

Taylor University

## Pillars at Taylor University

---

Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE)  
Theses

Graduate Theses

---

2021

### To Lead or Not To Lead: Undergraduate Women's Experiences in Leadership

Kait Bedel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bedel, Kait, "To Lead or Not To Lead: Undergraduate Women's Experiences in Leadership" (2021). *Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE) Theses*. 181.

<https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe/181>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Theses at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE) Theses by an authorized administrator of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).



TO LEAD OR NOT TO LEAD: UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN'S  
EXPERIENCES IN LEADERSHIP

---

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Arts and Humanities

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

Kait Bedel

May 2021

© Kait Bedel 2021

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

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

---

MASTER'S THESIS

---

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Kait M. Bedel

entitled

To Lead or Not to Lead: Undergraduate Women's  
Experiences in 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 2021

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kelly Yordy, Ph.D.      Date  
Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kimberly Case, Ph.D.      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Skip Trudeau, Ed.D.      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

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

### Abstract

Women have increasingly occupied a greater percentage of the college student population in recent history. Given the importance of involvement and leadership development during the undergraduate years, the purpose of this study was to examine the effect that participating within a leadership role can have on a woman's view of self-as-leader as well as her overarching leadership development. This study implemented a qualitative, phenomenological design through the use of individual interviews. The interview protocol was designed to be semi-structured which allowed the participants freedom in their ability to communicate about their leadership experiences. The data collected from these interviews revealed five major themes: the importance of voice, acknowledgement of unequal expectations, fear of judgements, confusion toward the validity of their perceptions, and hesitancy in regard to the role of female leadership and faith. The findings of this research serve as a foundation for designing programming that supports the specific needs and development of undergraduate women in leadership positions.

## Acknowledgements

I have found that words cannot adequately describe the deep well of gratitude that I feel for those who have taken the time to support and encourage me over the past two years. I am overwhelmed by the many individuals who have impacted me during this time. To those who have spoken into this season, your late-night conversations, moments of encouragement, and many shared cups of coffee have not been overlooked or taken for granted. Without your support, I would not have had the opportunity to develop into the woman I am today.

Thank you to my family—your continual support has been a safe haven in times of stress and exhaustion. You have encouraged me in my times of struggle, challenged me to continue forward in my times of apathy, and celebrated with me in my times of success. Your love and care has been a constant during a time when consistency is not guaranteed and for this I am so grateful.

Thank you to my friends who have provided a space for me to experience the fullness and weight of this project. You have consistently affirmed my journey through this season of research, and you have taken the time to listen to my many moments of verbal processing. You all have been a light in my life, and I deeply appreciate the intention with which you have approached our time together.

Thank you to my thesis supervisor, Kelly Yordy, as well as my other professors for your guidance and wisdom. You have become irreplaceable role models, not only in terms of professionalism but also in how you demonstrate care for students. I consider it a

privilege to become your colleague and an honor to have had the opportunity to learn from your experience.

Finally, thank you to my cohort for becoming the mutual support system that has been so vital during this time of growth. Whether near or far, each of you will continue to hold a closeness in my heart. We, together, have experienced a series of unprecedented events and have come out stronger. I feel the highest degree of confidence in saying that you will have a profound impact on the students and spaces that you are going to encounter; higher education will be all the better because of you.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Traditional Undergraduate Women .....	2
Leadership Experiences .....	2
Purpose of the Study .....	3
Conclusion .....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	6
Traditional Undergraduate Women .....	7
A Chilly Climate for Women.....	8
Involvement .....	10
Models of Leadership and Perceptions of Gender .....	11
Women and Christian Higher Education .....	13
Leadership Identity Development and Aspirations.....	14
Conclusion .....	16
Chapter 3 Methodology .....	17
Research Design.....	17
Participants.....	18
Procedures.....	19



	vii
Data Analysis .....	20
Conclusion .....	21
Chapter 4 Results .....	22
The Importance of Voice .....	22
Acknowledgement of Unequal Expectations.....	23
Fear of Judgements .....	25
Confusion Toward the Validity of Their Perceptions.....	27
Hesitancy Regarding the Role of Female Leadership and Faith.....	28
Conclusion .....	30
Chapter 5 Discussion .....	31
Major Themes .....	31
Limitations .....	35
Implications for Practice .....	36
Implications for Future Research.....	38
Conclusion .....	38
References.....	40
Appendix A: Informed Consent.....	45
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	48

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Upon entering college, Elana was enthusiastic about the opportunities that would be available to help her develop both personally and professionally. With great excitement and anticipation, she joined an academic club related to her major, took part in discussions surrounding current events, and even began developing relationships with both peers and faculty members. Elana seemed to have all the characteristics of an aspiring leader; however, she only accepted a leadership position reluctantly after being encouraged to do so by a peer. Her apprehension stemmed from her view of self: she did not see in herself the qualities that seemed necessary for successful leadership, and she was not sure it was the right path for her to pursue.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Elana's story is not unique. A study conducted by McKenzie (2018) has shown that many women, in general, avoid taking leadership positions on the basis that it does not match their view of self. There are a multitude of factors that affect the extent to which a woman views herself as a leader; however, the most pressing of these factors appear to be: a historically male narrative within leadership, socio-culturally influenced perceptions of successful leadership, and a lack of role models within high-level leadership positions (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; McKenzie, 2018; Schwartz, 1997; Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Furthermore, whether a woman views herself as a leader can be one of the most prominent factors in deciding if she will pursue leadership opportunities; this

has a substantial impact on the potential for leadership development within her formative undergraduate years, as holding leadership positions is a key element in leadership development (McKenzie, 2018).

### **Traditional Undergraduate Women**

Despite the historically male roots of higher education, women now comprise 57.1% of the American undergraduate population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Schwartz, 1997; Vanderslice & Litsch, 1998). This holds true both within the traditional college campus environment as well as nontraditional forms of higher education. College can be a formative experience for all learners but is especially important for the development of traditional undergraduate women (Paul, 2012; Wolf-Wendel, 2000). This is a time of both personal and professional development; during the traditional four years of undergraduate education, a woman's view of self is greatly affected (McKenzie, 2018; Paul, 2012). Additionally, this is the time in which many students establish career goals and aspirations which may or may not include leadership experiences (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003).

### **Leadership Experiences**

Leadership experiences are an incredibly valuable portion of the undergraduate experience for many traditional students (Paul, 2012). Through holding leadership positions within residence halls, clubs, student government, administrative offices, social societies, and other similar activities, students are able to experience personal development as well as leadership development (McKenzie, 2018). The social, cultural, and psychological experiences of students within their leadership positions aid in the development of these students' leadership styles, views of leadership, and views of self-

as-leader (Kinzie et al., 2007; McKenzie, 2018; Wolf-Wendel, 2000). This is especially true of undergraduate women within their leadership roles. These women often develop a deeper confidence in their leadership abilities after experiencing success within leadership positions that they have held (McKenzie, 2018).

However, this opportunity for leadership development has the potential to be stifled by the persistent cultural idea that successful leadership requires the possession of stereotypically masculine traits (Paul, 2012). If women do not identify with this particular view of leadership, or exhibit stereotypically masculine characteristics, then they are liable to avoid leadership experiences altogether, regardless of how well-suited they may be for a particular position (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; Paul, 2012). This would ultimately create a predicament in which undergraduate women would not be able to benefit from promising opportunities for leadership identity formation and leadership development that would be presented through various leadership experiences (Paul, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Despite Elana's aforementioned reluctance, she discovered that through the course of her leadership experience she became more confident, continued to develop her interpersonal skills, and began viewing herself as an authentic leader. Through her own leadership development, Elana found that she wanted to encourage other women within their individual leadership as well as pursue leadership opportunities throughout her future career. This reflects the experience of many women who have found that taking on a leadership position has developed them in such a way that it changes their view of self

and aids in the development of aspirations for future career advancement and leadership opportunities (McKenzie, 2018).

The literature, which will be further discussed in Chapter 2, has indicated that while cultural expectations of successful leadership have been expressed increasingly in feminine terms, many within the college environment and beyond still view men as more effective leaders (Powell, 2011; Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Additionally, the literature has indicated that often a woman's own perception of female leadership can both positively and negatively impact her view of self-as-leader (McKenzie, 2018). Given that women comprise more than half of the undergraduate population, if factors leading to negative experiences and perceptions of female leadership can be specified, then leadership development programming can be revised to meet the needs of this majority segment within the typical university student body. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the effect that participating within a leadership role can have on a woman's view of self-as-leader as well as her overarching leadership development.

### **Conclusion**

Currently, there is little research regarding how leadership experiences affect the leadership development of undergraduate women attending Christian liberal arts institutions as compared to what is experienced by undergraduate women at a non-religiously affiliated institution. There has been minimal research conducted regarding whether the experiences of undergraduate women at both types of institutions equally confirm what has been evidenced in the literature. Additionally, it is uncertain whether one type of institution is more likely to provide undergraduate women with developmentally beneficial leadership experiences. Therefore, this gap in the literature

will be addressed within this study. Using the stories and experiences of women from a Christian liberal arts institution, this study will look at the leadership development narrative presented by the unique stories of fifteen women in formal student leadership. The guiding research question for this study is: To what extent do undergraduate women's experiences within leadership positions affect their overall leadership development and view of self-as-leader, and does a religious environment impact these experiences?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

While women are becoming more visible within positions of leadership, there is still a disproportionate number of men in high-level leadership positions compared to women. The McKinsey & Company (2020) *Women in the Workplace 2019* report showed that men held more leadership positions across all levels with the positional gap between men and women widening at each successive level. While this report did indicate increasing numbers of women within leadership throughout the last five years, this disparity of women in leadership positions is indicative of an overarching and self-fulfilling cycle of women not being included in leadership opportunities within our current cultural climate.

When women are underrepresented in positions of leadership, it has the capacity to have devastating effects on the leadership development and aspirations of other women, since mentoring and the presence of role models has been shown to correlate positively with leadership goals (Dahlvig, 2013; Dahlvig & Longman, 2014; Dupre, 2011; Kinzie et al., 2007; Longman & Lafreniere, 2012; Paul, 2012; Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Moreover, today's undergraduate women must develop their own leadership identity in the face of a historically masculine concept of leadership (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; Dupre, 2011; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011; McKenzie, 2018; Paul, 2012; Powell, 2011). In light of the need for increased parity of women in senior leadership roles, as well as the necessity for adequate opportunities in leadership identity

development within young women, it is quite pertinent to study the current state of undergraduate women's leadership development and culturally-gendered perceptions leadership.

This chapter will review and discuss the relevant existing literature related to the development of women as students, professionals, and leaders. This review of the literature will first look at the current context and climate of the traditional undergraduate woman as well as the impact of involvement on female leadership development. Lastly, literature pertaining to the relationship between various models of leadership and cultural gender perceptions will be analyzed in regard to their impact on the development of female leadership aspirations and identity.

### **Traditional Undergraduate Women**

For the purpose of this study, the traditional undergraduate woman will be defined as a woman, age 18–22, earning a bachelor's degree within the traditional college campus environment. In today's current college campus context, all undergraduate women fitting this definition will have been born after the year 1995 thus indicating that they are identified as a part of "iGen" (Twenge, 2017). iGen, otherwise known as Generation Z, is the generation immediately following the Millennial generation (Twenge, 2017). Generation Z students are typically described as slow to grow up, overconnected, overwhelmed, desiring to make a difference, politically independent, and excited yet insecure in regard to the future (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Twenge, 2017). They have also been labelled as "we-centric" in comparison to the "me-centric" label placed on the Millennial generation; this means that Generation Z seeks to make a difference in the world and be agents of change (Mohr & Mohr, 2017, p. 86). Ironically, while those



within Generation Z highly value collaboration and loyalty, Mohr & Mohr's (2017) study has shown that they also have a distinct preference for working alone.

With so many generational differences undergirding the experiences of today's students, research was conducted in order to determine what changes need to be made within the classroom in order to accommodate this new generation of learners. Mohr & Mohr (2017) found that expressing the inherent applicability of coursework, as well as the value of the individual student's role within larger group assignments, are key elements that should be present when educating Generation Z students. Additionally, it was recommended that educators avoid "busy work" and strive to make the classroom a meaningful and engaging environment for the students (Mohr & Mohr, 2017, p. 91). These measures were suggested in order to make the classroom environment one that is more congruent with the values of the typical Generation Z student with which one would be interacting with on today's campuses.

### **A Chilly Climate for Women**

While an engaging classroom environment that expresses the relevancy of the coursework and the value of the students is considered to be at the forefront of best practices for educating Generation Z, not every student receives an equal opportunity to benefit from such engaging classroom or campus environments. In a study of women's experiences at a women's college compared to a coeducational institution, it was found that women who attended women's colleges were overall more engaged in effective educational practices than women attending coeducational institutions (Kinzie et al., 2007). Additionally, this study noted that women were more likely to experience increased opportunities to participate in leadership positions and pursue traditionally male

disciplines at a women's college rather than a coeducational institution (Kinzie et al., 2007).

While it can be argued that women's colleges are more sensitive to the distinct needs and societal issues faced by students (Kinzie et al., 2007), another factor that plays a role in the experiences of women at coeducational institutions is the likelihood of interacting with a "chilly" campus and classroom climate (Allan & Madden, 2003; Kelly & Torres, 2006; Sandler & Hall, 1986). A chilly campus climate can be characterized by "subtle ways in which women are treated differently, ways that communicate to women that they are not quite first-class citizens in the academic community" (Sandler & Hall, 1986, p. 1). These subtle communications are small, common, and "so normal" that they often go unnoticed within the business of everyday life (Sandler & Hall, 1986, p. 2). However, the weight of a chilly climate eventually begins to "hamper women students' education, ...limit women faculty and administrators' productivity and advancement, and prevent institutions from being the best that they can be" (Sandler & Hall, 1986, p. 2).

### *A Chilly Classroom Climate*

Previous research conducted by Allan and Madden (2003) noted that when analyzing women undergraduates' classroom experiences qualitatively, it can be seen that many characteristics of a chilly climate are still being encountered and normalized. These experiences include but are not limited to: invalidation or denial of female students' experiences, discouragement, feeling invisible or overlooked, being interrupted or spoken-over, being stereotyped on the basis of sex, and being subjected to sexual innuendos or labels. This study also indicated that some female respondents reacted to the study in a manner that is characteristic of a cultural "fear of feminism" (Allan & Madden,

2003, p. 26). Respondent comments rooted in accusation, rather than personal experience, are indicative of a larger, cultural denial of the chilly classroom climate encountered by many female undergraduate students.

### ***A Chilly Campus Climate***

Moreover, the chilly climate experienced by college women does not stop at the classroom door; instead, research conducted by Kelly and Torres (2006) indicated that many college campuses remain chilly in regard to the way that they “perpetuate a culture of fear for [women students’] campus safety” (p. 24). This study found that many women think about their personal safety every day, and many of these fears are actualized when their safety is genuinely threatened on or near campus. This study also found that many women students reported frustration when male peers reacted to stories of assault and harassment with shock, disbelief, or the tendency to blame the victim. Both the fear for their safety and the lack of support from male peers create an overall chilly climate in which women do not have the same feeling of security going to various locations on campus or travelling across campus at night (Kelly & Torres, 2006). Climates such as these have the potential to limit women’s ability to be fully involved on campus or in the nearby community (Kelly & Torres, 2006).

### **Involvement**

These limitations then have implications on women undergraduate students’ ability to become involved both on campus and in the local community. One of the primary factors in the success of female students indicated by Wolf-Wendel (2000) in her study of women-friendly campuses was the ability to connect them to their local community. This study found that when students engaged with their community, they

were more likely to gain social consciousness, experience personal and communal success, and foster the sense of being a community leader.

Astin's (1984/1999) theory of involvement defines student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). Essentially, this theory emphasizes the student's participation in the learning process over the educator's participation. The theory of involvement focuses on what factors of the university experience were likely to increase involvement and thus increase student persistence in college. These factors included, but were not limited to: living in campus residences, participating in an honors program, academic involvement, athletic involvement, and receiving frequent interaction with faculty. This theory also noted that students who were actively involved in student leadership positions were more satisfied with their peer relationships and more likely to persist in college attendance, thus prompting the student to become more cognitively and educationally developed (Astin, 1984/1999).

### **Models of Leadership and Perceptions of Gender**

Beyond experiencing a chilly campus climate, another factor that affects women and leadership would be the various models of leadership and the manner in which gender plays a role in leadership style. Recently, two styles of leadership have been the main focus of many leadership theories: transactional leadership and transformational leadership (Powell, 2011). Transactional leadership, which has historically been viewed as the typical style of leadership, is consistent with stereotypically masculine qualities (Eagly et al., 2003; Lopez-Zafra et al., 2012; Powell, 2011). Transactional leaders primarily focus on task-completion and an autocratic style of decision-making (Powell,

2011). Moreover, transactional leaders typically exhibit more agentic behaviors such as being “independent, masterful, assertive, and instrumentally competent” (Eagly et al., 2003, p. 572).

Transactional leadership is the style of leadership that is most commonly assigned to effective leaders due to its long-standing presence in both business and higher education. However, another form of leadership has emerged that has been shown to be just as effective as, if not more than, transactional leadership; this style is known as transformational leadership (Eagly et al., 2003; Powell, 2011). Transformational leadership primarily focuses on motivation, democratic decision-making, and collaboration (Powell, 2011). Additionally, transformational leadership is associated with more stereotypically feminine or communal qualities such as establishing oneself as a role model, showing care for the welfare of subordinates, friendliness, kindness, and being interpersonally-oriented (Eagly et al., 2003; Lopez-Zafra et al., 2012).

While neither transactional nor transformational leadership is inherently positive or negative, the gendered associations with each of these styles can lead to both subtle and overt disapproval of female leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011; Kolb, 1999). Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role congruity theory is an extension of social role theory in that it reaches beyond “to consider the congruity between gender roles and other roles, especially leadership roles, as well as to specify key factors and processes that influence congruity perceptions and their consequences for prejudice and prejudicial behaviors” (p. 575). This theory is particularly important when analyzing the leadership preferences of men and women. Since transactional leadership

has been historically utilized in both business and educational settings, many perceive strong leaders as having more culturally masculine characteristics (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Despite an increase in transformational leadership (Powell, 2011), the cultural lens of transactional leadership often places female leaders in a “double bind” (Eagly & Carli, 2007). If women lead in a more transformational manner, which is more congruent with the female gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002), they are often viewed as weak and non-assertive leaders because they do not fit the leader role that has been culturally perceived as effective (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, if they choose to lead in a more transactional manner, they are viewed as domineering and lacking warmth and perceived negatively for not meeting the cultural expectations of the female gender role (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Interestingly, while women face a double bind in which it appears that they are unable to satisfy cultural expectations of both the leader role and the female gender role, male leaders often receive more freedom in stepping out of the cultural expectations for their gender and leader roles. Eagly & Carli’s (2007) study has shown that men are received favorably both when acting within the masculine leader role and when acting within a warmer, communal role.

### **Women and Christian Higher Education**

Moreover, women working and attending Christian institutions may feel further pressure to adhere to the communal, culturally-ascribed female gender role because of the theologically conservative view of men as leaders and women as supporters (Dahlgvig, 2013; Dahlgvig & Longman, 2014; Lafreniere & Longman, 2008; Longman & Anderson, 2011; Longman & Anderson, 2016; Longman et al., 2011). Women who move into leadership positions at Christian, or theologically conservative, institutions often find that

they receive “conflicting signals about role expectations,” and at times even experience blatant disregard or questioning of their authority (Longman & Anderson, 2016, p. 26). Additionally, it is not uncommon for women within Christian higher education to experience “benevolent sexism” in which patriarchal or traditional gender roles are complimented, encouraged, or enforced (Longman & Anderson, 2016, p. 29). Between theologically-oriented gender stereotypes and the Christian value of humility leading to the self-denial of credit, it is unsurprising that many female leaders within Christian contexts find themselves experiencing “imposter syndrome” (Dahlvig, 2013; Longman et al., 2011). This is the erroneous belief that these women are inadequate for their roles and that their success is due to external sources rather than their own leadership ability (Dahlvig, 2013). Naturally, challenges such as these can hamper not only the leadership identities and aspirations of faculty and staff but also those of student leaders as well.

### **Leadership Identity Development and Aspirations**

Having looked at various factors that affect women in leadership, one is left to consider how these factors affect young women’s leadership development and aspirations. Studies have shown that many undergraduate women do not instinctively view themselves as being leaders or aspire to leadership positions due the cultural perception that effective leadership is masculine (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003; McKenzie, 2018). In McKenzie’s (2018) study of leadership identity development, it was noted that “students were unable to connect the concept of leadership in others with their own abilities” (p. 5). It was also observed that the undergraduate women studied initially related leadership with titles and the characteristics of others, rather than with the inherent personal qualities that they already held. This sentiment was also expressed in

Dupre's (2011) study on undergraduate women's view of leadership in which women first identified themselves as leaders by citing the positions they held rather than the qualities that they embodied.

These initial views of leadership being positional or externally placed upon these women, rather than being characteristics which they already possess, are likely related to Boatwright and Egidio's (2003) study in which it was proposed that women who viewed themselves as traditionally feminine were less likely to aspire towards leadership. Moreover, McKenzie (2018) reported that "students expressed an awareness of females needing to behave in certain approved ways and an understanding of the expectations placed on female leaders" (p. 5).

However, it was found that, upon entering into leadership positions, undergraduate women began to experience a shift in their view of self-as-leader. After spending time within leadership positions, and being identified by others as a leader, these undergraduate female leaders began to self-identify as leaders (McKenzie, 2018). This concept holds considerable significance in the way that women view both themselves and others as leaders. If a woman initially did not view herself as a leader but upon gaining confidence within a leadership position began seeing her own internal leadership qualities, then she is likely to desire to foster that in other women as a role model (Dupre, 2011; McKenzie, 2018).

With the increase in confidence that many undergraduate female leaders gained from success within their leadership positions, they were able to more readily connect their identity as females with their identity as leaders (McKenzie, 2018). It is in that shift beyond culturally-perceived masculine leadership qualities that many women feel the



freedom to make decisions more democratically, utilize teamwork, delegate responsibilities, and embrace an overarching transformational model of leadership (Dupre, 2011; McKenzie, 2018). Additionally, in this more transformational form of leadership, these undergraduate women strove to serve as role models for their female peers to aid in being able to present a relatable leader image to a significant portion of the student body (Dupre, 2011) and in instilling the message that other undergraduate women could also be leaders (McKenzie, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Factors that affect an undergraduate woman's experience as a leader, including campus climate, cultural gender and leadership perceptions, role congruity, and leadership identity development, directly relate to the purpose of this study. There have been significant strides in the acceptance of more communal qualities within transformational leadership; however, women still face a double bind in regard to cultural gender expectations that hinder their leadership identity development and experiences. This study will explore how many of these factors, especially a faith-based campus climate, impact current undergraduate women's leadership experiences.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This study utilized a qualitative methodology to analyze and interpret the lived experiences of undergraduate women holding student leadership positions. The interviews were conducted through the participation of fifteen female undergraduate student leaders, all of whom attend a small, Midwestern, faith-based institution. Participants either currently held or had previously held a formal student leadership position at their university of attendance. For the purpose of this research, a qualitative approach is both useful and appropriate for exploring themes within a group of individuals' lived experiences.

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate the lived experiences of female undergraduate student leaders and explore commonalities amongst each of their stories. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological research seeks to find common meaning in the lived experiences of several individuals who have encountered the same phenomenon. In the case of this particular study, the phenomenon shared by the participants was the experience of being an undergraduate woman in a student leadership position.

Moreover, the specific type of phenomenology utilized was a hermeneutical phenomenology, which “reflects on essential themes [and] what constitutes the nature of [the individuals’] lived experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). A key component of a

hermeneutical phenomenology is going beyond the description of the participant's experience to interpret various meanings that come forth through the description of the experience (Creswell, 2013). Given that this study concentrated on interpreting meaning from a variety of participants' experiences in order to compare the established themes, a phenomenological research design was highly appropriate.

Many studies within the literature have followed qualitative research designs when exploring themes related to the experiences of female students, women in leadership, and female leadership identity formation (Dahlvig, 2013; Dupre, 2011; Kelly & Torres, 2006; Longman et al., 2011; McKenzie, 2018; Paul, 2012). This method demonstrates that the nuanced and complicated nature of women's lived experiences are best communicated in a narrative or thematic fashion that is not always attained through quantitative analysis. Qualitative research, and phenomenological research in particular, contributes a layer of understanding to the existing statistical data in order to uncover the essence of undergraduate women's leadership experiences.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were women who were currently enrolled as undergraduate juniors or seniors and had held an official student leadership position within the university. All fifteen of the participants were identified as student leaders at a small, Midwestern, faith-based institution. For the purpose of this study, only undergraduate women who were currently holding, or had recently held, an official student leadership position were asked to participate. Official student leadership positions represented within this study consisted of resident assistants, choir officers, service organization student leaders, student activities officers, first year experience leaders,

student diversity representatives, theatre managers, and student government officers.

Twelve of the participants were White, two participants were Asian American, and one participant defined herself as a Latina. Participants are referred to in the following chapters by predetermined pseudonyms.

The participants were identified and invited to participate through the recommendations of university faculty and staff that work with student leaders on campus. Additionally, the use of homogeneous sampling was employed within the participant selection process. This form of purposeful sampling allowed for participants to take part in the study due to their shared defining characteristic of being female undergraduate student leaders (Creswell, 2012).

### **Procedures**

The recommended participants were contacted via email with an invitation to participate in the study, a description of the study, and an attached informed consent document (see Appendix A). Participants who choose to participate in the study were then contacted to set up an appointment for an in-person interview. When an in-person interview was not feasible due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, a Zoom interview was scheduled as an appropriate alternative.

Prior to the selection of participants and scheduling interviews, the interview protocol was examined through pilot interviews with three women who have had undergraduate leadership experiences but remain outside the scope of the study. This process allowed for the interview questions to be further clarified and refined, thus creating a greater sense of accuracy within the interview responses (see Appendix B).

The pilot interviews were a crucial factor in maintaining the reliability of the obtained information as well as the quality of the interview protocol.

Each interview lasted for a period of 30 to 50 minutes, and permission was attained of each participant to record the interviews. The interview format was semi-structured; the interviews were facilitated through the use of the piloted, open-ended questions. This gave the interview an appropriate level of structure but also allowed for the participant to request clarification or to take the interview in an unanticipated direction that benefited the outcomes of the study. The participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they had the freedom to answer questions at their discretion and comfort or to end the interview at any time.

### **Data Analysis**

Each recorded interview went through the process of being transcribed and then reviewed. Upon reviewing the transcriptions, the interviews were coded in order to identify and interpret various themes that emerged from the data. In addition, the interview process, themes, and supporting evidence underwent a peer review which allowed for an external check of the research process and added to the reliability of the research results. Member checking was also employed, in which the data was shared with the participants in order to allow them to deem it as both accurate and credible. Lastly, the findings of the research, which will be discussed in the upcoming chapter, were written using a “rich, thick description” that will aid in the usefulness and transferability of the research collected (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). This measure will act as a means of allowing the reader to make use of the findings within a broader context. All of these

procedures were used as a way of providing a high level of validation and reliability within the findings of this study.

### **Conclusion**

Completing this research allowed for both the researcher and the participants to develop a holistic view of undergraduate women's leadership experiences. Through the utilization of a semi-structured interview format, followed by coding for themes, this methodology lent itself well to exploring the shared experience of these student leaders. Moreover, by analyzing the themes revealed from a faith-based institution, additional information was able to be uncovered that could further aid in the leadership development of undergraduate women at these institutions. The results and implications of this study will be further discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This research was conducted in order to investigate the overarching essence of the female undergraduate student leadership experience at a faith-based institution. As a result of this study, five significant themes emerged that led to a better understanding of what undergraduate females are experiencing within their leadership positions. The remainder of this chapter will present these themes: the importance of voice, acknowledgement of unequal expectations, fear of judgements, confusion toward the validity of their perceptions, and hesitancy in regard to the role of female leadership and faith.

#### **The Importance of Voice**

The overall importance and value that was placed on the female voice and being heard as an aspect of leadership was the one theme that all fifteen participants spoke about during their interviews. Some participants spoke of frustration at continually having felt that their voice is unheard, unacknowledged, or undervalued. A common sentiment shared by many of the participants was frustration at being spoken over and then subsequently viewed negatively when making an effort to be heard. Miranda, a junior in her third year of formal leadership, expressed in regard to communications with her co-workers:

I feel like every time I walk into the room, there's more of an effort that I have to put in than guys do to speak up over them since I get spoken over more than they

do. And then sometimes I get seen as bossy or loud when I'm just trying to get my point across.

Miranda was not alone in her experience. Other participants voiced feeling shut down, quieted, spoken over, or simply viewed as white noise.

While some participants communicated continued exasperation at these occurrences, others spoke of the hope to use their experiences to create a more hospitable environment for female voices in the future. Many of the women interviewed considered relationships as a motivating factor in their leadership and mentioned a desire to ultimately empower other women in their pursuit of leadership opportunities. Kinsley, a junior in her second year of leadership, expressed her commitment to supporting other women's voices:

I get what it feels like to be the white noise and, so, wanting to make sure that my voice is heard but then also looking out for other women who have great ideas.

They have awesome aspirations but it's not always being received.

This idea of using both positive and negative experiences with voice as a form of empowering other women in the future was verbalized by nearly all of the participants in this study.

### **Acknowledgement of Unequal Expectations**

While every participant identified the value of their voice as a leader as a significant component of their leadership experience, another prominent theme that arose was the variety of ways that women in leadership positions felt that they had unequal expectations placed upon them. This often led to female leaders feeling the weight of additional work or emotional load not felt by their male counterparts of the same title.



This theme was ultimately referred to by eleven of the fifteen participants and was expressed particularly by women holding Resident Assistant titles within the campus residence halls. These women spoke of the additional workload that was placed upon them not by their supervisors or administrators, but rather by their peers.

Resident Assistants leading all-female floors spoke of the high expectations placed upon them by residents: providing an aesthetically-pleasing living space, planning several social outings and events each semester, and dedicating a great deal of their free time—or lack thereof—to attending to the emotional needs of others. Many of the participants indicated that these peer expectations tremendously increased the workload of their position to a level that was typically not experienced by male peers holding the same title. Leah, a junior in her second year as a Resident Assistant, mentioned, “even though [men] have the same title, we do very different things. And you come into it, like, oh we all have the same job but we do not do the same work.” She also noted the differentiation of time expectations.

Moreover, many of the same participants mentioned COVID-19 as an additional factor that contributed to a perceived greater workload for women than their male peers. Several participants communicated a level of frustration in regard to enforcing campus residence policies relating to the COVID-19 guidelines. Many of these women felt that they, along with other female Resident Assistants, were being more consistent in carrying out their responsibility to remind residents of mask-wearing and social distancing. Elise, a junior in her second year as a Resident Assistant, when referring to this dynamic, said:

What was really frustrating for me and [my co-leader] was that we were the ones reminding people to social distance and wear their masks and, like, the [male

Resident Assistants] were the ones almost propagating—like making it worse and I don't know, it was just frustrating.

This frustration was conveyed by the participants as one of the major elements that they find difficult within positions that they otherwise enjoy, and many of them communicated that this element was significant enough to be taken into account when deciding whether to reapply for their positions.

### **Fear of Judgements**

In addition to the frustration the participants verbalized in regard to the unequal expectations they felt were placed upon them in their roles, many participants also spoke of experiencing fear in relation to the way they felt they might be judged or perceived for their actions. This theme was the second-most prominent theme to emerge from this study with twelve of the fifteen participants expressing fear or, at the very least, apprehension toward engaging with a leadership position in certain ways because of what others might think. Callista, a junior in her second year of leadership, spoke of the societal standards that she had been introduced to long before beginning a formal leadership position:

Women are taught to defer or that there is a narrative that women's thoughts or values aren't as important or, like, you need to be kind to everyone. If you're assertive then, like you're a bitch... cultural things have made me devalue my voice and made me afraid. Like, oh if I'm assertive then I'm going to be perceived as mean or rude.

This sentiment was shared by the majority of the other participants who expressed hesitation in seeking out leadership opportunities or chances to speak out on a topic

because of the way that they could potentially be perceived and the negative labels that are associated with women in positions of authority.

A variety of undesirable terms were used by participants to describe reputations they feared gaining as a result of their work in leadership or any actions that could fall outside of the culturally-accepted feminine gender role. These terms included: bossy, bitchy, domineering, overbearing, aggressive, manly, unattractive, abrasive, rude, no fun, a kill-joy, intense, and intimidating. Many participants indicated that the fear of these labels had become overwhelming at times and had even caused enough uneasiness to prevent them from pursuing roles that they would have otherwise enjoyed.

Some women spoke of ways in which they have tried to cope with the fear of a damaged reputation by thinking of ways they could fulfill their leadership role without necessarily breaking from their culturally-ascribed gender role. Some referred to this strategy as using their gentleness to their advantage or playing to their strengths. Others felt that they spent additional time outside of meetings thinking of how to best communicate their thoughts in such a way so as to not come off in a manner that would paint themselves in a negative light. Ali, a senior who recently completed one year of formal leadership, asked:

As somebody who is willing to say what I believe, how can I say those things and speak up and, you know, stand up for my own ideas, without being perceived as bossy or rude or any of those other negative connotations?

Referring to her own natural outspokenness, Ali echoed the fears of many other participants.

Another prominent element that was noted by one participant, who is a woman of color, was the added level of judgment or negative perception when a woman is acting in a role that falls outside of her prescribed gender role and the dominant culture of the institution. Cristina, a senior in her third year of leadership, spoke of how she learned to “flip a switch” in order to acclimate to the cultural expectations that she felt were present on campus. She articulated her experience of being in leadership in an environment that she was not necessarily accustomed to culturally:

I had to learn to hold back my personality a little bit and not be as intense with people. That was something that I really struggled with coming into my sophomore year—the label that I am very intense and I’m intimidating and all these different things. And I’m like, ok, how do I pull back a little so that people feel welcomed and they feel they have a place to belong. And so I’m not being overbearing.

The intermixing of both gender role and cultural expectations was also further expressed as an unexpected and unnecessarily difficult piece of other participants’ leadership development.

### **Confusion Toward the Validity of Their Perceptions**

In the midst of the participants conveying the various events, conversations, thoughts, and feelings they have experienced in regard to being a woman in leadership, another notable, yet unexpected, theme unfolded. As the participants explained particular moments that they had considered unpleasant, inappropriate, or distinctly gendered, several of the participants began to make statements in which they questioned the validity of their own perceptions. Eight out of the fifteen participants made at least one statement

during their interview in which they noted that they were unsure whether they had actually experienced gendered treatment or whether they were viewing the event through a preconceived societal lens.

Cassandra, a junior in her third year of formal leadership, expressed her hesitancy to take command at times in order to avoid appearing bossy. However, she ended her statement with the comment, “I don’t know if that’s a construct I have, one that society had created, or if it’s a reality of how gender roles are.” Additionally, Autumn, a senior in her third year of leadership, conveyed how she had felt uncomfortable expressing herself in meetings at times for fear that she might come across in the wrong way. As she continued to process and communicate her thoughts, she began to focus on whether the message she had internalized from society was true or simply a falsely believed narrative:

I think some of it is societal expectations that have been imposed. I, like, discredit myself personally of places where I would speak up, places where I would take initiative. Like, society tells me if I speak up as a woman then I’m a bitch, which is not necessarily true but I would say that is the message that’s conveyed to a lot of women.

Other participants also made comments questioning whether they had had valid experiences or whether they had skewed or unreliable perceptions of their own experiences.

### **Hesitancy Regarding the Role of Female Leadership and Faith**

The final theme that was uncovered as a result of this study was not one of high frequency but rather one of magnitude. The level of importance that one’s faith plays in their leadership pursuit and development is critical, especially when in the context of a

faith-based institution. In their interviews, four participants not only noted the positive and negative aspects of their leadership experiences, but they also indicated a level of confusion on what role women of faith were to play in leadership.

A variety of views were shared. Some felt that women had a place in leading other women while men should maintain formal, familial, and pastoral leadership authority. Others had spoken of their belief that women could hold any role a man can hold but also noted that they received pushback that left a lasting mark on the way in which they think about faith and leadership. These women cited family structures, passages of scripture, as well as reproaches by others as reasons they had a certain level of difficulty in knowing where they belong as both women and leaders.

Elise described her feelings as “a struggle because it’s, like, this is how I feel. This is what God’s word says. But other people interpret God’s word, but I do feel God has gifted me. Yeah, so it’s kind of complicated.” In the same fashion Heidi, a senior in her third year of leadership, spoke of her belief that women can, and should, hold roles that have been traditionally held only by men. However, she did express hesitation at the thought of having a self-fulfilling or inaccurate theology. She communicated:

I don’t like being wrong. Like especially when it comes to God, I don’t want to be wrong. If [a position] is right there and He wants me to know, I’m going to ask Him for wisdom. Because I don’t want to go spreading heresy just because I feel like it. Or if you’re given a leadership position, taking it in vain and just doing what you want with it. So because I submit to God’s authority, that’s a big deal to me.

As a result of these hesitations, the participants continued to relay a lack of certainty in regard to where the boundary falls between expectations at their religious organization and expectations at their institution.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to uncover the essence of the female undergraduate student's leadership experience. While themes pertaining to the importance of voice, acknowledgement of unequal expectations, fear of judgements, and confusion toward the validity of their perceptions held a prominent presence in the majority of the participants' experiences, the theme of hesitancy in regard to the role of female leadership and faith also played a significant role in the experience of some participants.

This study not only revealed female undergraduate leaders' overarching passion for both being heard and elevating the voices of others but also highlighted some core apprehensions. This research highlighted the frustration that women feel at the unequal expectations they believe they have set up against them as well as the fear and anxiety they often experience at the hands of societal judgments of women who do not align with the culturally-ascribed role of a woman. Notably, this research also unveiled the confusion that many undergraduate women are experiencing in regard to the validity of their own perceptions and the role as women of faith in leadership. These themes, as well as their implications for future research and practice, will be further discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This study posed the research question: To what extent do undergraduate women's social, cultural, and psychological experiences within leadership positions affect their overall leadership development and view of self-as-leader? The data, collected through a series of individual interviews, revealed that these female undergraduate student leaders felt a strong sense of possessing a developed leadership identity yet still undergo a variety of conflicting—and often negative—emotions regarding their perceptions and experiences in leadership. From this research, five major themes were presented: the importance of voice, acknowledgement of unequal expectations, fear of judgements, confusion toward the validity of their perceptions, and hesitancy in regard to the role of female leadership and faith. Therefore, it is the purpose of this chapter to discuss in greater detail these major themes followed by the limitations of the study, implications for practice, and implications for future research.

#### **Major Themes**

##### ***The Importance of Voice***

The data showed that the student leaders interviewed believed in the importance of having a voice and being heard. Additionally, the speed with which so many participants spoke of experiences in which they felt shut down or ignored indicated that they have had other opportunities to speak on and process the way their voices are being received. The sentiments expressed in these interviews were not necessarily new to the



participants but rather a moderately accepted form of reality. Despite this perceived reality, the data went on to show that these women did not want solely to have their voices be heard; they wanted to use their negative experiences as a motivator for the elevation of other female voices. This aligns with the implications of McKenzie's (2018) study on female leadership identity development in which female leaders more readily felt compelled to point out leadership qualities in other women after securing their own identities as leaders.

### *Acknowledgement of Unequal Expectations*

In addition to expressing the importance of having their voices be heard, the participants overwhelmingly referenced differences in their work-load as compared to male peers holding the same position. Female student leaders, primarily within the campus residences, felt that they had a significantly greater mental, emotional, and physical load to bear in order to complete their roles in a way that would be considered satisfactory by their peers and residents. The expectation placed upon female resident assistants to create aesthetically appealing residence halls, plan multiple events, and provide consistent emotional support, often late into the evening, increased the burden on these participants in such a way that they reported feeling exhaustion and frustration at the lack of understanding male peers exhibited.

Many of these unofficial role expectations can find roots within leadership style differences as well as role congruity theory. Many of these participants' leadership styles bore distinct similarities to the transformational style of leadership, known for being associated with culturally-ascribed feminine qualities such as acting as a role model, showing care for the welfare of others, friendliness, kindness, and being interpersonally-

oriented (Eagly et al., 2003; Lopez-Zafra et al., 2012). Moreover, it is unsurprising that so many of the participants would hold transformational styles of leadership given the double bind that women face if they act outside of their perceived gender role. If they do not live up to their residents' expectations of how an acceptable female resident assistant behaves, then they may face the perception that they are betraying their gender and be viewed in a negative light (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

### *Fear of Judgements*

Once more pertaining to role congruity theory, a study conducted by Eagly and Carli (2007) revealed that male leaders are typically received favorably regardless of when they are acting within their prescribed gender role or in a more warm and communal manner. Women, however, were often viewed critically if they were perceived as stepping outside of the cultural expectations for their gender role. This dynamic was pertinent in regard to what the data revealed about the fears experienced by many of the participants.

These female leaders expressed a great deal of fear concerning how they may be labelled or what reputational damage could potentially be done if they said the wrong thing or crossed over a gendered line. Many participants revealed a hesitancy to speak out on a topic for fear of being considered rude, mean, or bitchy, while others declined to take charge in social situations at times for fear of being labeled pushy, bossy, or domineering. Even still, other participants spoke of leadership opportunities they had declined, or had considered declining, because of the potential for backlash or negative perceptions by others. This theme held considerable weight in the study given the implications that it has had, and continues to have, on the participants.

### ***Confusion Toward the Validity of Their Perceptions***

Another significant theme revealed by the data was that over half of the participants had exhibited a degree of confusion pertaining to whether their experiences with potentially biased or gendered treatment were legitimate or whether they were creating a situation by looking through a lens created by society. The participants indicated that they wanted to share their experiences but also felt hesitant in relaying potentially false or defamatory information in order to protect the reputations of their male peers. This questioning of one's own perception could be indicative of thinking critically with respect to one's experience. However, it is also within the realm of possibility that these women have internalized messages from time spent in "chilly" environments in which their past experiences have been either disregarded or invalidated, such as in the chilly classroom climate described by Allan and Madden (2003).

### ***Hesitancy in Regard to the Role of Female Leadership and Faith***

The final theme that was uncovered through this study was significant not because of its frequency amongst the participants but rather because of the implications it could hold for female leaders at faith-based institutions. Some participants relayed experiences in which their leadership as women was challenged by others using specific verses of scripture or theological ideals to demonstrate why women should be cautious in the types of leadership responsibilities they pursue. These participants felt both hesitancy and a lack of clarity when discussing the intermixing of their faith and leadership identities.

This confusion was primarily because of their desire to use their personal strengths well while also trying to navigate the most appropriate way in which to demonstrate their roles within their faith context. These women were concerned with how

future leadership positions might interfere with the structure of male leadership that many churches cite from the scriptures. Moreover, these women were concerned that pursuing leadership positions might adversely affect a potential future calling to represent their faiths by continuing in their familial tradition of becoming a homemaker.

These sentiments are reflective of other studies that have focused on female leadership within Christian higher education in which women often experience “conflicting signals about role expectations” as well as blatant questioning or disregard for their leadership authority in some facets of faith-based higher education (Longman & Anderson, 2016). It is significant that female students, as well as other key stakeholders within Christian higher education institutions, are blurring the lines between prevalent religious authority structures and outside leadership opportunities. The impact of this perception can have a lasting effect on the way that women view their identities and abilities as leaders.

### **Limitations**

Though this study revealed several valuable themes that will require additional attention and future research within higher education, there also remain some limitations to consider in reference to the aforementioned data. First, the COVID-19 pandemic created parameters that had the potential to hinder the effectiveness of communication. Best practices in qualitative research, such as interviewing face-to-face, were forced to undergo alterations such as mask-wearing for in-person interviews or the use of Zoom to conduct virtual interviews. Had these parameters not been in place, it is possible that there could have been a more comfortable or communicative interviewing environment.

Additionally, it is necessary to note that the institution in which this research was conducted is heavily reliant on student leadership engagement. Therefore, the results of this study could be different at an institution that has a lower overall level of student leadership participation. Furthermore, due to the university demographics, the pool of participants was primarily White. The research outcomes could vary if primarily exploring the unique experience of women of color in leadership positions.

Lastly, many of the participants for this research came from a residence life background. Even of the women that currently hold non-residential leadership positions, several referred to a previous experience as a leader within the residence life department. This could have implications on the results as residence life leadership positions can vary greatly from the roles, responsibilities, and perceptions that are encountered in other leadership areas.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study has confirmed the need to offer specialized resources that both develop and support undergraduate women as they navigate the unique experience of being a female leader. Student affairs educators play an important role in this. As such, they have the opportunity to have a significant impact on the ways in which student leaders develop their sense of self-as-leader as well as how they engage with the various challenges that are presented within their leadership opportunities. Given the findings that have been presented as a result of this research, it would be fitting for professionals working with student leaders to implement programming that addresses the unique needs and obstacles faced by undergraduate women.

The first of these implications would be less programmatic and more cultural in nature. It would serve the student body—and especially female student leaders—well to be able to see women holding leadership positions at the faculty, staff, and administrative levels. By elevating the voices and visibility of women in leadership who may not necessarily fall within the traditional female gender role, a cultural statement will be made that there is acceptability to fall outside of what may be perceived by the students as a cultural norm for women. This visibility can also aid female leaders in using their own voices to empower other women, especially since the data has indicated this is an area that carries importance for these students.

Next, it would be appropriate for student affairs professionals to partner with other campus departments in order to develop programming that helps to build confidence and community among female student leaders. This programming could look like group sessions facilitated by the counseling center to create a supportive environment for female leaders who may feel isolated in their experience. This could include workshops that offer concrete tools for how to address stereotyping or self-doubt. Moreover, this could include informative sessions on what bias or gendered treatment looks like realistically and how to validate one's personal experience with such treatment. These resources can provide a sense of support to female student leaders that may not fully understand how to address some of their more uncomfortable experiences and perceptions.

Lastly, opportunities should be established for both male and female leaders to engage in an open dialogue regarding the experiences that they have had within their leadership roles. Male student leaders will be better able to support and empathize with

their female peers if they are made aware of some differentiated aspects of their work loads. Spaces for dialogue can produce a greater depth of understanding and trust within mixed gender leadership teams—an element that is necessary for any organization to remain successful in its endeavors.

### **Implications for Future Research**

One suggestion for future research could include exploring the experience of undergraduate female leaders at a variety of Christian universities across the country. This could give more clarity in regard to the element of role confusion and its potential prominence in Christian higher education as a whole. By examining a wider breadth of institutions, research could also indicate what the difference in responses might look like when comparing an institution with a significant number of students in leadership to an institution in which fewer students participate in leadership opportunities.

An additional suggestion for future research would be to explore what the experience of women of color in leadership positions at primarily White institutions looks like as compared to White women. This research could also be paired with an inquiry related to how this difference in experiences could be affected by a Christian context. Individuals from diverse backgrounds will naturally have diverse experiences within student leadership—some of which are positive and some of which are negative. Research elevating a greater number of voices would be appropriate in order to attain a clearer understanding of the female undergraduate student leader experience overall.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study revealed that the participants' experiences in leadership did affect their view of self-as-leader positively in that each participant distinctly viewed

herself as a leader with a voice that deserved to be heard. However, it was also unveiled that many female leaders perceived that these roles often come with a greater mental and emotional load than experienced by male peers. Student affairs educators will be able to aid female student leaders not only in their leadership identity development but also equip them for challenges and pushback they may face in the future by enhancing three primary elements within their institutions, namely 1) increasing visibility of female leaders within the faculty, staff, and administration 2) providing resources for building confidence and community, and 3) creating opportunities for open female-male dialogue concerning their experiences within similar leadership positions.

Student leaders are an asset to any thriving higher education environment; however, educators must remain cognizant of the specific needs their students may possess. Female undergraduate student leaders desire to have their voices heard and their experiences validated. Professionals working with these students not only have the opportunity to engage those experiences with these women; they also have an obligation to do so. If student affairs is to remain committed to holistic development, these challenges—amongst many others—must be addressed with consistency and care.



## References

- Allan, E. J., & Madden, M. (2003, April 21–25). *Chilly classrooms for female undergraduate students at a research university: A question of method*. [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Astin, A. W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal for College Development*, 40(5), 518–529.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220017441\\_Student\\_Involvement\\_A\\_Development\\_Theory\\_for\\_Higher\\_Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220017441_Student_Involvement_A_Development_Theory_for_Higher_Education) (Original work published 1984)
- Boatwright, K. J., & Egidio, R. K. (2003). Psychological predictors of college women's leadership aspirations. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44(5), 653–669.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2003.0048>
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dahlvig, J. E. (2013). A narrative study of women leading within the council for Christian colleges & universities. *Christian Higher Education*, 12(1), 93–109.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2013.739435>
- Dahlvig, J. E., & Longman, K. A. (2014). Contributors to women's leadership development in Christian higher education: A model and emerging theory.

*Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 23, 5–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2014.862196>

Dupre, C. (2011). *How undergraduate women at a predominantly White institution view leadership: A phenomenology* [Doctoral dissertation, Clemson University].

Dissertations at Tiger Prints. [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_dissertations/690](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_dissertations/690)

Eagly A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). Women and the labyrinth of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(9), 62–71. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e664062007-001>

Eagly, A. H., Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C., & Van Engen, M. L. (2003). Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles: A meta-analysis comparing women and men. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(4), 569–591.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-29909.129.4.569>

Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. [https://doi.org/10.1037//0033-](https://doi.org/10.1037//0033-295X.109.3.573)

[295X.109.3.573](https://doi.org/10.1037//0033-295X.109.3.573)

Kelly, B. T., & Torres, A. (2006). Campus safety: Perceptions and experiences of women students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(1), 20–36.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0007>

Kinzie, J., Thomas, A. D., Palmer, M. M., Umbach, P. D., & Kuh, G. D. (2007). Women students at coeducational and women's colleges: How do their experiences compare. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(2), 145–165.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0015>

- Koenig, A. M., Eagly, A. H., Mitchell, A. A., & Ristikari, T. (2011). Are leader stereotypes masculine? A meta-analysis of three research paradigms. *Psychological Bulletin, 137*(4), 616–642. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023557>
- Kolb, J. A. (1999) The effect of gender role attitude toward leadership, and self-confidence on leader emergence: Implications for leadership development. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 10*(4), 305–320. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.3920100403>
- Lafreniere, S. L., & Longman, K. A. (2008). Gendered realities and women's leadership development: Participant voices from faith-based higher education. *Christian Higher Education, 7*(5), 388–404.
- Longman, K. A., & Anderson, P. S. (2011). Gender trends in senior-level leadership: A 12-year analysis of the CCCU U.S. member institutions. *Christian Higher Education, 10*, 422–443. <https://doi.or/10.1080/15363759.2011.559874>
- Longman, K. A., & Anderson, P. S. (2016). Women in leadership: The future of Christian higher education. *Christian Higher Education, 15*(1–2), 24–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2016.1107339>
- Longman, K. A., Dahlvig, J. E., Wikkerink, R. J., Cunningham, D., & O’Conner, C. M. (2011). Conceptualizing of calling: A grounded theory exploration of CCCU women leaders. *Christian Higher Education, 10*, 254–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2011.576213>
- Longman, K. A., & Lafreniere, S. L. (2012). Moving beyond the stained glass ceiling: Preparing women for leadership in faith-based higher education. *Advances in*

*Developing Human Resources*, 14(1), 45–61.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422311427429>

Lopez-Zafra, E., Garcia-Retamero, R., & Berrios-Martos, M. P. (2012). The relationship between transformational leadership and emotional intelligence from a gendered approach. *The Psychological Record*, 62, 97–114.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03395790>

McKenzie, B. L. (2018) Am I a leader? Female students leadership identity development. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 17(2). [https://journalofleadershiped.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/17\\_2\\_McKenzie.pdf](https://journalofleadershiped.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/17_2_McKenzie.pdf)

[https://journalofleadershiped.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/17\\_2\\_McKenzie.pdf](https://journalofleadershiped.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/17_2_McKenzie.pdf)

McKinsey & Company. (2020). *Women in the workplace 2019*. Lean In.

<https://leanin.org/women-in-the-workplace-2019>

Mohr, K. A. J., & Mohr, E. S. (2017). Understanding Generation Z students to promote a contemporary learning environment. *Journal on Empowering Teaching*

*Excellence*, 1 (1), 84–94. <https://doi.org/10.15142/T3M05T>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Number and percentage distribution of students enrolled at Title IV institutions, by control of institution, student level, level of institution, enrollment status, and other selected characteristics: United States, Fall 2018*. U.S. Department of Education.

<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/Search?query=percentage%20of%20women%20as%20undergraduate%20students&query2=percentage%20of%20women%20as%20undergraduate%20students&resultType=table&page=1&sortBy=relevance&collectionYears=2018-19&overlayTableId=26392>

- Paul, A. (2012). *Leadership is passion: Understanding the changing experiences of women student leaders at a coeducational liberal arts institution* [Honors thesis, Union College]. Student Work at Union/Digital Works.  
<https://digitalworks.union.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1917&context=theses>
- Powell, G. N. (2011). The gender and leadership wars. *Organizational Dynamics*, 40, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2010.10.009>
- Sandler, B. R., & Hall, R. M. (1986). *The campus climate revisited: Chilly for women faculty, administrators, and graduate students*. Association of American Colleges.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED282462.pdf>
- Schwartz, R. A. (1997). Reconceptualizing the leadership roles of women in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68(5), 502–522.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1997.11778995>
- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy and completely unprepared for adulthood and what that means for the rest of us*. Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Vanderslice, R. & Litsch, K. (1998). Women in development: Advancing women in higher education. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED444421>
- Wolf-Wendel, L.E. (2000). Women-friendly campuses: What five institutions are doing right. *The Review of Higher Education*, 23(3), 319–345.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2000.001>

## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **TAYLOR UNIVERSITY**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT**

##### **Undergraduate Women's Experiences in Leadership**

You are invited to participate in a research study of how your experiences as an undergraduate, female, student leader have shaped your leadership identity and development. You were selected as a possible subject because you currently hold a leadership position for this school year or have held a leadership position during the previous school year. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. The study is being conducted by Kait Bedel, a student in Taylor University's Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development program.

##### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent that participating within a leadership role can have on an undergraduate woman's view of self-as-leader as well as her overarching leadership development.

##### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 12-16 subjects who will be participating in this research. If you agree to participate you will be asked to conduct an individual interview with the primary researcher.

##### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

1. Agree to participate in an individual interview lasting approximately 40-60 minutes.
2. Agree to have your responses recorded during the interview.
3. Agree to be quoted and/or have your experience referenced in the results of the researcher's study under a pseudonym.
4. This study will take place during the fall 2020 semester, but your participation will simply consist of your individual interview.

##### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

There is minimal risk involved with taking part in this study. While participating in this study, there is the risk of discomfort or an emotional response associated with recalling one's past experiences as a female student leader. For this reason, participants may choose to not answer any interview question.

##### **BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

The full benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are unknown, however it is reasonable to expect that reflecting on one's leadership experiences and development may have positive effects on the participant's view of self as a leader.

This research may also benefit university professionals, such as student development faculty and staff, to create leadership development programming that better meets the unique needs of undergraduate women.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential, however we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence and a pseudonym will be used in reports in which the study may be published. Transcripts and recordings will be stored in a password-protected computer. Audio recordings of interviews will only be made accessible to the researcher and they will not be used for any other purpose or for any other person. Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the primary researcher and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Dr. Kelly Yordy, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher or faculty advisor:

##### **Researcher:**

Kait Bedel

[kait\\_bedel@taylor.edu](mailto:kait_bedel@taylor.edu)

##### **Faculty Advisor:**

Dr. Kelly Yordy

[klyordy@taylor.edu](mailto:klyordy@taylor.edu)

Inquiries regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or the interim IRB Chair, Edwin Welch, at 756-998-4315 or [edwelch@taylor.edu](mailto:edwelch@taylor.edu)

#### VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to

which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University.

#### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study. *A copy of this consent form can be made available to you if you would like one for your records.*

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

1. How would you define leadership?
2. How would you describe yourself as a leader?
3. Have there been any noteworthy interactions that you have experienced as a female leader that stand out to you?
4. In what ways, if any, has being a woman positively impacted your leadership experience and future aspirations for leadership?
5. In what ways, if any, has being a woman negatively impacted your leadership experience?
6. Do you believe being a woman has had any impact on how others view you as a leader, why or why not?
7. If you could alter any aspect of your leadership experience, what would you change?

