Influences on Residence Hall Students' Perceptions of Student Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been a focus of higher education since the inception of colleges and universities (Astin & Astin, 2000). Although leadership has been defined in different ways, it resonates as a principle within many higher education institutions. Although the commitment to leadership development has remained strong, different perspectives on leadership have gained prominence and a plethora of models ,perceptions, theories, and definitions concerning leadership and leadership development have emerged (Bass, 1 990).

Leadership development initiatives can be more effective if practitioners learn more about the students they are targeting. Knowing and understanding student leadership perceptions and attitudes toward student government and leadership programming could enhance leadership development efforts. This study addresses (a) how residence hall students perceive leadership, (b) which students are more likely to participate in leadership development programs, and (c) how students perceive residence hall student government structure.

Leadership Perceptions

Scholars have struggled simply to define leadership. Several definitions, models, and theories attempt to describe this phenomenon. Bass (1 990) states: "There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (p. 1 1). Trying to make sense of leadership is a challenge because, as Burns (1 978) noted Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (p. 2).

Rogers (1 996) placed leadership thought into industrial and postindustrial paradigms. The industrial paradigm emphasizes conventional views of leadership that have dominated leadership perceptions throughout the twentieth century. It assumes that: (a) leadership is the property of an individual; (b) leadership pertains primarily to formal groups or organizations; and (c) the terms "leadership" and "management" are interchangeable. The postindustrial paradigm has emerged from more recent literature and thoughts on leadership critical of the industrial paradigm. The postindustrial paradigm assumes that leadership: (a) is based on relationships and does not belong to any individual; (b) is meant to create change; and (c) can be done by anyone, not iUSt by people who are designated leaders (Rogers, 1 996).

Although the industrial paradigm has dominated societal perceptions of leadership (Rogers, 1 996) and quite possibly also has been dominate on college campuses, signs of the postindustrial paradigm also exist. For instance, women tend to perceive leadership in a more nontraditional way (Kezar, 2000; Romano, 1 996) Romano (1 996) noted that women student leaders use words such as „ nonhierarchical, interactive, accessible, one-toone, equality, and team member" (p. 679). Kezar (2000) believes people of color, who view leadership as collective, collaborative, teamoriented and having equal power relationships, also tend to view leadership as nonhierarchical.

Wielkiewicz (2000, 2002) measured student perceptions of leadership with the

leadership Attitudes and Beliefs Scale. The scale included 28 items, half reflecting "hierarchical thinking" and the other half reflecting "systemic thinking." Hierarchical thinking conceptualizes leadership as power-based, with those at the top exerting the most influence. Survey items reflecting this approach include: "A leader must maintain tight control of the organization," and "The most important members of an organization are its leaders" (Wielkiewicz, 2000, p. 343). Systemic thinking refers to the notion that anyone can exert influence. Survey items addressing this thinking included: "Leadership processes involve the participation of all organization members ," and "Organizations must be ready to adapt to changes that OCCUr outside the organization "(Wielkiewicz, 2000, p. 343).

Very little literature discusses leadership specifically related to residence halls. Willett and Licata (1 990) sought to understand residence hall students' brinkmanship, defined as "assertive behavior that challenges authority while avoiding negative sanctions" (p. 343). They discovered that a poor social climate unsupportive of individual needs evokes challenges or revolts toward residence hall staff, such as Resident Assistants. Thus residence hall students are less likely to engage in brinkmanship when they perceive a positive social climate.

Leadership Programming

Leadership development is a challenge for higher education. Many colleges and universities have leadership development as a principle and realize this programming goal in several different ways. Some of the most common methods of leadership development include student organizations, leadership conferences, leadership seminars, and educational programs (McIntire, 1 989). Student affairs typically has been the locus of leadership development initiatives on college campuses, although some institutions offer academic courses on leadership, many for credit (McIntire, 1 989).

Roberts' and Ullom's (1 989) framework for evaluating leadership initiatives is predicated on assumed differences among leadership training, education, and development. Leadership training means improving the performance of an individual in the role he or she presently occupies, and includes officer training workshops and organizational retreats. Leadership education offers broader lessons in leadership and applications to settings other than the student role. Thus, leadership education can contain theory and reflection. Leadership development places students in an interactionist environment allowing them to work with others toward change while struggling with increasingly complex situations (Roberts & Ullom, 1 989). Leadership development happens as students are challenged and as they work with others.

Student Government

The third focus of this study is students' perceptions of student government including residence hall associations. Student government has long has played an important role on college and university campuses. Until the 1 960s and 1 970s, student government did not necessarily mean that students had a role in rule-making ,iudicial operations, and institutional and academic policy development (Moore, 1 995) . Student government leaders still are seen by most students as a powerful campus group, despite the fact that smaller numbers of college students are determining who comprises this group, with a general decrease in participation in student elections since 1 978 (Levine & Cureton, 1 998).

DATA AND METHODS

The Population and Sample

A survey was administered to a random sample of students living in university residence facilities at a four-year, public land grant university located in the Midwest and enrolling more than 23,000 undergraduate and 4,300 graduate students. Approximately 35% of the students live in university-owned housing. The undergraduate population is 88% white, 7% minority, and 5% international. Most undergraduate students (78%) come from

within the state. Most students come to the institution with a record of organizational involvement, including school clubs and organizations, scouting, 4-1-1, Campfire USA , church organizations, and a host of other activities.

The studied residence population excluded students living in university family housing and in upperclass student apartments. A 25% random sample (n = 1 ,667) of the remaining population were asked to complete a 41 -item survey. Hall staff assisted in administering and collecting the survey during early November 2000. A 69% response rate resulted in 1 , 1 50 usable surveys.

Over half (54.9%) of the respondents were male. Over half (5 1 .3 ^{0}/0) were freshmen, 29.3% sophomores, 1 1 .6^{0}/0 iuniors, and 7.7% seniors or graduate students. Residence hall tenure was measured by the number of semesters, excluding summers, that students reported living in residence halls. Most respondents (59.7%) had lived in the residence halls for 1 or 2 semesters, 29.7% for 3-4 semesters, 6.9% for 5-6 semesters, and 3.7% for 6 or more semesters. Slightly Under one-third (29.8%) held a residence hall student government office or club position. These characteristics are representative of the target population.

1 3

The Survey

Although the survey was designed for use at the institution, it included ideas and items from previous research (Wielkiewicz, 2000). Six demographic questions were asked: (a) gender, (b) classification, (c) residence hall, (d) number of semesters living in the residence halls, (e) house name, (f) whether the student had ever held a residence hall student government position or belonged to a residence hall club. The remaining questions requested leadership information using a Likert-type scale (l = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). These were subdivided into 3 sections: (1) leadership perceptions (1 7 questions); (2) leadership programming preferences (9 questions); and (3) student government (9 questions). Reliability measures for the 35 leadership items was alpha
= 87.

Data Analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS for Windows, Version 1 0.0, and AMOS 4.01 for Windows (Arbuckle, 1 994) to conduct structural equation model estimation. Structural equation models are the result of multivariate regression methods predicting several dependent variables simultaneously. One equation is estimated for each dependent (endogenous) variable Using predictors that can be exogenous (not a dependent variable in any equation) or endogenous in another equation. The equations are linked, with a dependent variable in one equation serving as an independent variable in another. The model estimates both the direct effects of independent variables on the dependent variables and the indirect effects of independent variables mediated through other dependent variables. These virtues of structural equations were exploited to understand and explain perceptions of student leadership among residence halls students.

Gender and semesters in the residence halls (the latter variable is named semester) were retained in statistical model building. Student classification was not Used because it provided information similar to the semester variable (r = 0.68). In addition, a new variable, position, was created to include involvement in residence hall student government or club positions.

Principal components factor analysis was conducted to reduce complexity of the leadership questions in the survey. Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization was Used to extract orthogonal (i.e., uncorrelated) factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1 These results are summarized in Table I .

Four factors were retained from the 1 3 leadership perception questions. These produced a broad view of leadership, ranging

from traditional hierarchical to nontraditional nonhierarchical'

1 . The hierarchical leadership perception holds that leaders are elected, and that leaders deserve credit for organizational success. leaders make the important organizational decisions Using a formal leadership style, This is the most dominant factor, with eigenvalue of 3.227, accounting for 20.2% of the variation among the leadership items.

2. The situational leadership perception holds that some people are leaders and others followers. Individuals do not need to have a position to have influence, and leadership involves participation by all members of the organization. The eigenvalue for this factor was 2.698, accounting for 1 6.9% of the variation among the leadership items.

3. The democratic leadership perception holds that leaders are elected into positions and that anyone can lead. Therefore, those in leadership positions are not born leaders. Rather, leadership skills are earned through accumulated experience. This factor had an eigenvalue of 1 .275 and explained 8.0% of the variation among the leadership items.

4. The anarchistic leadership perception holds that an organization can succeed without leaders. Proponents reiect the need for positional leaders. The factor had an eigenvalue of 1 . 1 77 and explained 7.4% of the variation among the leadership items.

A single factor—participation—was extracted from the eight leadership programming questions. The factor corresponded to students' interest in various forms of leadership education (e.g., evening program, day-long leadership conference, reading publications about leadership).

Similarly, a single factor—respect—was extracted from the eight student government questions. This factor measures students' respect for residence hall student government.

Standardized scores were calculated for each respondent on each of these derived factors because they provide a common basis for determining the magnitude to which any

TABLE 1

ROTATED FACTOR LOADINGS MATRIX

(PRINCIPAL COMPONENTS FACTOR ANALYSIS wŒITH VARIMAX ROTATION)

Leadership Perceptions	Hierarchical	Situational	Democratic	Anarchistic
I believe leaders are those elected into positions	0.64	-o. 1 5	0.31	-0.21
I believe that some people are leaders while others are followers	0.1 1	0.67	0.00	-0.07
It is important that a single leader emerges in a group	0.66	0.19		-o. 1 6
Positional leaders deserve credit for the SUCCeSS of the organization	0.46	0.32	0.15	-0.44
Individuals do not need a position to be a leader	-0.21	0.69	0.22	0.04
Leadership processes involve the participation of all organization members	0.10	0.58	0.38	-0.05
Individuals need to be in a leadership position in order to have influence	0.72			0.12
I believe that leaders are born, not made	0.52	0.05	•0.49	0.31
I believe that anyone can be a leader	0.02	0.20	0.82	0.14
I feel that leaders possess certain skills that set them apart from others	0.19	0.75		-0.07
I feel that an organization could succeed without				

positional leaders	0.19	-0.06	0.10	0.84
The most important members of an organization are its leaders	0.63	0.1 1	-0.09	0.1 8
The main task of a leader is to make the important decisions for the organization	0.54	0.12	0.09	0.10

Leadership Programming	Participation
I like learning about leadership	0.77
I feel that I have had enough leadership development	-0.07
I would attend evening programs about leadership	0.87
I would attend a day-long leadership conference	0.88
I would attend a weekend-long leadership retreat	0.84
I would read publications about leadership	0.77
I would prefer to have professional staff members teach me about leadership	0.72
The Department of Residence provides enough leadership development opportunities	0.04

Student Government	Respect
I feel that there is a strong sense of community in my hall	0 93
I feel there is a strong sense of community among all students living in halls	0.21 I feel that those in student government represent me 0.70
I respect the student governments in the residence halls	0.88
I respect those who hold leadership positions in student government	0.85
I believe that students have an influence in decision making within the Department of Residence	0.71
I like the student government structure within the residence halls	0.79
I am satisfied with the performance of the student governments in the halls	0.77

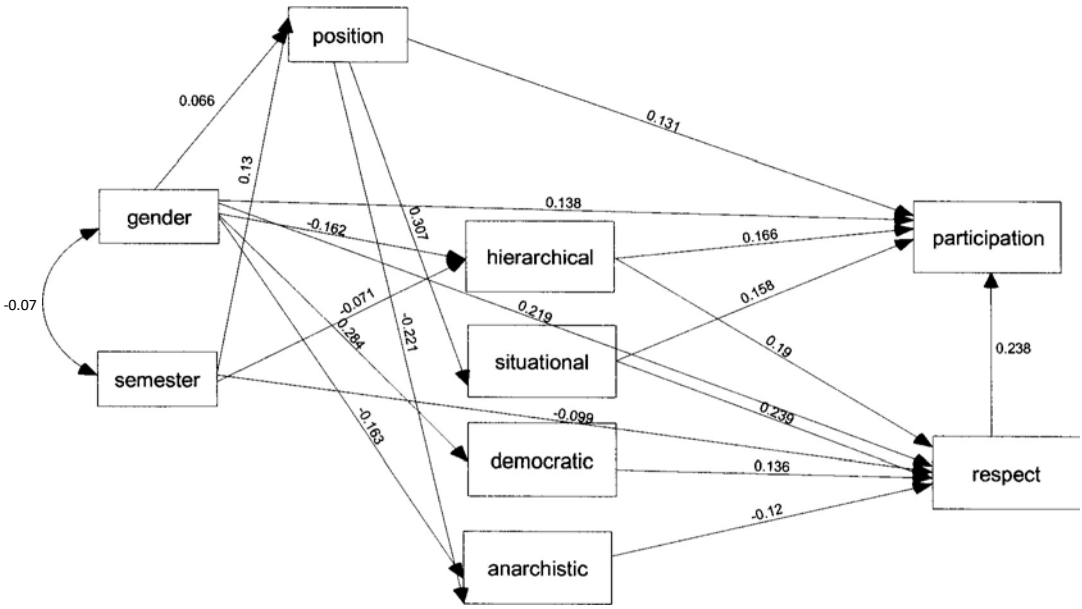

Figure 1. The Reduced Path Model for the Analyses.

respondent scores above (positive) or below (negative) the mean of each composite factor, weighted by factor loadings of each item on each factor. The Anderson-Rubin method was Used to calculate standardized factor scores for each of the four leadership dimensions, the participation dimension of leadership programming, and respect for student government. The factored composite variables are summarized as standard normal (Z) scores, with mean O and standard deviation 1 , providing continuous composite variables to be used in model development.

The Full Model. The final model comprised two exogenous (independent) variables— gender and number of semesters in the residence halls— and 7 endogenous (dependent) variables. The endogenous variables were whether the student held a residence hall position, the four leadership perception factors, respect for student government (respect), and the desire to learn leadership skills (participation). Visual and numerical evidence was checked to ascertain that multivariate normality was satisfied approximately before estimating the model. Structural equation estimation of this system of seven simultaneous equations was undertaken using AMOS 4.01 (Arbuckle, 1 994).

The validity of such models is determined by measuring the extent to which the estimated model reproduces (fits) the sample covariance matrix. The fully recursive AMOS model resulted in a good fit (c^2 = 2. 1 09, df = 909) between the estimated model covariances and the sample covariances among the nine variables.

The Reduced Model. When path estimates of model parameters are nonsignificant ,the model is inefficient and standard errors are inflated, resulting in conceptual clutter and more difficult interpretations. Nine nonsignificant possible model paths were set to 0 in a reduced model (Figure 1), which is parsimonious and provides a reasonable alternative to the full model.

The values of the goodness of fit index (GFI = .997) (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1 984), adiusted goodness of fit index (AGFI = .992) (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1 984) and other indicators confirm that the reduced model

reproduces the relationships among the variables in the model.

TABLE 2
DECOMPOSITION OF TOTAL EFFECTS FOR THE REDUCED MODEL

			Regression Weight				
		Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	Direct Effect as % of Total Effect
	→	genderposition 0.066 0.066 0.000 0.025 100.0 semesterposition o. 1 30 o. 1 30 0.000					
0.008	→	100.0 genderhierarchical -O. 62 -o. 162 0.000 0.061 100.0 semesterhierarchical -0.071					
-0.071	→	0.000 0.019 -3.81 100.0 genderdemocratic 0.284 0.284 0.000 0.062 4.61 100.0					
	→	positionsituational 0.307 0.307 0.000 0.067 100.0 positionanarchistic -0.221 -0.221					
0.000	→	0.067 100.0 genderanarchistic -o. 178 -o. 163 -0.01 5 0.062 -2.64* * 91 .6					
	→	hierarchicalrespect O. 90 O. 90 0.000 0.029 100.0 situationalrespect 0.239 0.239 0.000					
0.028 8.44	→	** 100.0 democraticrespect 0.1 36 0.1 36 0.000 0.029 4.75* * 100.0 genderrespect					
0.253	→	0.219 0.034 0.058 86.6 semester respect -0.099 -0.001 0.01 8 -5.61** 99.0 anarchistic					
respect - 2.09* 6Å.5	→	O. 1 20 -O. 1 20 0.000 0.028** 100.0 positionparticipation 0.203 0.1 31 0.072 0.063					
	→						
	→						
	→						
hierarchical	−9	participation	0.21 2	o. 166	0.045	0.029	5.71 ** 78.3
respect		participation	0.238	0.238	0.000	0.030	** 100.0
situational		participation	0.215	0.1 58	0.057	0.029	** 73.5
gender		participation		0.1 38	0.045	0.058	2.39* 75.0

Note: Total Effect = Direct Effect + Indirect Effect.
significant at p < .05 (i.e., Critical Ratio 2.00) • significant at p < .01 (i.e., Critical Ratio 2.60)

RESULTS

Contributors to Holding a Leadership Position

Results characterizing the parameters of the fitted reduced model are provided in Table 2. Women (t =2.63, p < .01) were more likely than men to hold a residence hall leadership position, and students with longer residence hall tenure (t =1 6.75, p < .01) were more likely than those with less residence hall tenure to hold a residence hall leadership position.

Perceptions

Men were more likely than women (t = -2.65, p< .01) to adhere to hierarchical, or formal, leadership perceptions, and students who had lived a shorter time in the residence halls (t — = .3.8 1 , p < .01) were more likely than those who had lived longer in the residence halls to hold hierarchical perceptions of leadership. Having residence halls leadership experience {t = 4.56 ,p < .01) is the only demographic variable related to a higher score for the situational perception . Women were more likely than men to adhere to the democratic leadership perception (t = 4.61 ,p < .01); no other

demographic variable was related to this perception. Men (t — -2.64, .01) were more likely than women, and students who have not held a residence hall student government position (t = -3.29, p < .01) were more likely than students in government positions to agree with the anarchistic perception, the most nontraditional of the four perceptions.

Indicators of Student Government Perceptions

Several variables significantly predicted respect. Women students indicated that they had more respect than did men for residence hall student government (t = 3.78, p < .01). Students with less residence hall tenure also demonstrated more respect for residence hall student government compared to those with longer residence hall tenure (t -5.61,

Students scoring higher on the three more traditional leadership perceptions showed more respect for residence hall student government than did students scoring lower on those three perceptions: situational (t = 8.44, p < .01), hierarchical (t = 6.60, p < .01), and democratic (t = 4.75, p < .01). A higher score on the anarchistic perception was associated with less respect for student government (t = -4.23, p < .01).

Interest in Leadership Programming

Female students expressed more interest in learning about leadership than did male students (t 2.39, p < .05). Students who hold or have held student government positions also were more interested in learning about leadership than were those who had not held such offices (t =2.08, p < .05). Students who had more respect for student government had a stronger interest in learning about leadership than did students with less respect for student government (t = 7.99, p < .01). Students who held more positive hierarchical leadership perceptions (t - — 5.71 , p < .01) and more positive situational leadership perceptions (t = 5.37, p < .01) also expressed more interest in learning about leadership than did students scoring lower on these two perceptions of leadership.

Direct and Indirect Effects

The path model displayed in Figure 1 demonstrates how some predictor variables might have an intervening effect on the outcome measures, but all of these indirect effects are minor. Direct effects are displayed in Figure I by arrows that go directly from a predictor variable on the left to a dependent variable to its right, without passing through any other variable in between. In contrast, indirect effects are relationships between a left-side predictor variable and a right-side dependent variable that are mediated by passing through one or more variables in between. The magnitude of indirect effects may be determined by cross-multiplying the regression coefficients for any combination of paths that connects a predictor variable on the left with a dependent variable on the right and then summing these results. The total effect of a predictor variable on a dependent variable is the sum of its direct and indirect effects.

There are statistically significant direct effects from gender, position, and respect on participation in residence hall student government, and statistically significant indirect effects from the hierarchical and situational learning perceptions. An example of how the direct and indirect effects provide a more complete picture of relationships among the variables in the model can be noted with the path from gender to participation. The path from gender has a direct effect of . 1 38, which amounts to 78% of the total effect (. 1 84). The remainder of the total effect of gender on participation is accounted for by the indirect path from gender, through holding a position (position), to participation; this mediated pattern demonstrates only a minor indirect effect (.045).

Table 2 presents all of the direct and indirect effects of the model. Indirect effects generally were moderate compared to the magnitude of the direct effects. Women students indicated that they had more respect than men for student government. The direct path from gender to respect is reinforced by an indirect effect from gender to participation. The influence of number of

semesters in the residence halls is reinforced by the level of respect for student government. More semesters in the residence halls is related to a stronger situational perception, which in turn is associated with less respect for student government. The analysis of direct and indirect effects reveals that leadership perception is an important intervening variable. Part of the effect is brought about not by inborn, gender-based differences, but rather by different perceptions that develop from later life experiences.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research provide some unique insights into attitudes toward leadership, indicating the influence of both gender and semesters living in the residence halls. Gender has a strong influence on interest and involvement in student government, Women are more likely than men to hold a residence hall student government position, to respect student government, and to be interested in leadership programming. This result may be related to a previous research finding that women's development is different from men's, especially in the importance of interpersonal relationships (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1 998). Women may find that student government provides them a strong opportunity to develop interpersonal relationships in a way that permits them to develop autonomy and leadership skills.

Women are more inclined than men to hold a more democratic leadership style that is more collaborative and built on relationships (Kezar, 2000). Men are more inclined than women toward a hierarchical or anarchistic leadership style. Men's view might be explained by their perception that leadership is a trait expected of them, and thus they conform to more traditional leadership styles. Women, on the other hand, are not as likely to maintain traditional styles because leadership is not what is expected of them, but at best may be encouraged (Delworth & Seeman, 1 984). Given these gender differences in leadership perceptions, campuses should assess not only how they provide leadership education, but also their language. For example, Arminio et al. (2000) recommend that institutions de-emphasize hierarchical relationships and emphasize involvement, association, and commitment to include minority students. Although this study did not consider ethnicity, it supports the need for campuses to explore how they portray leadership education in efforts to include various groups. As campuses emphasize new leadership paradigms, it is i mportant to understand that individual differences, such as gender, might influence students' perceptions of leadership education.

In addition to gender, residence hall tenure also impacts students' perceptions of leadership. Underclass students are more likely than upperclass students to have a positive respect for student government. Most probably this is explained by the enthusiasm that new students feel for college generally. Underclass students also might enter college believing that their residence halls' SUCCeSS depends on student government, whereas upperclass students might feel they have more control and personal autonomy. Interestingly, those living in the residence halls longer are more likely to get involved than are students with less residence hall tenure. This could be because upperclass students feel more confidence in their own abilities and less dependent on leaders. Longer residence hall tenure also is associated with declining support for the hierarchical view of leadership. Perhaps this is because the people who really enioy communal living, something that presumably fosters a more democratic view, are those who have remained longer in the residence halls. It also is likely that students holding leadership positions are more likely to be retained in the residence hall system.

Further research should explore leadership involvement to determine how both longevity in student residence facilities and leadership perceptions influence student government involvement. These differences in leadership perceptions based upon classification suggest that institutions and student organizations

should devote attention to whom they encourage to get involved and where they target their leadership training efforts. Although many leadership training efforts are devoted to current leaders, it is important to support the enthusiasm of new students while offering new ways of understanding leadership. In addition, current institutional leaders need to ensure that mentoring efforts extend to developing leaders as well.

It is not clear if it is the influence of holding a role as a student leader that stimulates the desire to learn more about leadership, or whether it is interest in leadership learning that in turn explains variation in the level of concern and respect for student government. This line of inquiry should be pursued in future research, to ascertain the causal ordering of these effects. Disentangling the proper causal order can be undertaken with structural equations methods.

The analysis of direct and indirect effects reveals that leadership perception is an important intervening variable. Part of the effect is brought about not by an inborn gender difference, but rather by different perceptions that develop in later life. Further research on gender effects in student leadership certainly seems to be in order, along with research on other causes and consequences of participation in and perceptions about student leadership. More importantly, institutions may find value in assessing the leadership perceptions of students on their campuses. Many campuses struggle with decreasing student desire to be involved with governance (Levine & Cureton, 1 998). An understanding of how leadership perceptions contribute to student willingness to become involved in campus organizations and leadership positions may provide strategies enabling appropriate programmatic changes. This study offers a potential tool for gaining this understanding of leadership perceptions.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has yielded some interesting thoughts about student leadership. Certainly the findings presented here are limited by being based on results from a survey conducted at one Midwestern land grant institution, and therefore may not generalize broadly to all institutions of

higher education. However, the findings provide further support for Wielkiewicz's previous work on leadership perceptions. Although the model is not overwhelmingly powerful and does not account for all of the variance, it performs adequately considering the limited number of items (41) in the survey. This model can form the basis for further exploratory research Using other variables, such as ethnicity, that were not considered.

Further research may focus on applications of alternative statistical methods, such as cluster analysis, a technique of sorting observations that could ascertain which students share the characteristics associated with different leadership perceptions as well as different levels of respect for and interest in leadership. Other possible research could include examining the relationship between students' leadership perceptions and their reasons for attending college.

The primary explanatory value of this study lies in its identification of how predictor variables such as leadership perceptions, gender, whether the student had held a leadership role, and the number of semesters living in residence halls influence undergraduate students' participation in and respect for student government. If the world is moving toward a postindustrial environment as Rost (1 993) suggests, then higher education needs to provide programming that will educate students on this new paradigm of leadership In this new environment, programming efforts should seek to develop situational and democratic leadership perceptions. There is no single factor that predetermines leadership perceptions. A "onesize-fits-all" programming model excludes the variety of leadership perceptions that we know to exist and would not meet the leadership development needs of students. This study's findings suggest that gender and length of stay in the residence halls are two particularly important factors that should be used in future efforts to understand and

address the need for leadership programming development.

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