College-Aged Women and Leadership: Understanding the Variables Impacting College-Aged Women Student Leaders

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Attending college offers many women the opportunity to take on a variety of leadership positions. As women take on more leadership roles today while in college, barriers inhibiting their involvement still exist. The campus climate and societal expectations are two such barriers that can deter women from taking on leadership positions. This paper examines the history and perpetuation of barriers that exist for women student leaders in higher education settings. How these barriers have changed and can continue to change in the future in order to promote greater campus involvement and acceptance of women student leaders will also be discussed. Recommendations addressing the specific needs of women student leaders and suggestions for their leadership development will also be addressed.

Throughout the 20th century, women fought to achieve equality with men in all aspects of their lives. In certain arenas this fight continues into the present day. This struggle for equality is not only true of women in the working world, but also for those women on college campuses throughout the United States. Women today are more likely to attend a coeducational institution because a large number of formerly women’s colleges now open their doors to men. Coeducational institutions of higher education often place men and women in competition for the same leadership roles, similar to what they will face in the working world. Although women are more likely to take on leadership roles today than in the past, there are still barriers that deter women from taking on leadership roles. This paper will examine the history of the barriers for women leaders in higher education settings and how they are gradually being broken down to allow more women to take on pivotal leadership positions on campuses throughout the United States. The campus climate and societal expectations and their effects on women leaders, the leadership style of women, and the unique needs of women that require attention and development will also be addressed.

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Women in Higher Education

In order to understand the perpetuation of barriers that still exist for women student leaders, it is necessary to look at the history of women in the realm of higher education and how the role of women has evolved over time. Only in the past 25 years have women attended college at the same rate as men. For example, “…in 1950, 32% of college students were women; in 1978, half were women. By 1982, women received as many baccalaureate degrees as men” (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 2002, p. 47). However, equal enrollment with men has not come without a cost. When looking at the struggle women have experienced in their quest for rights and equality, it is not difficult to understand that despite significant improvements, there is still much more to accomplish. Women are succeeding in gaining respect in society as leaders, but it is important to keep in mind that women did not even achieve the right to vote until 1920, only 86 years ago.

Historically, colleges and universities were established for educating men of higher social status. Eventually women’s colleges were established as the demand for educating women rose. The most famous women’s colleges were the “Seven Sisters”: Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar College, Wellesley, and Mount Holyoke. These institutions were able to prosper as women’s colleges, unlike their predecessors, “[w]hile about 50 women’s colleges had been founded between approximately 1836 and 1875, most were unable to develop financial or organizational resources or academic programs of high quality” (Harwarth, Maline & DeBra, 2005, ¶ 3). Each of these seven colleges created an academic curriculum that was similar to that of selective male colleges. These schools stressed the importance of female leadership by hiring women faculty and staff to serve as role models for the students.

Much has changed since the 19th century within the realm of higher education for women. The enrollment in women’s colleges today has declined and more women are choosing to be educated in coeducational institutions. The environment on college campuses today is one that needs to cater to the needs of both men and women, and it is one that continues to be challenging, specifically for women leaders.

Societal Pressures and Campus Climate

In order to completely understand the situation on campuses for student leaders, it is also important to recognize the role of women in society today, as this inevitably plays a role on campus. Today, women throughout the United States are still underrepresented in positions of authority; “[a]ccording to the most recent U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau Statistics (2002), women now comprise 56.5% of the total United States workforce, but hold only 5% of the top leadership positions in this country” (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003, p. 654). While this statistic is staggering, it is a reality many women will face when they graduate. Obviously, work needs to be done to increase the representation of women in leadership roles. Leadership experience gained in college can provide women
with skills and confidence that they can carry into the working world. However, leading can be difficult due to many challenges that exist on the college campus, such as societal pressures and perceived roles of women.

There are several factors why certain women are hesitant to consider leadership as an option while attending institutions of higher education. The first of these factors is the stereotypical view of women as mothers and homemakers, which is a stereotype that has existed for centuries and still permeates society today. Having a family and being a leader outside the home are often not considered to go hand in hand. It is a societal pressure that women are the family caretakers (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003). This knowledge can deter women from pursuing leadership, because if they are expected to be homemakers, such an experience may be deemed unnecessary. Boatwright & Egidio (2003) write, “Because the academy has not always supported female personnel who have opted to have children, female college students are given the message that leadership and childrearing roles cannot coexist” (p. 665). Although this thought process may seem old-fashioned, it still exists today. Additionally, while society does not expect women to be leaders, women are also not usually considered when a leadership position arises within the work environment because they are often “perceived as having less leadership potential than men ... or as being excessively ‘nice,’” (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003, p. 654). These societal expectations, or lack thereof, not only lead to organizations failing to consider women for leadership positions, but they lead women to not consider themselves for leadership positions.

Campus climate is also a contributor to women’s pursuit of leadership on campus. College is a time when many students are heavily influenced by their peers. As Feldman and Newcomb (1969) determined, “…peer groups help students achieve family independence... offer emotional support and meet needs not met by faculty...offer another source of gratification if unsuccessful academically, [and] affect a student’s leaving or staying in college...”(as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 9). Therefore, as peer acceptance can be one deterrent to women student leaders, it can also be seen that women are taking a risk when they decide to pursue leadership due to peer reaction and “must be willing to resist the standards of peer culture” (Romano, 1996, p. 677). Understanding and recognizing the influence and pressure from peers is so important for student affairs professionals, and it can help them better understand the influences that are affecting the female students.

Extensive research has been completed with regards to women in higher education and several studies have concluded that the overall college experience is not necessarily positive. In fact, “women experience subtle forms of discrimination such as not being taken seriously in the classroom, being discouraged from seeking help with academic concerns, using student services, or participating in campus life” (Romano, 1996, p. 676). Several studies have shown that the college environment is more beneficial to men than to women because “dissimilarities between males and females in their psychological development and socialization lead many women students to experience the educational climate in a
A final element that cannot be ignored is the “glass ceiling,” or the imaginary boundary that suppresses women from gaining top positions of leadership, that still exists. Although work has been done and will continue to be done to completely break through the glass ceiling, it is a barrier for many women today in the professional world. It still exists on college campuses as well, where women still struggle to have their voice heard, received, and valued as much as the voice of men.

Understanding the Leadership Qualities of College-Aged Women

When there seems to be so much inhibiting women from taking on leadership roles, it is interesting to look at what experiences draw certain college-aged women to become student leaders in certain capacities. It is relevant for student affairs professionals to examine the types of leadership roles women decide to take on and their leadership style in order to appeal to this population. Although women tend to make up the majority of the student body at many coeducational institutions, it cannot be assumed that women feel welcomed, comfortable, and respected on their respective campuses. When looking at the misrepresentation of women in leadership roles throughout the country, an educator may ask the question, Why aren’t there more women leaders?

It is important to take into consideration how women lead so that campuses can take steps to help cultivate and accept the leadership styles that are more common for women. Much research has been done in the past regarding the perception of women student leaders on college campuses. Researchers such as Astin (1984), Leonard and Sigal (1989) and Baxter Magolda (1992) have looked extensively at the role of college-aged women and how they are affected by the college experience. Their research also notes that leadership is difficult for many women to initiate. Collaboratively, their research also indicates that women may have a hard time stepping up and leading on college campuses. Those women who are leaders are often perceived negatively by their peers (Romano, 1996).

Many women view leadership as a means to make connections with others and they seek out positions to cultivate these connections. Holland’s Theory of Vocational Development (Holland, 1992) for both men and women identifies six personality types that can be connected to leadership styles. Holland, Powell, and Fritzsch (1994) found that, “women are more likely to be social types and less likely to be realistic types, which are more likely to be men” (as cited in Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 238). Realistic types tend to be “frank, practical, inflexible, uninsightful, and uninvolved...[while social types] prefer activities that involve working with others in ways that educate, inform, cure or enlighten” (Evans, et al., p. 229). Women more typically seek out interpersonal connections through leadership positions because they feel more com-
fortable and secure. It has been determined through numerous studies that women who long to feel connected are more likely to seek out leadership positions because “their connectedness needs may actually instill within them a desire to connect with and empower others through leadership roles” (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003, p. 654).

As previously mentioned, peer acceptance is also very important to college-aged students, and to woman student leaders this can be especially important in order to facilitate more effective leadership and confidence. This is perhaps why democratic leadership is often the preferred method for many women. Eagly and Johnson (1990, as cited in Boatwright & Egidio, 2003) found that “results from a meta-analysis of 370 leadership studies showed that female leaders employ more relational and participative behaviors than male leaders, two traits that characterize the democratic leadership style” (p. 653). Democratic leadership is becoming more effective and encouraged today, whereas hierarchical leadership had been looked upon as superior in the past. As Boatwright and Egidio (2003) point out, “forward thinking organizations have begun actively seeking leaders who effectively incorporate democratic strategies (e.g., shared power, collaboration, and teamwork) into their leadership styles more so than the traditional hierarchical, stereotypically male leadership strategies” (p. 653). Thus the leadership style most closely aligned with women is gaining larger acceptance.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

It is important to look at how campuses can address potential woman student leaders and encourage them to look at their leadership options. As it has been pointed out, women are also psychologically and developmentally different from men. These differences can be more widely recognized on campuses and student affairs professionals can initiate programs to educate their students. This section will look at ways campuses and student affairs professionals can address the needs of woman student leaders.

Providing women students with a connection to a mentor such as a faculty or staff member, or even an upper-class student leader, can be an excellent source of support and encouragement. When strong female role models are present to show young women that it is possible to have a leadership position and a family, these women are able to realize that they too can be successful in a position of power. As Romano (1996) suggests, “whether working with students at women’s colleges or those at coeducational institutions, student affairs professionals should regard themselves as role models for student leaders and exhibit leadership values they hope students will emulate” (p. 681). These role models can also serve as mentors to young women. These mentors can motivate female students and their presence could make the difference in the life of a student leader. Due to the gradual change in attitudes and the increased acceptance of women leaders, it is possible that more mentors for young women will emerge in the future. However, this is currently an area of support that is lacking for many young women on college campuses.
College-aged women can be exposed to other women leaders through programs, such as a lecture series, that are comprised of various speakers who either address the concerns of women or speak about how they have overcome the stereotypes and barriers that society has imposed upon them. Such programs can provide a wider vision for women so that they can see where their path can lead and they can start working toward a future goal while in the college environment.

Providing students with leadership workshops can also be beneficial to the emerging leader. As mentioned, the democratic model that appeals largely to women is often not as acceptable as the more traditional hierarchical model of leadership. By providing students with leadership training and by demonstrating other methods of effective leadership, student affairs professionals can encourage women to pursue their interests. Leadership workshops can show women who might not be excited about leading that leading others is possible and it can be done in different ways. Leadership training can also inform men of the different leadership styles; therefore they can better receive women as leaders and understand that they may lead differently.

Providing women with campus student groups and organizations that specifically address their needs can also be a way to encourage their leadership development. Women are more likely to be leaders in groups when they feel comfortable and connected, and a group specifically targeting women can be an excellent setting to create this atmosphere. Research has demonstrated that the type of student organizations students participate in depends on their ethnic backgrounds, and the same might be true for gender. Therefore, women will be more involved in student organizations that address their concerns (Miller & Kraus, 2004, p. 424). As stated, other organizations and programs addressing certain populations of students (e.g., queers, Latinos, and African Americans) have been successful in increasing awareness about the needs of these populations and they have created a safe place for these students. This type of programming for women can be accomplished through a campus women’s center, which currently exists on many campuses. However, more colleges should strive to create such programs and centers for women to help them create connections that can contribute to their leadership development.

Looking to the Future

Just as the role of women has changed since women won the right to vote in 1920, it can be assumed that the role of women student leaders will evolve as we look ahead. Studies have already begun to show that women’s views of leadership are beginning to change. Romano completed a study in 1996 that looked at the holistic college experience of women student leaders in terms of how they became student leaders and how they were received on campus as leaders. Although her study was not comprehensive, it did present some interesting findings. Romano (1996) states, “student leaders in this study felt comfortable and confident in modeling themselves after other women...[c]ontrary to previous findings in the literature, the women in this study found leading... to be an

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experience that enhanced their growth and development… (pp. 682-683). More recent research conducted by Boatwright and Egidio in 2003 found that a more holistic view of leadership was a more successful approach to use when developing leadership skills in women. In particular, they found that leadership development should focus on “experiences that validate women’s relational identities, [and] increase women’s awareness of how their relational strengths may enhance their leadership effectiveness…” (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003, p. 668). This information is important so that student affairs professionals can be aware of the most effective way to reach out to women who want to be leaders.

There is movement by women within the structure of higher education to become leaders and hopefully this trend will continue and expand to a larger population of woman students. More steps can be taken to decrease the inequalities that still exist between men and women. By increasing campus programming targeted specifically at women student leaders, women will feel more comfortable on campus and can in turn leave school and use their skills in the real world.

References


