same study found that for both genders, course-related student–faculty interaction related to higher college GPAs, larger gains in critical thinking and communication, and greater satisfaction with overall college experience (Kim & Sax).

Thus we see that females have a significantly different college experience than do their male counterparts in learning, communication, and leadership (Astin & Leland, 1991; Kim & Sax, 2009). Addressing needs specific to women is critical for increasing student satisfaction and academic achievement (Grebbinikov & Skaines, 2009; Kim & Sax). The aforementioned findings by Kim and Sax on the differences in communication style by gender might indicate that female students would benefit more from individual attention from faculty than would their male counterparts. Mentoring relationships offer one manner of increasing that contact.

Student Leadership

While leadership is desired in organizations the world over, agreeing on a definition of it is no easy task (Bolman & Deal, 1991). “[I]t is not simply a matter of wielding power or occupying a certain position,” (Bolman & Deal, p. 421). Instead, leadership is an agreement, implicit or otherwise, between a group and its leader(s) that goals or tasks can be accomplished better through the vision and decision-making

presence of a leader or leaders than without such a presence. Student leadership occurs when this phenomenon happens with a student or students leading other students.

In a study by Posner (2009), students of both genders who experienced a leadership development program as freshmen were more likely than a “quasi-control group” (p. 557) to exhibit leadership behaviors as seniors. However, this does not account for the interaction of what Wolf (2000) calls “pre-matriculation characteristics” and the experience of college (p. 341). The study exposed only business students to the freshmen leadership development program, which Posner readily admits might have limited his study. One means of developing student leaders is simply offering a class or other form of formalized leadership development.

Boatwright and Egidio (2003) examined the psychological characteristics that affected the desires of female college students to pursue leadership positions in their future. They found that “femininity (gender role), connectedness needs, and self-esteem” tied significantly to the hope of future leadership among the women they studied (Boatwright & Egidio, p. 660). The study replicated the results of an earlier study in finding that high femininity was tied strongly to low desire to achieve leadership positions in future jobs. Their study found a positive relationship between the desire for impacting and beneficial relationships with others and leadership aspirations. Somewhat surprisingly, the same study found that there was not a significant connection between the fear of being judged negatively and leadership goals. Self-esteem scores were positively correlated with striving for leadership (Boatwright & Egidio). If institutions desire to develop female student leaders, then, the study by Boatwright and Egidio indicates that they can do so by encouraging self-esteem and the desire for strong relationships with

others. Both self-esteem and the desire for strong relationships had larger magnitude positive effects on leadership aspirations than the magnitude of the negative effect of femininity.

In summary, while women so far have been granted fewer opportunities proportionally within higher education to hold positions of the highest level both on an administrative level and a student leadership level, progress has been made over the past two decades towards increased opportunities (American Council on Education, 2010; Feibelman & Haakmat, 2010; LaFreniere & Longman, 2008; Miller & Kraus, 2004). Women stand to benefit greatly from role modeling or mentorship from other women within their field (Casto et al., 2005). However, there are a variety of significant barriers to this, such as the sheer paucity of female faculty or the lack of willing female mentors for fear of being replaced as the token female in a setting (Cullen & Luna, 1993). These barriers can be even more challenging in some conservative religious contexts, where visible leadership positions are seen as the realm of men only (Bryant, 2006). In addition, female students experience unique challenges, communicate with faculty differently than males, and offer a different perspective of improvement to the university (Grebbernikov & Skaines, 2009; Kim & Sax, 2009).

Despite all of this, Montgomery and Newman (2010) did not find female student leaders to be judged to be less effective than their peers. Also, Boatwright and Egidio (2003) found that women with high self-esteem and a strong desire for healthy relationship were likely to desire leadership roles in future employment opportunities. These findings could give higher education institutions an idea of what characteristics to foster in female students to assist them on the path to leadership and to identify which

female students are primed for leadership roles already. According to Boatwright and Egidio, there exists a solid understanding of how to develop leadership in female students who already exhibit desires for such roles but much less of an understanding of how to encourage that desire. For example, fostering self-esteem and strong relationships helps develop leadership, but less is known about the methods to foster the desire for leadership (Boatwright & Egidio).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Grounded Theory

For the purposes of this study, grounded theory methods were used to identify experiences, relationships, traits, and other factors that have formed the student leaders chosen as participants. Grounded theory is defined as a systematic, qualitative research approach used to create a theoretical explanation of a topic (Creswell, 2008). This methodology was selected because it treats individuals with care, represents the nuance of a complex situation, and can be utilized where existing theories might be of little use (Creswell). Grounded theory methodology is useful to those who experience that which is being studied as well as those who experience it due to its grounding in collected data (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002). Grounded theory also highlights that which is significant in a study through continuous comparison between the information in the study (Creswell).

Participants

Participants in this study were female student leaders at a faith-based Midwestern liberal arts university. All participants were required to be undergraduates in student leadership roles at the time of their selection or to have had such a position during the previous semester. Examples of such leadership positions include but are not limited to resident assistant, student government roles, and leadership roles within student organizations. The criteria for consideration of a job or role as a leadership position were as follows: students must have applied and been interviewed for the position by a staff or

faculty member, or they must have been elected by the student body. The role must also require leadership of and interaction with other students. While it is possible that these criteria excluded some students who were considered student leaders by their own institution, it was intended to be inclusive and clear.

In order to study specifically that which forms women in student leadership, of course all of the participants were female. Six women took part in the interview process in order to provide a breadth of experience. They represented different types of mentoring relationships: for example, formal or informal, with faculty or with non-faculty, directed or not directed. The various types of mentoring and the different self-perceptions represented by these women contributed to saturation.

Directors of departments that supervise student leaders at the institution in the study were asked to recommend the most effective female student leaders from their department. The guiding criteria for this selection were as follows: extent to which the student leader embraces all the aspects of their leadership role and participation in a regular mentoring-type relationship (informal or formal) or prior experience with such a relationship (see Appendix A for an example of a request for such a recommendation). These recommendations were then aggregated and analyzed by the researcher in an effort to determine which leaders were most widely recognized for their excellence.

Procedure

Subsequently, selected participants were contacted via email or telephone communication in an attempt to arrange interviews. In an attempt to answer the research questions, the participants were asked to describe that which led them to pursue student

leadership and any significant relationships that were a part of that pursuit. Students were also led to self-assess their leadership capabilities.

Prior to participating in the interview, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix B). Before any of the students in the study were interviewed, a pilot interview was conducted with a student who met the qualifications for inclusion in an attempt to assess the research protocol's ability to lead students to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2008). Following this pilot interview, the interviewee provided feedback about the protocol and changes were considered. Some minor changes were made for the sake of clarity. The pilot interview was included in the study. An interview protocol can be found in Appendix C. Interview lengths allowed for variance due to the nature of the individual and the flow of the interview, but were roughly 45 minutes in length on average.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded. Upon their completion the researcher then transcribed the interviews and analyzed the transcriptions and the other information gleaned from the interview, such as observations recorded in notes, using open coding to group the data into categories and subcategories (Brown et al., 2008; Creswell, 2008). In the next step of the analysis, the researcher will perform axial coding, where one category is identified as the "core phenomenon" and all other categories are analyzed in relation to it. This follows the grounded theory research design of approaching a group of persons with similar experiences in an attempt to formulate a generalized explanation of what sets apart excellent female student leaders (Creswell).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The results apparent in the interviews revealed a wealth of information about the experiences and ideas of the women who participated. Many of the responses formed themes that pertain to the research questions, which were: (a) “What is the significance of the gender of a role model or mentor to a female student?” and (b) “How do female student leaders view their own leadership abilities?” In response to the research questions, the study found that while there was little stated difference in mentors by gender, male mentors were more uniformly praised than female mentors. All of the women were confident in their leadership and acknowledged that their gender played a role in shaping their leadership. Also, all of the women spoke of leadership in terms of organizational and relational skills, and all of the women spoke of having very supportive families.

The most common themes that emerged can be divided into 3 categories: mentoring, leadership, and gender. While overlap exists between all 3 to some extent, gender was an intrinsically significant part of both mentoring and leadership themes. Each of those 3 categories can be subdivided into more specific themes, as is evident in the recounting of these themes below.

Mentoring

Significance.

A guiding research question of this study was, “What is the significance of the gender of a role model or mentor to a female student leader?” More of the mentors and

role models named by the female student leaders were women than were men by an overall ratio of 13 to 5, but there was not a difference in the impact of the mentor or role model based on gender. In fact, male mentors were more uniformly praised than female mentors. Two students said that they gained confidence through their relationships to their male mentors. “I don’t know what I would do without [my supervising male mentor],” said Whitney. Another student decided to pursue a leadership role a second time after observing the passion for mentoring and sacrifices for students exhibited by a male faculty mentor.

Students also said that their mentors were supportive and integral in their choice to apply for leadership positions. Besides the aforementioned story of a faculty mentor’s influence, 3 other students indicated that mentors played an irreplaceable role in supporting and encouraging student leadership pursuits and other continued involvements. Within their student leadership roles, students found their mentors helped them to excel by helping them work through challenges, modeling excellence, instilling confidence, and by both making suggestions and providing room to grow.

In many cases, the women made it clear that they recognized the importance of mentoring in their own lives. For example, Kate has had the same mentor during her entire 4-year college career: a woman with whom she attends church who is a professor’s wife. Because her experience has been so enriching, Kate expressed a desire for her institution to more actively provide mentors to students who might want them, whether or not those students were leaders.

Experiences as mentor.

Each student leader interviewed is also actively mentoring at least one younger woman. Many of these mentorship roles are organically formed and informal but meet with rigorous regularity. Students expressed discomfort leading older peers throughout their interviews. This likely contributes to the informal nature of these mentorships, as does the fact that all of the peer mentorships were with women, all of whom are younger than the mentor. Erica said that she saw mentorship as her principle role with the female student leaders she supervises but acknowledged feeling limited by being at a similar life stage to those she mentored.

Some of these relationships have made notable impacts in the lives of the mentors and the mentored. Kate mentors the woman who succeeded her in her largest student leadership role; this mentoring relationship has been in place since Kate left that role. Ellen meets regularly with one of the women she mentors over a book. Debby expressed that she has grown from being a mentor. These outcomes are very similar to the outcomes the student leaders' mentors have fostered in them, which presents another example of mentors modeling practices that the student leaders implement.

Leadership**The influence of family.**

Every student leader spoke of the positive impact of one or both of their parents on their development of leadership abilities and desires. For half of the interviewees, the largest contribution of their parents to their development of leadership was through modeling, and for the other half the largest parental contribution was an encouragement

to pursue leadership. The specific things valued by each student differ considerably and are described below.

Kate decided to pursue leadership and learned of the importance of mentoring through watching her father mentor young men in the church her family attended. She saw his impact in the faithful devotion those middle school and high school aged men developed and maintained even when they would go away to pursue higher education. Kate pursued leadership roles and mentoring relationships as soon as she was able upon arriving at college.

Whitney also benefitted from the modeling of a parent who was intimately familiar with what leadership looked like. Whitney's mother was a single parent, and because she led Whitney's family in many ways, Whitney saw her mother as a holistic leader. Whitney's mother also works at a leadership development center, and Whitney values that her mother's work is not limited to gender-specific leadership topics but instead that her mother's work is "transcendent of gender." Whitney's mother also modeled an excellent posture of leadership through a humility and willingness to acknowledge that she was imperfect.

Erica said that her parents' biggest contribution to her pursuit of leadership was their desire to care for others. This care manifested itself as leadership with some regularity, but Erica appreciated that her parents led as a pursuit of caring for others, not as an end unto itself. Similarly, Erica acknowledges that she is a leader but emphasizes that she, also, leads because she cares.

Laura said that she comes from a small family and so both her parents and her grandparents have encouraged her to have high expectations of herself. Debby said that

her parents have always been supportive, even through her failures. Finally, Ellen said, “My whole life I’ve been told I was a leader,” but she has had to figure out how that manifests itself in her life. Her older brothers were also leaders, and she needed to find out how she was a leader, too.

The influence of faculty and peers.

While each of the student leaders interviewed had multiple mentors, many of the mentions made of faculty and peers were of admiring their work from a distance, not of working with them as supervisors or co-workers. Most of these role models were at least personal acquaintances, and proximity to them allowed students to observe their work and character. The students’ general reasons for admiring faculty and peers were similar: they found them to be effective leaders with admirable traits. Specifics varied, however, beyond a general admiration of excelling, especially in a challenging role, and in some cases specifics were not very clearly articulated.

Almost all of those named as role models were either current or former supervisors, students’ major field faculty, or fellow cabinet members. When students spoke of faculty, they tended to focus on diligence and professional traits and experiences, as well as a personal connection with that faculty member. When speaking about peers and supervisors, students focused on more on the nature of their personal relationship with the role model.

Pre-college leadership experiences.

Four of the 6 women interviewed in the study spoke of leadership experiences that they had before coming to college. These experiences helped them to learn to lead, develop a desire to pursue leadership while in college, and affirmed that they could be

leaders. Most of these experiences occurred in youth ministry contexts within their church during middle school and high school, although some spoke of leading at school and in athletics. Having some leadership experience before going to college helped students understand that they could lead peers.

Self-perception in relation to male leadership.

The women interviewed were keenly aware of the traditional expectations and gender differences of leadership, and it permeates the various self-perceptions present in their words. Erica articulated a feeling of being inferior as a leader due to her gender:

I have noticed this, too: even in our meetings with guys and girls, um, the girls will say or mention one thing, um, the guys will say something else, and typically that's what's, that's what's thought of or talked about first, um, sometimes eclipsed, um, or like, we'd rather have a guy, but a girl will fit.

The specificity of Erica's story is unusual among the interviewees, but anxiety about feeling marginalized due to gender was not unusual. The impetus for this feeling was different for different students. Kate recognized that institutional leadership was mainly older white men. Laura said it seemed easy to be a leader as a female because there were more women, but males were pursued to be leaders because fewer of them sought it.

Whitney worries that the positive feedback she received was overzealous because she is a woman and others want to affirm her. She specifically sought a leadership position that was not gender-specific. She wanted to avoid the stigmas of being a woman in leadership to combat attitudes like the ones exhibited toward Erica in the quote above. Finally, Debby worried that others would assume she got the role she has because of her

close relationship with a high-ranking male and not for her own merit. In short, these young women are aware of leadership gender stereotypes and take a variety of approaches to break those down or resist them.

Busyness and balance.

As previously mentioned, each of the women meets with multiple mentors. Each of them has also had multiple leadership positions either on- or off-campus during their time at college. Most of them either spoke of having learned to pursue balance by avoiding over-commitment or bemoaned a current state of being stretched too thin due to their commitments.

Laura has learned to become a better leader through boundaries during her second year in her current role. “I can’t do my role justice when I’m trying to do too many other things,” she said. Erica feels a similar tension but made a commitment to herself to be a part of a specific off-campus volunteer ministry throughout her 4 years at college and has maintained that commitment alongside a leadership role, in spite of the challenges it provides. Erica also spoke of admiring the ability for excellence amid balancing a busy load of commitments exhibited by a female faculty member within her major field.

Ellen learned while studying abroad that she did not always have to be doing something and that, instead, she could be with people and value that time: “[H]aving a year off, um, just kind of transformed that idea of always having to be doing something to find my worth or to be a good leader.” Kate has scaled back her involvement from holding 3 leadership positions as a sophomore to 1 each as a junior and senior. Balance was an issue with the other women, as well, but was more evidenced through their practical pursuit of it than through a change from the past. They did not necessarily refer

to a past experience of over-commitment in speaking about balance but did emphasize its importance to their academic and leadership pursuit.

Self-perception as gifted leaders.

Participants were selected because supervisors of student leaders recommended them as exemplary leaders, but discovering how they thought of their own abilities was the aim of one of the research questions. Overall, the women interviewed were confident in their student leadership abilities. Kate said she did not think she was being a good student leader this year, because she is less invested and has found it difficult to feel invested with decreased involvement. However, she said that nothing was holding her back from being a better leader than her own lack of initiative this year and self-confidence.

Debby was less confident in her natural abilities but spoke confidently of effort and characteristics she thought were important. The discomfort that some women experienced while mentoring peers was also present in leading peers for Debby, who said, "So [leading peers] is kind of hard sometimes, when I feel like I shouldn't be a leader, when I'm just like, 'I'm learning from you just as much as I'm teaching you.'" Whitney, Laura, and Erica thought themselves to be good leaders. "I could've done so much better with more preparation and more training," Erica said. Ellen said whether she was good at leading or not varies depending on the whether or not she is too concerned with herself that day.

Organization and relational nature as leaders.

It became clear when the women spoke of their leadership that they valued organization and having a relational nature the highest among various characteristics of

leaders. Some of the students also specifically connected those two traits to being a woman, implying that men led in a different, more visionary style. Students who did not feel organized felt it was a drawback to their leadership.

Kate spoke of being both organized and relational, and she connected her desire and ability to lead relationally with her gender while also acknowledging that men, too, can be relational. Both of these traits were brought up frequently and independently while speaking about leadership, especially leadership styles. These women value organization and relationships above other traits in student leadership.

Intrinsic motivation of leadership roles.

When asked about their motivation in their leadership roles, each participant spoke of being motivated by the purpose or mission of their organization. Each of these women – who work in a variety of leadership areas – finds motivation to do her role from the aims of the organization. Ellen spoke of the role as a platform on which to use her gifts.

There was certainly some variance in articulating the purpose of their organizations, but that is due to a diverse group of purposes. Only 1 student spoke of her role as an opportunity to build her resume, and she did so as a secondary value of the role. It is also a leadership position within her field of study.

Gender

Perceived impact.

Every woman interviewed acknowledged the impact gender had on her leadership. However, interpretations of its impact differed. Erica and Laura both confirmed that being a woman had impacted their leadership, but they could not

differentiate the impact of their personality and gender from each other. Whitney spoke of intentionally avoiding the sort of leadership position where she would only lead women and said she is motivated by her gender to be a better leader. She spoke of desiring to be excellent in her work in order to transcend the stereotypical understanding of female leaders as being emotional and second-rate. Kate, also, noted that working together on a leadership team with both genders feels empowering.

Debby wondered whether there was a limit to the type of leadership position a woman can hold, and she also wondered what it would look like for a woman to be in a role at that limit. “[W]hen I hold that position, will people respect me more, will people respect me less, how will they look at me?” Debby said about high-ranking student leadership positions, “[T]here’s never been really a question in my life whether or not I should do something. No one’s told me, since I’m a girl, I shouldn’t do something.” Debby indicated that her curiosity about the roles females can attain is based in social signals rather than explicitly stated limits.

Kate said that she would like to see more female institutional leaders at her school, noting that most of them were men and that she believed that there was an organizational assumption that men are supposed to be primary organizational leaders, “probably ‘cause we’re a Christian institution and that is still a large part of the Christian church as a whole.” Erica also said that she perceived that it was “more acceptable for guys to lead.” Ellen said she thought that women were less respected in leadership and that women are not granted the same authority as men. Ellen also said, “I respect a lot of women in leadership, but a good male leader, I probably follow better.” In saying this, Ellen was acknowledging that she theoretically supports women in leadership roles,

which is congruent with her holding a role and speaking highly of other female leaders. However, she is also admitting that, in practical terms, she follows men more readily.

In her personal leadership, Kate says she needs to feel established in her role to be a good leader and that relationships lead to trust; she wonders if those things are related to feeling inferior as a female leader. Ellen also thinks that women have an opportunity to provide a different approach to leadership and said, “I think you need both perspectives for healthy leadership.”

Personal concerns.

Gender also made an impact in the sort of leadership approach the interviewed women took. Debby worries that she might accidentally flirt with men while meeting with them. She also worries that occasionally others, including her fiancée, scrutinize her for meeting with men for leadership-related purposes. While Kate acknowledged that men could be strongly relational, too, she indicated that women tend to operate in a relational framework more than men do.

Debby was also self-conscious about this, saying that males are ascribed more proficiency and less emotionality than female leaders. Whitney felt as though there is a stereotype that ascribes to women too much emotionality to lead well, and she said that she tries to avoid acting like “an overemotional woman leader.” She also tries to avoid creating programs that would appeal solely to women.

This creates an interesting paradox because, as indicated earlier, most of the women felt that only organizational skills rivaled “being relational” as a positive leadership characteristic. To be a relational leader does imply a greater level of emotional investment than leadership styles valuing hierarchy. However, as previously mentioned,

the women often connected organizational and relational traits with specifically female leadership, implying that men led differently. Whereas most of the women felt comfortable aspiring to an even more relational leadership style, this made Debby uneasy. Whitney directly rebelled against, this clearly indicating that she rejects the notion that women must lead differently than men.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The importance of mentoring, prior leadership experience, and a supportive family background are evident from the interviews and themes. Overall, the women thought themselves to be exceptional leaders, and the exact relationship between that self-perception and those influences is not especially clear. Do students feel they are strong leaders because they have been told they are and because they feel equipped by mentors, peers, and family? Or do they feel they are strong leaders intrinsically and then assign responsibility for that development to extrinsic factors? Either way, there was a strong connection between familial support and the pursuit of leadership, which mirrors the connection between influential adults and professional leadership found by Astin and Leland (1991).

Surprisingly, there was little evidence that students with female mentors had a better mentoring experience than did students with male mentors. While the literature might have led to an expectation that females in student leadership would have benefitted from female mentors, this study has done nothing to indicate that male mentors are doing a subpar job of supporting female students. In fact, if there was any difference by the gender of the mentor, it was that female students with male mentors spoke more highly of their mentors than did their counterparts with female mentors. As implied by Brown (2005) and stated by Cullen and Luna (1993), this seems to indicate that male mentors might offer an advantage to female students that female mentors typically do not.

Running counter to Casto et al. (2005), women with male mentors in no way indicated greater fear of failure or feelings of isolation. This raises the question of whether having an empowering male mentor has benefits for females in student leadership that might be unique from female mentors. For instance, does having a supportive male mentor allow female students to feel as though they are accepted in and prepared for leadership in a way that those with female mentors are not? Yordy (2009) found that for female Christian college presidents, “male and female mentors are equally beneficial, and women in higher education are wise to take advantage of the benefits that both male and female mentors can provide” (p. 37).

Each of the women also spoke of personal experience mentoring younger women. The women indicated that they had benefitted from mentoring which suggests that one way institutions can provide mentors to more students is to depend on student leaders to mentor younger students. This experience is beneficial for the student leaders and provides a mentoring relationship to a younger student who might not otherwise find one. While the benefits from peer mentoring might not be as far-reaching as the results from a more traditional mentoring relationship, it can still be an enriching experience for both parties. The importance that the women indicated they placed on their own experience being mentored by older peers indicates that the mentored student benefits, as well.

While students value role modeling within their field, traditionally by faculty, personal relationships made a far greater impact on the students. Students simply indicated that they learned more and more greatly valued their mentoring relationships than their experience observing role models. This was true in familial relationships, as

well: while students valued what they learned from observing parents and other family members, they had much more to say about the things those persons actually taught them.

Perceptions of differences in gender, specifically as those differences pertain to leadership, were very familiar to the student leaders. Students expressed experiences of being marginalized, intentionally or not, and anxiety about marginalization due to their gender. Helping female student leaders to understand that their work truly is valuable and can stand on its own is important and difficult. One student worried that others would think she achieved her position due to her fiancée's position. Another student expressed concern that she received overzealous praise for her work from others, even including her mentors, whom she considered excellent. This pair of stories indicates that even being explicitly affirming might leave female student leaders doubting the motivations of their mentors.

Almost all of the student leaders either currently or previously had held multiple leadership positions at one time. Since identification with the purpose of the organization in which they work was a strong motivating factor for students, it makes sense that they might pursue multiple passions through multiple leadership positions. However, students also indicated that life balance was critical for effective leadership, academic success, and their personal well-being. Over-commitment differs for each person; certainly some students could maintain a healthy balance while holding two leadership positions, but most students have plenty of challenge and fulfillment from one leadership position at a given time.

Perhaps the most unexpected finding was that the students frequently spoke of leadership through the dual lenses of organizational and relationship skills. It is unclear

why these traits were valued so highly above others and is certainly worthy of future research. Figuring out a way to talk about or model other leadership traits for female student leaders might provide valuable different perspectives.

Research Limitations

One limitation of the research is the sample size: 6 women were interviewed in the research for this study. While the data indicates that there was thematic consistency and a variety of experiences were represented within the interviews, it is possible that further study would have resulted in more robust findings.

A second limitation is that all of the interviews for this study occurred within one student population on one campus. Therefore, identifying whether or not themes are a specific phenomenon irrelevant to other student leadership settings is a significant challenge. The specific type of institution might add to the limitation in this regard, as well. It is a small, faith-based, Midwestern liberal arts university where student leadership is highly valued among students, staff, and faculty. Whether the findings would be replicated at a dissimilar institution is unclear.

Implications for Future Research

The experience of student mentors was a topic that arose in each interview, as every woman mentored at least one other student. While the women spoke of enjoying such experiences and felt as though they were important, delving into the specifics of students mentoring other students was not a goal in this study. However, given that all of the interviewed students participate in such a relationship, often without a formal reason to do so, it seems as though learning more about the process and outcomes of such a relationship for the mentor is worth researching. Here students seem to avoid the fear of

tokenism that Cullen and Luna (1993) found among female administrators. This could be taken as an encouraging sign that a younger generation of women feels comfortable enough in their place and abilities that they no longer feel threatened by other women due to a fear of being replaced as a token woman.

All of the students indicated that they felt very supported by their parents and even extended families in leadership, both before and during their college experience. This made it difficult to determine whether their families were generally supportive and leadership was simply another thing to support, or whether they specifically encouraged leadership in their children. A comparison group of students in leadership without supportive parents could provide a fascinating counterpoint to the experience of students who have only known support.

Research into longitudinal mentorship effects on students, specifically student leaders, might help create a curricular approach to mentorship across a students' time under a mentor. For instance, are freshmen non-leaders in need of a specific and different type of mentorship than upperclassmen leaders? Are freshmen in mentoring relationships with faculty or other students especially likely to pursue leadership roles later in their career, or later in life?

As noted in the results section, the women spoke of their leadership style almost exclusively in light of organizational and relational skills. A map of leadership characteristics that considers the experience of leaders of both genders could begin to represent leadership characteristics in a way that represents the different styles of leadership skills individuals may possess. Hopefully, this would help to define leadership characteristics outside of traditional, gendered understandings.

Implications for Practice

First, institutions should do whatever possible to provide mentorship to students, regardless of the gender of the mentor. As previously mentioned, women with male mentors did not indicate in any way that they were unsatisfied with the mentorship provided and in fact might have even valued their experience more than their counterparts with female mentors. This information, coupled with the established value of experiencing mentoring, ought to lead to an increase in mentoring programs across campuses.

Even student-to-student mentoring ought to be encouraged in an effort to expose as many students as possible to the benefits of mentoring. This ought to be preceded by training in mentoring, but if upperclassmen (specifically students already in leadership positions) had the encouragement to enter peer-mentoring relationships, mentoring outcomes would be magnified, even if peer mentoring were less effective than staff or faculty mentoring.

While male mentors might have a similarly beneficial impact in the lives of female students, males cannot be female role models in institutional leadership. The impact of high-ranking females in the university was mentioned by several of the interviewed women in some fashion. The role modeling they can provide is beneficial, as it can help change the perception – of self or of others – that females are second-rate leaders.

Finally, practioners need to encourage balance – this is aided by creating leaders and allowing freshmen to lead, lest the overachievers take multiple leadership positions and overextend themselves. This provides valuable leadership opportunities to capable

freshmen and discourages over-commitment. If this study is any indication, students who feel as though they are strong leaders are likely to see leadership needs and fill them.

While such high-achieving students are likely capable of overextending themselves and still succeeding in both leadership and the classroom, it can be an unhealthy approach.

Also, more students are exposed to leadership if other students fill those roles, an experience that, according to Posner (2009), might lead to stronger development of leadership characteristics in those students over time.

Ideally, a better understanding of that which forms leaders can help researchers, educators, and practitioners cultivate stronger leadership in a greater number of students. Such an understanding provides insight into how best to challenge student leaders and support them in their pursuits. While it is not possible for every student to have a mentor, recognizing that female student leaders benefit from mentors of either gender expands the pool of available mentors for female students. Knowing the challenges and perspectives of female student leaders also suggests potential for future research and programmatic responses to the need for leadership and mentoring.

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APPENDIX A: FEMALE STUDENT LEADERS & EXCELLENCE: A
QUESTIONNAIRE

In order to answer the following research questions:

- What is the significance of the gender of a role model or mentor to a female student?
- How do female student leaders view their own leadership abilities?

the researcher intends to interview between three and five female student leaders from your institution. Criteria for selection for this study is extent to which the student leader embraces all the aspects of their leadership role, participation in a regular mentoring-type relationship (informal or formal) or prior experience with such a relationship, and general excellence within her role. Data will be collected through interviews with females in student leadership roles on several different campuses. If you have any questions about the nature of the study before you agree to participate, do not hesitate to ask. I would be happy to share the findings of this study with you after I have completed my research. The names of participants will not be connected to the findings of the study in any way, and only the researchers will know your identity.

The following list includes the names of all of the female undergraduate students at [name of institution] who currently occupy student leadership roles. All of the women on this list either went through an application and interview process or were elected by the student body to attain their current position. They may or may not be paid, but their position must require them to lead other students. From this list, please pick two or three women who exhibit excellence in leadership in their current role.

[list of leaders]

Please provide any comments on the list below:

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title: “Understanding Predictors and Formative Experiences of Females in Student Leadership”

That which follows is provided to assist you in deciding whether or not to participate in this study. Please know that it is your right to choose not to participate in this study or to discontinue your participation at any time without your withdrawal affecting your standing in your leadership position or your college or university.

This study is designed to determine that which has led you to pursue and excel in a student leadership role on campus. Data will be collected through interviews with females in student leadership roles on several different campuses. If you have any questions about the nature of the study before you agree to participate, do not hesitate to ask. I would be happy to share the findings of this study with you after I have completed my research. Your name will not be connected to the findings of the study in any way, and only the researchers will know your identity.

This and all other interviews for the study will be recorded with two recording devices: my personal laptop and one other device obtained from the institution at which I study. I will personally transcribe each interview from the audio. The audio and transcriptions will be stored on my personal, password-protected laptop, and an external hard drive in my locked apartment. Any printed transcriptions will also be kept behind a lock in my apartment.

There are not any known risks or discomforts associated with this study. I expect that the benefits of this study will be a greater understanding of what shapes and

motivates women to pursue leadership roles while studying as undergraduates at a higher education institution.

If, in the knowledge of the study's purpose and procedures, you agree to participate in the study, please sign below.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Dauthan A. Keener, graduate student, Taylor University (615) 482-7048

Taylor University's Institutional Review Board: irb@taylor.edu

R. Edwin Welch, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board, Chair

Taylor University

236 W. Reade Ave.

Upland, IN 46989

(765) 998-5523

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How did you come to be in a student leadership role?

Who or what influenced your decision to pursue such a role?

Did anyone encourage you to pursue a student leadership role?

What motivates you within your role?

Do you regularly meet with someone in a mentoring relationship?

If so: do you have multiple mentoring relationships?

Are you the mentor or the mentee in this relationship?

What is the gender and vocation of any person(s) with whom you meet?

Do you think that you are a good student leader?

Describe the personal characteristics that make you a good/poor/average leader.

Do you think that anything is holding you back from being a better leader?

If so, what?

Has anyone in your life inspired you to pursue leadership? Who?

How would you describe your leadership style?

Does your student leadership position allow you to work with one or both genders?

What are some of the benefits or drawbacks of being a woman in leadership?

Do you think that your gender has an impact on your leadership?

If so, please describe how.

Who are some leaders – students or staff/faculty members – on campus that you admire?

Do you have a personal relationship with any of those individuals?

How has/have that/those relationship(s) impacted your leadership?

Are there any resources you wish you had access to for support?