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Andrea N. Timmerman
Davenport University

Laura M. Rodeheaver-Van Gelder
Calvin College

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Program Model for Women's Leadership Development and Career Success

Andrea N. Timmerman
Laura M. Rodeheaver-Van Gelder

Davenport University
Calvin College

Abstract

In our work with students in the residence halls, we identified a need for additional education regarding professional identity formation among female students. We have found a naivety in students regarding the current climate of the American workforce and potential challenges women may encounter in their career fields as it pertains to gender norms, gender-bias, and inequity. In thesis research by Timmerman (2013), it was found that the workforce climate remains bleak for female professionals. While women make up the majority of the American working population, very few hold management or senior-level positions within their field. Current research indicates that colleges and universities by and large do not prepare female students for navigating the difficulties of gender-bias in a contemporary workplace. In response, a women's leadership event was designed to provide one programmatic step toward addressing this educational gap.

For a number of years, optimism prevailed among new and hopeful female professionals regarding gender equity in the workforce. However, research by Noble and Moore (2006) shows these early signs of optimism to be waning as women are continuously marginalized. Some gains have been made, but the gains are marginal considering that women are earning over 60% of university degrees (Farrington, 2012). Conversely, undergraduate students largely carry the perception that a gender gap no longer exists in a contemporary professional setting, and will not impact them in the workplace (Garcia, 2009). Yet current statistics reveal this to be a misperception, particularly in upper-level management and high-ranking leadership roles (Farrington, 2012).

While there has been some marginal increase in women holding managerial positions in the past few decades (Latu et al., 2011), women are still largely underrepresented. Particularly in business and corporate leadership roles, in medicine, in faculty positions within higher education, and in the sciences and engineering, women have not achieved equity. It would seem that the higher the position and ranking, the fewer female faces can be seen in these roles (Farrington, 2012). Moreover, it is only the most exceptional women who rise to the top of their prospective field, and of these, few remain long term (Sipe, Johnson, & Fisher, 2009).

Characteristics often associated with upper-level leadership roles have long been attached to men more so than to women (Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra, 2006). Additionally, women receive subtle negative gendered cues in the workplace, which leak into their perceptions of opportunity for employability, growth, and professional development (Garcia, 2009). There is added difficulty for women in balancing home and work, battles of constant competition, and often a pre-established hierarchy of male dominance in higher-level administration. Overall, women are bowing out of higher-level roles. Some are choosing not to pursue them altogether in light of the barriers they may face (Noble & Moore, 2006) and discouragement they receive.

Research also indicates that sex-segregated work environments, with primarily male leadership, can foster a work environment that is less than congenial to women (Garcia, 2009). For example, in environments with few women in leadership, research has shown that female employees remain less confident, and thus they avoid opportunities to lead in general (Garcia, 2009). Women may also see the lack of women in upper-level positions as professionally threatening, which can negatively impact work performance and participation (Yeagley, Subich, & Tokar, 2010). Furthermore, women are not concentrated in roles which emphasize power, authority, or leadership. This lack of concentration contributes to steering women away from that pursuit altogether (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006).

According to Noble and Moore (2006), women generally play an important role in the workplace and without them in senior leadership roles, there is a lack of diversity, perspective, and approach. Additional research by Farrington (2012) would indicate that

the pursuit of gender equity in leadership is imperative in providing access to a diverse talent pool in a world where educated and thoughtful leaders will evoke positive societal change.

The overall quality of companies, businesses (Noble & Moore, 2006), and, in the case of our research, Christian institutions of higher education, is being impacted by gender inequities. Out of the 108 CCCU institutions, a 12-year study by Anderson and Longman (2011) showed that most CCCU campuses average a female student population of at least 60%, yet administration represented in these institutions is by and large dominated by male professionals. In 2010, at the conclusion of their study, 78% of CCCU schools had one or no female members on their executive leadership teams (Anderson & Longman, 2011). Complicating the issue, there are historical and theological barriers still in place for women attempting to gain leadership positions within Christian higher education. Particularly for colleges and universities closely associated to a specific denomination, the theological constraints add additional complexities for female employees as they strive to grow in leadership or attain higher-level positions (Anderson & Longman, 2011). While acknowledging these complexities, the fact remains that subtle gendered messages to students on CCCU campuses are being absorbed daily. When women in higher education hold few administrative positions, female students struggle to picture themselves in an upper-level leadership role in their own career.

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Thus, if undergraduate students have the perception that today's workforce has achieved gender equity (Garcia, 2009), and research indicates that this is not the case (Sipe, Johnson, & Fisher, 2009), then what better place to model gender-balance in leadership than in Christian higher education, where leaders have a critical influence on the next generation of professionals?

Response to Findings

In response to this research, and our own experiences in Christian higher education, we chose to develop a program for female undergraduate students that might spur conversation and learning on these topics. The program came out of a desire to educate women on gendered messages being communicated in contemporary culture. We hoped to assist female students in the process of shaping long-term career goals, and we desired to do so in a way that prepared them to thoughtfully engage with brokenness in the professional world as it pertains to gender.

Among our female residents, we saw natural leadership skills and the desire to cultivate those skills in a profound way. However, we found that the leadership training and development we were providing in the undergraduate setting did not speak directly to gender, its social construct, or the disparities young women might face following their time in collegiate leadership roles. Nor did our leadership training address the issue of long-term career goals for these students or how those goals may be impacted by gender inequities or societal gender-bias.

Research by Sipe et al. (2009) would recommend that colleges and universities should help students dispel the belief that gender equity is no longer an issue. There is a need for colleges and universities to do more in the area of preparing female students for the potential gender-related challenges that they will face in the pursuit of upper-level professional leadership roles.

Many institutions of higher education remain fairly silent in terms of educating female students about the potential socio-cultural implications gender may have in relation to employability (Garcia, 2009). Colleges and universities generally place emphasis on individual skills and abilities rather than highlighting gender differences in student development efforts. Gendered patterns, gender-related bias, and inequality are topics often avoided (Garcia, 2009) or simply left unaddressed. This led to the question: as Christian institutions of higher education, are we preparing our female students to be faithful to their vocational calling, with the additional recognition and preparedness for the aspects of the workforce that have been impacted by brokenness in our culture? How are we preparing them to respond to what society tells them is true about their gender identity? Are they prepared to boldly, professionally, and graciously respond when they are faced with a disparity that is perceived to be gender-related?

Theoretical Background

Theory of Self-Authorship

The theory of self-authorship was consulted in the design of the women's program as it was recognized that the internal ability to define one's own belief system, personal identity, and positive social relations is critical to a thriving career. In a longitudinal study exploring working adults, Baxter Magolda (2008) discussed the level at which these adults drew upon their identity, core beliefs, and ability to navigate relationships in order to function well in the workforce. Creamer and Laughlin (2005) also linked self-authorship with career-decision making for women as far as how they utilize others' advice in order to determine future career paths. Baxter Magolda called educators to recognize the importance of applying the constructs of self-authorship in order to aid college students in their own meaning making. It follows then, that when a person knows himself or herself well, they are better able to pursue a career that offers fulfillment.

Through qualitative research with college students, Creamer and Laughlin (2005) affirmed the connection between self-authorship and career-making decisions. They found that, particularly in the beginning stages of self-authorship, women are heavily influenced by the people whom they hold in high regard. It is suggested that students are influenced by parents in career decisions, and other mentors may need to develop relational rapport with students in order to also influence career choice (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005).

Additional mentors should also explore messages students have received from immediate mentors, such as a parental influence, and then seek to "model and support more complex ways of knowing by helping students consider the limits of relying exclusively on people

in their immediate environment” (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005, p. 24-25). Student affairs professionals may also employ elements of self-reflection in order to guide students toward a defined internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2008). An educational community that encourages students’ self-authorship would help students identify primary voices of influence and seek to expand students’ understanding of their own identity and future career options.

Through the lens of this theory, evidence suggests that young women are more apt to follow the advice given to them by those with whom they have a close relationship. According to the research of Creamer and Laughlin (2005), proponents of this perspective assert that counselors, teachers, advisors, as well as other educators may systemically share some of the responsibility for the under-enrollment of women in certain fields. This directly correlates to the subtle, and potentially menial, messaging communicated to students by people whom they trust in positions of authority. Interconnectivity found between women and these outside influences may attribute to one reason why women are underrepresented in fields that are often regarded as masculine, such as those in science, technology, engineering, and math (Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra, 2006).

A large part of a person’s identity lies in what they believe to be true about who they are, how they understand life, and how they live. A person’s gender is a large component in the identification of those truths. There are messages sent from birth that directly link to a person’s sex, and those messages interface with decision making, thought processes, and goal-setting. A coherent sense of authentic identity will allow a person to operate with confidence and certainty, even in the face of difficulty, challenge, or setback. However, that identity is undeniably influenced by its surrounding culture. This presents both positives and negatives as we work to address these issues in our current context.

Social Cognitive Theory

Both internal and external factors contribute to women’s leadership aspirations as they enter the professional world. The social cognitive theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the social lens through which women approach decision-making processes, and ultimately, careers (Yeagley, Subich, & Tokar, 2010). The theory proposes that “a triadic relationship [exists] between individual differences, environmental factors, and behaviors that together explain occupational interests and goals” (Conklin, Dahling, & Garcia, 2012, p. 69). Therefore, the need to examine gender and its implications on leadership potential and success for women is magnified. The process of identity development that women experience is more complex than that of men (Coogen & Chen, 2007), with young girls experiencing negative gender-role orientation and limiting gendered socialization. This process impacts both life and occupational roles that at times may interface with adverse societal stereotyping (Coogen & Chen, 2007).

The concept of self-efficacy is a component of the social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy is defined as an estimate of one’s ability to successfully perform tasks in a given domain (Coogen & Chen, 2007). Thus, a woman’s perceived ability influenced by internal and

external factors communicated verbally and non-verbally over the course of a lifetime has an impact on career choice and overall leadership role pursuit (Yeagley, Subich, & Tokar, 2010). This suggests that a woman's self-efficacy is so heavily influenced in the negative that her affective commitment toward a certain end-goal is not enough to accomplish her highest career goals (Coogen & Chen, 2007).

Women's Leadership Event

The program, presented at Calvin College, a Christian liberal arts institution, centered on providing undergraduate women with current information on gendered-related challenges women face professionally and equipping them with essential tools and skills to best navigate these difficulties. Specifically, self-branding was addressed, meaning how particulars of appropriate, professional dress holds the capacity to express a person's core values and brings self-awareness in regard to long-term career goals. Additional topics were navigating movement forward or upward in a specific career, and being people of influence in current and future contexts.

Specifically, the women's leadership program sought to fulfill four main objectives:

1. Participants will be able to recognize and discern the importance of presenting oneself modestly and professionally in the workplace.
2. Participants will be able to understand the concept and value of networking within the career field as it pertains to gender.
3. Participants will be able to understand the complexities of future work environments and how to navigate these environments well.
4. Participants will begin to engage in conversation regarding their interest in attaining leadership positions in their future career field.

It was important in our conception of the program to tie the objectives closely to the learning outcomes of our institution's residence life program. We desired that participants would gain additional tools for thriving as independent adults, both in college and as they move into their career fields. This aligned with the Calvin College Residence Life objectives of growing students in personal responsibility, creating just relationships, and desiring purpose and congruence for all students living within the residence halls (Calvin College, 2014).

Thus, we desired to educate participants regarding unjust practices related to gender in order to encourage just relationships, as well as to help our students become "responsible participants in their communities" now and in future work environments (Calvin College, 2014). In all these things, we hoped participants would grow as faithful citizens living out their vocational calling and embracing a positive sense of identity, specifically in regards to their gender (Calvin College, 2014).

The format for the event consisted of three female keynotes at different levels of leadership and within various professional fields. The first session covered self-branding, looking specifically at the empowerment of women through the articulation of their clothing and asking the question: does their “self-marketing” reflect their values, principles, and career goals? The second session helped women begin to navigate what setbacks and challenges may arise in the pursuit of career goals. Finally, the third session addressed the importance of being women of influence in professional settings. As we did not focus on any specified career fields, participants were encouraged to use the framework of a future career in order to effectively translate the content into a future professional context.

The first keynote speaker directed participants through a reflection identifying core values to construct their personalized brand. This session guided students toward self-awareness, giving tools to select professional style that represented explicit career goals and aspirations. This session directly connected to ideas presented by Creamer and Laughlin (2005) regarding the importance of self-authorship for women as they contemplate future career paths and aided the program objective stated earlier to help participants recognize and discern the importance of presenting oneself modestly and professionally in the workplace.

Participants listened to a second professional who experienced setbacks in her career as a result of gender-bias. The speaker shared thoughts on resiliency in the workplace, the importance of cultivating identity, and retaining the power of self-definition in challenging contexts.

Finally, the event concluded with a powerful call to be people of influence in all contexts. The speaker addressed the double-bind theory and its impacts, leaving participants exposed to conflicting expectations in the current climate for female professionals. This accomplished our programmatic goal of helping participants to understand the complexities of future work environments and how to navigate these environments. It also encouraged students to assume the power of influence in whatever leadership role they serve in, regardless of career level. Through exposure to these ideas, students were more prepared to be professionals who take risks with a spirit of courage and grace, and aspire to attain positions of leadership in future career fields.

Women's Leadership Event Reflections

A wide range of students participated from all academic years, although the highest percentages of participants were first-year or third-year students. In the evaluation post-event, three questions were asked: whether the event helped the participants think about the topic of women and leadership from a Christian perspective, challenged their thinking and/or increased their understanding of gendered-issues, and if participants would be interested in attending future events regarding this topic. In all areas, the majority of participants either agreed or strongly agreed.

In the comments sections, students indicated appreciation for the relevancy of the speakers, leaving comments such as, “the speakers were wonderful and presented important

topics for people at all stages,” and, “I really loved hearing from the speakers and it was amazing to see how things in my life fit with what the speakers were talking about.” One student commented on the importance of positive role modeling, stating, “[it was] so helpful to see examples of women who take faith and leadership seriously – [it] helped me believe in the possibility of doing it myself.” Another enjoyed the program environment, commenting, “I enjoyed taking this time to listen and reflect. It felt like a retreat.” There were several comments indicating that offering similar programming in the future would be helpful. One student specifically requested programming on similar topics for female Resident Assistants during training.

Because of the success of the program, and with new research and gender-based studies being conducted each year, we intend to implement a second installation of the women’s leadership program in the spring of 2015. This time the program will involve three institutions, with a target goal of sixty participants. We hope to encourage positive conversation, networking, and goal-setting with the growth of this program.

Additional Resources

In Timmerman’s thesis work (2013), care was enacted to develop a general curriculum plan to address some of the issues found in current research regarding women. The curriculum could be adapted for various programs in a variety of contexts over several weeks’ time. Career development offices, residence life, and many other offices within student development could find the curriculum useful as they seek to develop current effective student leaders and future successful female professionals. The curriculum addresses three overarching goals: help undergraduate women gain professional negotiation skills, give undergraduate women networking opportunities in order to develop networking skills, and offer connections to successful women currently in their future career field. Topics included in the curriculum plan, which could be adapted for any future context, include the history of women’s relation to the American workforce and its evolution, examples of current issues from local professional women, case studies revolving around applicable theories (such as the theory of self-authorship or social cognitive theory), and covering leave and pay negotiation through role plays. It is also important to offer hands-on experience through mentoring and internship opportunities. Setting up meetings over coffee or lunch with career women in students’ potential field or requiring students to interview a number of professionals could create wonderful opportunities for conversation, growth, and future work possibilities (Timmerman, 2013).

With such a diverse curriculum, there is space for departments across institutions to collaborate, including collaboration between specific academic departments and their related career fields in order to create connections for students. The program can be adjusted to fit the current needs of the students, recognizing the diverse challenges facing women in today’s work environments. Any program that offers an opportunity for undergraduate students to gain an understanding of the current discriminations against female professionals is valuable.

Questions to Consider for Implementation

While our program covered only a few topics, additional issues could be discussed, such as salary inequities, sexual harassment or discrimination, pregnancy and maternity leave, child care and family leave, and moving upward professionally after having children. Consult your institutional or departmental goals in order to provide context for narrowing the direction of your program. Identify your students' needs and craft a program catering to what would be most helpful for your student population. It is also important to consider what ways you can collaborate with other departments within the framework of individual institutions.

Our particular program and research did not address the following areas of research which could be considered: the connection between gender and race in regards to discrimination and bias, western cultural messaging versus eastern cultural messaging as it pertains to gender, and the interplay of socio-economic circumstances as it relates to issues of gender among various races and cultures. Awareness of other factors that connect with gender can also lend to the specification of programming within your institutional setting.

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