

How Does Gender Increase/Decrease the Efficacy of the Role of President in Student Run Organizations?

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EVOKE

About the Ethnographer

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EXPLORE

Question

What questions is your inquiry contingent upon?

Are there major differences in responsiveness to leaders between pre-professional and social/service extra-curricular activities?

Are certain personality characteristics more conducive to effective leadership abilities?

Is one gender more dominant in their membership interaction?

Plan

How will you go about answering your inquiry?

I plan on conducting interviews with four presidents of student-run organizations, two pre-professional and two social/service based. Then I will be observing their meetings to further investigate the role of president and the interactions between members and leaders. Finally, I will be reviewing literature that examines leadership differentials based on gender and attempting to tie any pre-existing themes with my observations.

OBSERVE

What observations, or findings are you encountering in your research?

I performed five interviews in which I asked questions regarding personality traits/characteristics that were associated with effective leadership and leadership strategies. Other topics that my questions included were formalities of becoming president/chairperson of their respective groups, personal feelings towards being in a leadership position and specific examples of the most challenging and rewarding experiences they have had during their tenure as president.

I interviewed three females and two male presidents/chairpersons. I divided the interviews between pre-professional and social/service based organizations. My interviewees were: LaTonya Washington, junior and chair for a major event on campus geared towards African American students; Nathan Ludlow, sophomore and president of a campus wide group that caters to African American student population; Michelle Thornton, senior and first tenure as president of a pre-professional group; Daniel Smith, senior and second term as president of a pre-professional group; Iris Moore, senior and second term as president of a pre-professional group.

When I asked questions regarding personality characteristics that a "good" leader should exhibit, all of the presidents listed being able to create a certain level of comfort within

the group that would ensure an easiness so that all members would feel encouraged to participate. Other traits that I frequently came across were being a good listener, having the capability to compromise and also know when to make decisions. Michelle and Daniel had very similar ideas regarding traits, they both stated that in their roles, it is important to realize it is not all about them, and that it is necessary for buy-in. In my beginning questions, I am not noticing major differences, though the a few adjectives are different, the sentiment is the same.

While performing these interviews, I noticed how much effect prior experience played in these presidents approaches. For example, Michelle was a member of a varsity sport on campus and when I asked if she had varied her leadership strategy, she said no because the organization was pretty "cut and dry", she didn't feel that she could adjust her strategy per meeting like a coach of a team would do depending on the performance of the team. When asked the same question, Daniel relayed that he would offer incentives to his members such as "member of the month" where someone would receive a gift card, he was showing how his training in the business field was being used in his operational skills with his group. Then Nathan expressed that during high school, he was not very involved in extra-curricular activities because he worked in a managerial position and that he heavily used the skills he learned doing that in interacting with group members.

When my questions turned towards reasons for getting involved, Iris and Nathan spoke of a lack of their gender representation as well as their race. Daniel commented that he felt it was necessary for him to gain some experience in a leadership position at the collegiate level. All three females commented that they wanted to have a hand in how things were being run. Iris stated that she hated when people always had something to say about certain things not being done, but they never stepped up and took initiative. Michelle stated tht she liked being behind the logistics and understanding what is going on. LaTonya stated that she wanted to see the program become a better event that could be enjoyed by the entire African American community. I think this is where dominance was coming into place between the females. While I believe that all of the presidents wanted to see a change, the females were more likely to state this as being a contributing reason for their involvement.

I asked questions about any reoccurring problems that was evident in their respective organizations, and the answer from nearly everyone was centered around attendance and tardiness. Regardless of the pre-professional or social/service based classification. The difference existed in how the presidents responded. The males, Daniel and Nathan, saw these things as a reflection of their leadership abilities and tried to reformulate their strategies. For example, Daniel mixed things up and started to add different activities other than meetings, he started having socials and group dinners sponsored by the organization. Iris, who had the same type of problem in low attendance, would take her issues directly to the group and discuss it with them either via email or in the next meeting.

I asked questions regarding preparation for their positions and the responses surprised me somewhat. The males spoke of an ideological leader, they thought of the type of person that they would like to be their president and the traits that person would possess and tried to bring that same type of thing to the table. The females prepared for their positions by repeating patterns that they had observed from the past. For example, Iris and Michelle both had access to notebooks held by previous presidents and modeled their behaviors after theirs. LaTonya did something similar, since she had been on the committee in the past, she thought of things that had worked and things that didn't and structured her plans accordingly. I thought it was interesting that for the males, their leadership path was more internal and the women followed a more external one.

During my observation of the group that Michelle Thornton is president, I sat quietly in the corner and watched the group during their weekly executive board meeting. Everyone sat at a rectangular shaped table, the president sat at the head. There were four females and two males, one of whom came in late. Everyone was dressed casually. There was a lot laughing going on during the meeting, it seemed like every five minutes a side conversation would start, but it didn't seem like the president didn't have control of the group. It almost appeared that in addition to using this time to go over topics pertinent to the group, they used it as a time to catch each other up on things going on in their personal lives. Everyone had copies of the agenda for the evening. Each member of the e-board gave their report and addressed upcoming activities. All of the members seemed to know their role and took notes on each others roles. There were times when it seemed like one member was getting bored and she played with a stapler. Then it became evident just how close the members were, somehow they got off topic and started to have a competition about what side of Chicago was better, south side versus west side. It lingered on for a little, but then the president rose her voice and got order. The mood was very light-hearted. Not only did they discuss subjects that dealt with their majors, but there was a strong emphasis on community service and outreach to local youth about the types of things that someone in their major goes through. Another member started to write deadlines on the board and then the meeting ended. Even after it ended, everyone lingered around and had small conversations regarding deadlines that were approaching for the group. I saw themes that Michelle discussed in her interview being shown in her interaction with the group. She told me that she really wanted her members to feel comfortable networking and talking to others in their field and she really stressed that during the meeting. She also said that their group was very unified but they did have problems with side conversations during the meeting, which I observed. She said she would raise her voice to regain everyone's attention and that was exactly what she did. She was very open to taking ideas and compromising with her group members, another thing that she talked about during our interview. So I felt that her interview responses were very much in line with her actions shown during her meeting.

DISCUSS

Discuss your inquiry, taking care to separate speculation from fact or data

Introduction

A strong leader encompasses a variety of characteristics that enhances their position and in doing so strengthens their membership. Within my research, I sought to find differences in the approach of presidents in black student run organizations based on gender. I chose this topic after having an interesting experience while being a member of a large student run committee on campus. The chairperson was female and in many ways she seemed restricted in her interaction with the committee members. It seemed like she held back and in some ways, she had problems asserting herself. In preparation for investigating this topic, I planned on interviewing current presidents and observing meetings. This would allow me to gain insight on their personal leadership beliefs and strategies and tying their words with their actions. In addition, I reviewed academic articles that provided a framing for how leadership is viewed in terms of gender roles and also focusing on how student involvement shapes the academic experience.

I expected to find varying approaches used by each president and to also observe minor gender differentials. However, it was unclear if I would be able to contribute differentials solely to gender or if the findings would be purely attributed to differing personality traits. The literature revealed that even differences that I might have contributed to personality should be viewed as connected to the societal roles given to each respective sex.

Literature Review

Increased participation in activities while on campus can create more avenues for added enjoyment of the collegiate experience. Alexander Astin investigates the motivational factors behind student involvement in his article, "Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education." Throughout this article, Astin describes several theories that seek to explain the impetus of student involvement. Several theories suggest that involvement increases the overall satisfaction of a student on many levels including "interpersonal self-esteem, status needs as well as satisfaction with student friendships (Astin 304)." This article concludes that increased involvement enhances the learning environment experienced by students.

This article situates itself in my research by lending an explanation on the types of benefits received by students in conjunction with their participation. I used this information because I thought it would help explain motivation for getting involved and also explain the level of involvement that is exerted by the presidents. For the sake of my question, I used the benefits associated with involvement in student government because it mirrored the duties held by the leaders that I interviewed. Since the article promoted student involvement, it seemed appropriate to include it in my assessment of the topic.

An abundance of literature exists that discusses leadership differentials according to gender. Coleman and Pounder use two frameworks in explaining divergences of leadership patterns between men and women, transformational leadership versus transactional leadership and then they consider how biological and sociological roles of men and women impact the varying approaches used by the two sexes. Transformational leadership differs from transactional in that someone who uses the former tends to use tactics that are more inclusive of group members. They use motivational tactics in order to engage members in the mission of the organization (Coleman 125). A sign of transformational leadership, which is associated more with male leaders, includes being more performance-reward based in strategy. Sociological arguments include the predetermined roles given based on gender, which suggest that women tend to nurture while men tend to exhibit more aggressive behavior, and how these traits carry over into leadership styles.

Coleman and Pounder's article allowed me to gauge where each president's leadership strategies and motivational approaches were located in terms of viewing them as transformational or transactional. By doing so, I was able to find similarities and opposition with the notion that males tend to use the latter. Examining how sociological roles impacted leadership style proved to be more difficult because so many traits believed to be essential to effective leadership overlapped during interviews.

Perceptions of effective leadership are difficult to gauge because it is a multi-dimensional concept and certain traits are valued more heavily than others. Vicki Rosser concludes that differences in leadership styles used by men and women are the result of differing social interactions and behaviors. Thusly, the traits that women associate with effective leadership contrast with those held by men such as collective action and the capacity for self-reflection (Rosser 72). She also argues that women who use more traditional strategies, such as autocratic leadership, are evaluated more negatively than their male counterparts who adopt the same methods showing that behaving within predetermined sociological roles creates more positively based evaluations for women in leadership roles.

I used Rosser's framework to help locate similarities and differences in leadership traits used by the presidents. While her assessment was based on positions within higher academia, it was difficult to assume that similar opposition to female leaders possessing traditional leadership styles would be viewed in the same negative light at the level being studied in my research. This article still provided strong references to practices that are exhibited more frequently on the part of females than males.

Interviewing Process

I performed five interviews with presidents and chairpersons of student run organizations

whose programming focuses on the black community on campus. Before choosing my interview pool, I consulted with several administrators who work closely with and are familiar with the work that is being done by students on campus. My interviewees included LaTonya Washington, a junior in the college of education. She worked as the chairperson for a large campus-wide event geared towards the African American community. Michelle Thornton, a senior in the college of engineering. She serves as the president of a pre-professional group in her field. Iris Moore, a senior in the college of liberal arts and sciences. She is in her second term as president of a pre-professional group. Daniel Smith, a senior in the college of business. He is also serving a second tenure as president in a pre-professional group. Finally, Nathan Ludlow, a sophomore in the college of business who serves as president in a large organization which provides services to the African American community. I asked questions regarding personal leadership strategies, defining effective leadership and personal motivations behind pursuing leadership positions.

Are Certain Personality Characteristics More Conducive to Effective Leadership Abilities?

As noted by Vicki Rosser, women who utilize a more traditional leadership style do not receive the same positive feedback that their male counterparts would. In recognition of this, it seems valuable to investigate what traits are deemed necessary to possess by males and females who are in a more developmental stage of their personal leadership strategies. To examine this topic, I asked the following questions: What characteristics would you say are required of a good leader; what is your personal leadership strategy; and what is effective leadership to you?

Responses to these questions did not vary much on the basis of gender. For example, LaTonya listed good communication skills, possessing a cooperative spirit and knowing when to ask for help. These sentiments were reiterated by Nathan Ludlow, who stressed the importance of being able to facilitate discussion within the group, but he also acknowledged knowing how and when to make decisions based on the consensus of the group. Similarly, Michelle Thornton's responses echoed those of LaTonya and Daniel. She stated that being open to ideas, listening and accepting the opinions of other group members and realizing the process is "not all about you" helped to create a unifying cohesiveness within the group.

When asked to elaborate on effective leadership, there were similar responses once again. Michelle Thornton stated her definition of effective leadership was the ability to convince others to go along with your ideas while soliciting theirs simultaneously. Daniel Smith's response mirrored Michelle's when he explained that effective leadership comes when someone is able to stand up and talk and others immediately listen and are inspired to act accordingly to the speaker's thoughts.

Across the board, male and female presidents valued the same characteristics when approaching delegation with their group. It extended across pre-professional and social/service based activities. The traits expressed by these leaders dispel the notion that males and females at this stage possess opposing viewpoints on characteristics required of a good leader. In fact, their ideals are quite similar. Everyone stressed inclusion of group members, which was a trait believed to be practiced more frequently by females (Rosser 73). From these responses, we see that the male leaders value creating networks and strengthening the bond within the group to the same extent as their female counterparts.

It is also important to note that the responses to questions concerning effective leadership contradict the belief that female leaders are more likely to use transformational leadership practices. Michelle and Daniel demonstrate characteristics inherent to that specific style in their motivational tactics. They both express that an effective leader is essentially able to spark something within their group members, without having to offer rewards, but through their words and actions.

Is One Gender More Dominant in Their Membership Interactions?

As previously stated, I became interested in this specific topic after being involved in a committee headed by a female whom I felt had troubles with asserting herself in a leadership role. Therefore, I felt it was necessary to investigate the manner in which the two genders approached their positions. To gauge the level of dominance exhibited by them, I asked each interviewee to tell me about a time when they felt membership was slacking or unresponsive and how they rectified the situation. From this question, I was hoping to expose any re-occurring themes of inactiveness among groups as well as interpret the variation of strategic planning each president was willing to implement. For the majority of the responses, presidents addressed low attendance and tardiness as a major issue that disrupted the state of membership.

A major difference I observed was in the way the presidents responded to this problem. Daniel explained that in the beginning of the semester he faced a problem with low attendance. As a result, he felt it was necessary to reformulate meeting objectives. He implemented new programs for paid members such as socials, movie outings and trips to university football games. Knowing that diversification in meeting patterns would spark attendance, he saw an increase in attendance patterns. Iris Moore, another president of a pre-professional group, discussed a particular occasion when a representative in her organizations desired field was scheduled to address the group. At that meeting, attendance was unusually low and she took that as a sign of disrespect. She responded by emailing her group members and expressing her dissatisfaction with how the situation was handled.

This shows how two similar situations were handled in two totally different manners and how leadership strategies vary. On one hand, Daniel took the low attendance as a reflection of his own leadership abilities. He viewed himself as the main reason why people were not responding to his actions. Focusing on his actions, he revised his strategy and found another formula that revitalized attendance. Then there is the method adopted by Iris, she took her frustration and she addressed her group members. She did not view this as an issue that was reflective of her own leadership malfeasance, but as a misstep of the group as a whole.

From these examples, we see how these two leaders used two varying approaches to problem-solving, internalizing versus externalizing and individualistic versus holistic. Daniel internalized the problem and used it as a time of self-reflection of his role. He also chose to view this as an individualized problem that was reflective of his leadership abilities only as opposed to being the groups' issue. Conversely, by confronting the group, Iris externalized the issue and brought it to the attention of the members, making it a holistic representation of the group and its problems. This example frames itself around the topics discussed by Pounder and Coleman, when addressing leadership ideologies as transformational or transactional. The authors suggest that females show more signs of the former, while males exhibit those of the latter and this example enforces that notion. Because Iris was more willing to grant feedback to her group in the form of the email and promote the goals of the organization by showing great concern for the members to take advantage of each opportunity they have to communicate with professionals in their desired field. Daniel showed signs of transactional leadership in his implementation of new social oriented meetings, which can be viewed as reward based because they were granted gratis for paid members. In transactional leadership, the leader's rewards to followers are contingent on their achieving specified performance levels (Coleman124). In his case, the reward would come upon their increased attendance.

Are There Major Differences in Responsiveness between Pre-Professional and Social/Service Extra Curricular Activities?

I feel that each question asked during the interviews relates to this question in some form. The goals of the organizations change between these two forms of extra curricular activities. When the question, what are your goals for the organization, was asked, this became very evident from the responses. Michelle Thornton expressed her great concern for her group member to be able to network, gain mentorship's, being confident in talking

to other people in their field and gaining graduate and professional contacts. In addition to these, during my observation I saw a great deal of emphasis placed on reaching back to the community and mentoring youth. Daniel Smith stated that he wanted his group to be viewed as a well-rounded one. In lieu of discussing the professional activities his group maintained, he discussed the service based activities that they annually performed including a Christmas party at a local woman's shelter and donating supplies to survivors of Hurricane Katrina. Nathan Ludlow spoke of his organization serving the greater African American community. He wanted it to be viewed as a place of refuge the community would know was available as a support system.

As mentioned in the previous section, nearly all of the presidents interviewed, regardless of the type of group they led, listed low attendance and tardiness as an issue faced that impeded the flow of operations. This fact coupled with the responses that I received when focusing on the goals of their respective organizations leads me to the conclusion that levels of responsiveness does not waiver much between social/service based and pre-professional groups. If any differences exist, it would lie in the fact the pre-professional groups serve double duty as they attempt to create networking and gain experience in their desired field while also trying to connect with the campus community through service oriented work.

How Does Gender Increase/Decrease the Efficacy of the Role of President in Student Run Organizations?

Overall, there were certain differences that I observed in leadership styles adopted by male and female leaders. The ways in which presidents pattern themselves and approach their positions differed by gender. I asked each leader to describe how they prepared for their positions; the two male subjects responded the same. They described that in some ways, they were thrown into their position, but ultimately they envisioned the type of leader they would want to follow. They tied it in with the traits they used to describe effective leadership, after envisioning that person; they tried to emulate their actions after that model. They used an idealistic approach to their positions. The female presidents described that they modeled their actions after past presidents, for instance Michelle had access to the minutes and notebooks of the previous president. She modeled her system according to what was previously done. Iris, who had been a member of her group since her freshman year, recalled certain things that worked for past presidents and things that she felt did not work as well and she adjusted her strategies from there. Finally, LaTonya also performed a retrospective inventory she observed worked for past chairpersons and followed the same pattern. I found it extremely noteworthy that female leaders tended to be more analytical in their approach, using past models to create their own strategies. While the male presidents relied more heavily on their own abilities, they followed a model in some sense, but they placed their confidence solely on their own leadership aptitude.

In so many ways, this example attaches itself to sociological ideals that are connected with female leadership versus male leadership qualities. As I mentioned, the three women were members of their respective groups in previous years, which placed them at an advantage. The males were also members of their groups prior to their term as president, but they did not choose the same method of patterning as their female counterparts. Males are expected to show more analytical, decisive, aggressive and confident characteristics while females are expected to show qualities such as being sensitive, emotional, cooperative, and empathetic (Coleman 127). From the responses, we see female leaders exhibiting many of the traits associated with male leadership such as analytical skills and self-confidence.

When addressing problems held by the group, male presidents were more likely to take the issues as a reflection of their own strategy, internalizing it and reformulating their tactics to include a more reward based approach. At the same time, female subjects were more likely to take the problems directly to the group and adjust the issue collectively. In this way, we see men exhibiting transactional strategies by providing rewards dependent

upon the actions displayed by the group members. Women, utilizing transformational leadership tactics, found ways to motivate their group members by creating a communicative forum to prompt change. Transformational leadership styles are deemed more positively because they encourage inclusion of all group members through open dialogue and increased participatory style.

There are many overlapping outlooks in male and female ideological thoughts exhibited in my subjects. While the female presidents showed signs of male and female leadership traits, the same can be said of the male leaders in many respects. I feel that at this stage of my subjects' collegiate career, they are in a developmental phase that has not allowed them to adopt a rigid set of leadership traits that could be labeled as male or female. Right now, they possess qualities from both categories and apply them accordingly to the level of responsiveness they receive. Therefore, I feel that gender does not play a significant role in the efficiency in which the role of president is handled in student run organizations.

Implications for Further Research

During the course of my interviews, I asked each president whether they had prior relationships with members of the executive board. In four out of five cases, they in fact held strong relationships; some even stated that they had best friends who were members of the executive board that they brought in for their specific role. This did not surprise me; however when I thought about the cohesiveness of the group, this fact stuck out in my mind. Iris Moore stressed being able to have a certain level of comfort within the group, but I wonder how having such strong friendships or pre-existing "cliques" in organizations might impede the goal of it. In times where a decision of vital importance needs to be discussed and voted on, certain hindrances (i.e. loyalty in friendship) will prevent the introduction of new ideas. This tricky situation, where a level of maturity is taken for granted, has greater consequences when the friendships in the group do not meet up to the expectation of maturity that is assumed. Not as surprising is the need for acceptance in a group, even of friends, to exude a certain façade that does not portray the true convictions of the person portraying. As I observed a meeting of Michelle Thornton's group, the bonds were extremely evident, but I wondered to what level someone who was not directly involved in their bond would feel stressed or anxious about sharing opinions and ideas with the group. Therefore, I see that inadvertently formed cliques within groups could hinder the progression of an organizations goal.

References

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REFLECT

Link

Connect with other resources and materials.

I viewed another EOTU project done by Shilana Rairden titled: How do ethnic cultural centers help improve student development of our undergraduate student population? What purpose do they provide?

Shilana performed background research on the ethnic centers, then she observed programming at them, and finally she interviewed students who frequented them. Shilana is a non-traditional student in her fifties, from Central Illinois who found this topic interesting because she had never used the various ethnic centers. I wasn't quite sure what she expected to find out from her research, but I know she was looking to see how accepting she would feel at these various settings. She visited La Casa, the African American Cultural Program and the Cosmopolitan House. She did not feel out of place in these houses. In fact, she enjoyed the conversation and programming that each provided. She interviewed two students, a Latina who is very involved at La Casa and an African American male who is very active on campus. Her interviews consisted of questions regarding the students family and schooling background and then their familiarity with the cultural houses and the programs that were available. Overall, I felt that she gained a better understanding of the purpose of the cultural houses, however I don't think she fully answered her main question because she took those two students experiences to be the overall sentiment.

The readings that I read allowed me to approach my interviews already having an idea of some differences that I might come across.

1. In Alexander Astin's article "Student Involvement", I tried to see where the motivation came from for the presidents and also seeing what types of fulfillment they received from their positions. I thought it would be interesting to see how his idea that certain types of positions, such as student government, might have a certain type of effect on the overall perception of the students satisfaction.

2. In Pounder and Coleman's article "Women-Better Leaders than Men?", I used their biological and sociological aspects discussed along with the perception that the usage of transactional versus transformational leadership accounted for a considerable portion of the differences that exist between male and female leadership positions. I found this article extremely helpful, especially the transactional and transformational information because there was so much overlap that existed, so I couldn't fully agree that females used this form more frequently than males.

3. Finally, Vicki Rosser's article surrounding "Faculty and Staff Members Perception of Effective Leadership", allowed me take some existing stereotypes and compare and contrast them with what I found during my interviews. I did find that a lot of the stereotypes she hinted at that were attributed to women were related to the men I interviewed as well. While this article provided me with valuable information, in some ways it was difficult to correlate it directly to my findings, because it dealt with positions such as deans and staff members, but it was interesting to see how people who might one day enter academia would be viewed and where they are presently on the "leadership developmental continuum."

Implications

Could your findings have broader implications beyond this inquiry?

Overall, I see that there are some slight gender differences that exist such as where the efficient leadership ideology comes from and dominance displayed by female presidents. During my interviews, each president stated the importance of having a certain rapport with their members and stressed comfort. However, it seemed that everyone had previous relationships with their executive board so it was fairly easy for that level of comfort to be attained. I am beginning to wonder how previous relationships affect the members who are not part of the "inner circle" that already exists. It takes outgoing individuals to take the initiative that these presidents have, but I think the level of comfort that already exists could prove to be detrimental to increasing membership on other levels.

