College Leadership Opportunities' Impact on Life During and After College

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This study explores the personal experiences of 14 individuals who engaged in leadership opportunities during their college educations. Through in-depth interviews, this study sought to explore how those leadership experiences impacted their leadership, both in their careers and/or in the community, after their graduation from both 2 and 4-year institutions. Findings from this study indicate that participants identified that their leadership experiences had impacts upon their careers and leadership after graduation. Yet, participants also shared that they engaged in leadership because they were self-motivated to do so, rather than learning about these opportunities on their campus. The final finding indicated that there was little institutional support and/or messaging about leadership opportunities and/or opportunities to learn more about the positive impacts leadership experiences can have for students. Recommendations from this study include encouraging colleges and universities pursue more concerted efforts to better educate students about the benefits of leadership opportunities and to provide a mandated leadership experience in both a for-credit course and non-credit opportunity prior to graduation.
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COLLEGE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES' IMPACT ON LIFE DURING
AND AFTER COLLEGE

BY
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Leadership and leadership development are defined and studied differently in a student’s college experience based on their departments, majors, careers, student organizations, leadership opportunities and philosophies (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013). Fostering leadership development has become an outcome higher education institutions strive for and work to incorporate in and outside of the classroom. Leadership development has become such a key outcome and desirable skill that institutions of higher education have included it in education institutional mission statements, strategic plans and taglines (Shertzer, Wall, et. Al, 2005; Miles, 2011; Cho, Harrist, Steele & Murn, 2015; Rosch & Lawrie, 2011). However, only small segments of student populations on campuses are utilizing the leadership opportunities inside and outside of the classroom (Watt, 2003).

The study of leadership has moved beyond “trait theory or heroic-leader model toward a recognition that shared leadership is appropriate and meaningful as students take on leadership roles in the community” (Stephenson, 2011, p. 337). Komives, Lucas and McMahon (2013) view a leader as “any person who actively engages with others to accomplish change” and that viewing it this way shifts the paradigm “from seeing the concept of leader as only the person in charge to all those who are actively engaged with each other to accomplish the groups goals” (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013, p. 33). Further, the authors define leadership as a
“relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change” (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013, p. 33). Additionally, “contemporary theories of leadership prioritize self-awareness, ethics, morality, and social responsibility” (Ahlquist, 2017, p. 49). In this way, leadership is more than merely “being in charge,” and instead entails development of key aspects such as self-awareness, ethics, and active engagement within communities.

The shift of viewing leadership as a process rather than as something one individual in an organization does is largely credited to the work of Burns (1978) (Komives & Wagner, 2017). Current research on leadership focuses now on the positive aspects of leadership, along with social change that leadership as a process can provide, rather than an individual’s natural leadership abilities (Komives & Wagner, 2017). This view of leadership and leaders helps expand what is defined as leadership experiences and leadership roles since one does not have to be a director or president of an organization to help lead that organization and its mission forward to achieve positive change. This more expansive definition of leadership provides further possibilities to examine how a variety of individuals participate in, lead, and develop leadership skills, particularly on college campuses, as many college students begin to participate in organizations, cognitive development, as well as psychosocial development. These changes also influence students’ participation in leadership and leadership development.

**Problem of Practice**

Despite many colleges and universities priding themselves on developing and producing current and future leaders, there is a lack of mandated leadership experiences and skill building graduation requirements within two or four-year institutions (Miles, 2011a). Miles’s study she interviewed student government leaders and the students’ spoke of a responsibility they felt in helping other students develop leadership skills and feel they could be leaders too. One
participant interviewed said, “If I wasn’t in SGA, I wouldn’t have these opportunities” (Miles, 2011a, p. 5). The great challenge then is how to get those opportunities to students that cannot be in student government or other leadership development activities outside of class. A mandate of some type of leadership development prior to graduation could be a way to reach and influence more students. Importantly, research suggests that the more students involved in “student organizations, the more likely they are to develop strong leadership skills and exhibit more leadership behaviors [and that] student organization participation is important and a positive factor” (Patterson, 2012, p. 8). Yet, little is known about the long-term impacts of these experiences. While studies exist that illustrate the success students can have when they have leadership experiences in college, there are not many studies diving in-depth to see the lasting impact of these experiences on students after graduation (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Patterson, 2012; Brown & Robinson-McDonald, 2014; Haber-Curran, Allen & Snakman, 2015).

As such, the purpose of this interpretivist, grounded theory study was to explore how college leadership experiences (or lack of thereof) impacted alumni and their current leadership experience in their career or community. Specifically, the overall questions that guided the study were:

1. What do individuals perceive leadership as being and what are examples of successful leadership?
2. What do individuals cite as barriers of leadership experiences while in college?
3. How do individuals perceive their past leadership experiences in college as influencing their current leadership roles or experiences in life?

For the purposes of the study, leadership was defined as opportunities and experiences in any in-class or out-of-class experiences where a student has an opportunity to learn and harness
leadership traits and skills and where they can work with others to achieve positive change (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013). Examples of leadership opportunities included student government, student organizations, leadership college course, jobs, faculty mentor, experiential learning, and/or even leading a group project.

Information gained from the 14 participants in the study helped provide further details about how their leadership or lack of leadership experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, impacted them after graduation.

Findings from this study suggest that leadership experiences in college can have a major impact on students after graduation and help shape their life pathway and long-lasting values. Findings also suggest that while leadership opportunities in college can have a major impact, it was left to the individual student to self-select and discover leadership opportunities; that is, colleges played little role in advertising and/or promoting leadership opportunities during participants’ time at their institutions. Colleges were passive agents when it came to ensuring each student actually went through leadership experiences. For some participants in the study this took the form of a peer telling them to join a student club or a faculty member telling them they were good at something and that they should do a leadership opportunity on campus. As such, recommendations from this study suggest that it is not enough to passively offer leadership opportunities for students in college. Institutions of higher learning must take a proactive role in building the leadership skills and awareness of their undergraduate students. This could take the form in having mentorship and encouragement of students as a factor in professor tenure and merit wage increases for staff. It could also take shape in having a mandated in-class leadership course students must go through before graduation to ensure they are being exposed to leadership experiences prior to graduation.
Literature Review

In this review of literature, the relationship between academic and social integration were examined and looked at individually through a leadership lens. The benefits to offering leadership opportunities in higher education are also covered as well as some potential barriers to those benefits. Finally, a gap in the literature is examined on how leadership opportunities continue to support and/or influence leadership after college.

Academic Leadership Programs and Requirements

The amount of leadership certificates, degrees, departments and course work offered by colleges and universities has grown over the years as a perceived need and market demand has grown (Brungardt, Greenleaf, et al., 2006). Academic leadership degree programs can vary greatly in content and focus but a unifying theme is to prepare students to be leaders in their organization after graduation (Brungardt, Greenleaf, et al., 2006). In the data obtained by Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt and Arensdorft (2006) there were 15 institutions where they studied their leadership degree programs for themes and differences. They found from the data that there was little consistency in terms of departments or colleges that housed the leadership degree, credit hour requirements ranged from 30 to 71, careers from students graduating from these programs were large in variety, the programs had a focus on both theory and application, and while most programs focused on the collective nature of leadership some still were focused on an individual model of leadership (Brungardt, Greenleaf, et al., 2006).

There is a lack of consistency and standards in leadership programs offered at universities with some even just existing as a business management program that had been renamed to be a leadership program with similar content (Brungardt, Greenleaf, et al., 2006). Leadership courses and programs can be positive for students as they are avenues for leadership development that
are credit bearing rather than students having to rely on getting their leadership experiences outside of the classroom which could prove to be a barrier for some students. Putting an emphasis on students having to take at least one credit bearing interdisciplinary course in college to graduate places as much importance on leadership development as it does on math, English and public speaking. A general education course could help lower the amount of students graduating without a meaningful leadership experience (Miles, 2011a). Institutions have to put an emphasis on ensuring all students graduate with some type of leadership experience even if it has to come in the form of a mandated general study leadership course in their undergraduate program. The positive results that can be seen from students being socially and academically integrated and involved in student organizations (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012) indicates that institutions should put more emphasis on ways to replicate that impact in more of their students before they graduate. One way to do that is provide a mandate that exposes each student to a credit bearing leadership course while they are an undergraduate student. This act could at least work to introduce more students to leadership opportunities they could do and the rest of their college pathway would be up to them after the minimum of taking one leadership course. It could lead to more students taking on additional leadership opportunities outside of the classroom in college but even if it did not, it would still succeed in providing a baseline of leadership development inside of the classroom, which is lacking for some students in their undergraduate programs. It is important to not only have a diversity and interdisciplinary approach in leadership study programs but also have balance and consistency (Watt, 2003).

If the focus of colleges and universities is to develop civic minded, leadership focused individuals (Miles, 2011a), then researching ways to improve the reach of leadership development opportunities in the face of decreased funding from states and the federal
government should be a priority. While student organizations and student government/union activities involve a small unique subset of college and university populations, it still leaves a large segment of the student population not being exposed to these opportunities (Miles, 2011a).

There is limited information on how college leadership experiences impact leadership experiences and opportunities after college. By looking into the personal experiences of alumni that have graduated college there was knowledge gained in this study by their perspectives.

**Academic and Social Integration**

Regardless of if students are gaining knowledge and practicing leadership in or outside of the classroom, two elements are of great importance: being both academically and socially engaged during students’ time on campus. Such engagement increases the likelihood of success in the classroom (Tinto, 2012). These engagements “lead not only to social affiliations and the social and emotional support they provide, but also to greater involvement in learning activities and the learning they produce” (Tinto, 2012, p. 5), while both social and academic integration lead to success in the classroom. The more socially and academically involved and invested a student feels in a college the more they feel they can turn to others for help and guidance throughout their college experience. This allows students to feel more connected with community and with campus.

Learning in the college classroom directly impacts all students, even those who commute or have other obligations outside of the classroom presenting a barrier to outside learning opportunities (Tinto, 1997). The classroom can also act as the meeting point between academic and social integration and a more active classroom practicing shared learning experiences rather than a passive approach can help bridge a social-academic integration divide (Tinto, 1997).
The level of academic and social integration a student has at a college could directly impact the students’ retention and persistence at that institution of higher learning since students with teachers that encourage in-class and out of class educational engagement “tend to have increased student motivation and institutional commitment” (Brown & Robinson-McDonald, 2014, p. 162). A balance between social and academic integration needs to be discovered however in each student an emphasis too much on one or the other could lead to academic or social issues, which could impact learning progress in both areas of integration (Tinto, 1975).

A positive amount of academic and social integration students experience increases their motivations as students continue through their college experience (Brown & Robinson-McDonald, 2014). Moreover, academic and social integration work in conjunction with the other and can be mixed together as well (Tinto, 1997). It is possible for a student to have a great social and academic integration with a professor or just one without them mixing. In that case, a student could be integrated academically in a classroom experience and have social integration with other students in that class instead of the professor.

Leadership programs in college have the capability to allow students self-discovery of their own “values, motivations, emotions, needs, perspectives, and identities of others” and in creating this awareness it could assist in social integration (Haber-Curran, Allen & Shankman, 2015, p. 64). The increased social awareness developed in the classroom could assist students in building “more meaningful and authentic relationships with others” (Haber-Curran, Allen & Snakman, 2015, 2015, p. 64). Leadership opportunities can be a vehicle for increasing a student’s academic and social integration in college along with having them feel more integrated into the culture of the college.
Academic Integration through Leadership

Integration “naturally has an academic aspect as well as a social one” while faculty and staff at a college “have to provide an educational context that invites students to integrate academically” (Severiens & Wolff, 2008, p. 254). Academic integration can be both formal and informal. The formal involves direct academics related to the institute itself and course work while informally it involves students and teachers outside of the learning environment, connecting socially or discussing other matters loosely tied to the classroom (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Academic integration can also be considered “the degree to which the student affiliates with the academic norms” within the context of communities and subcultures of the institution, they are attending (Brown & Robinson-McDonald, 2014, p. 161). With academic integration, some measurements could include grade performance, intellectual development during college, while the level of integration could also be a reflection of a student’s commitment to the institution and their perception of the benefits they are getting from the institution compared to the different costs including time and money (Tinto, 1975).

Leadership in General Classrooms

Being able to have leadership opportunities integrated academically even in courses that are not in a leadership major or course could further ensure more students are being exposed to leadership as a process.. A myth about leadership is that leaders are born and not taught and that only people in a position of power practice leadership (Woodyard Jr., Love & Komives, 2000; Watt, 2003). While some might be driven to pursue leadership opportunities, leadership skills, techniques and knowledge can be taught and learned successfully that can provide students with critical thinking skills and other skill sets to help them in any career field they go into (Watt, 2003).
The community as a classroom is not a new concept; however, it has come up in relation to teaching leadership at the college level. Mentorship programs, community course projects, and community internships have emerged as ways to gain leadership experience in credit courses (Bonsall, Harris & Marczak, 2002; Besser, 2012). It also provides a way to test leadership theories and to give students real hands-on learning experience, which could help students with critical thinking skills, leadership development, understanding of “real world” issues and improving their self-confidence (Besser, 2012). Leadership programs and courses by being in demand from employers need to encompass more than just theory, as it must “make explicit, direct, and formal links between theory and practical experience, between knowing and doing” (Langone, 2006, p. 107).

**Leadership in Designed Leadership Courses**

Just from a public good perspective, providing a more formalized education effort to produce future civic leaders have importance and merit when seeing the voter apathy amongst many age groups (Moore, 2014). Stephenson (2011) believes that college curriculum should include “formal leadership development as an academic component of all students’ education” and be supplemented by bringing in community role models as mentors, and classroom leadership activities that allow the students to have active learning experiences (Stephenson, 2011, p. 338). Formal leadership courses and development would help provide assurance that all students experience learning about leadership in the classroom and help make up the large gap between students that self-select leadership courses and experiences and those that do not.

Service learning is also something that can be utilized in leadership-focused courses that are in subject areas of interest to students over the long term of a course could be seen as having positive impacts for students (Moore, 2014). Service learning courses can provide hands-on
experiences to highlight to students they can accomplish positive change and it has the ability to breed long lasting political engagement by further developing leadership identity for students (Winston, 2015).

Academic leadership programs have an opportunity to transform students and develop them into who they want to be in their life, not just during college but also after graduation as well to help them achieve personal, educational and career goals (Peck, 2018). Even with barriers to students that commute or that have obligations rendering it hard for them to develop socially in student organizations outside of the classroom, academic integration has the potential through active learning and engagement to be a bridge to social integration and help students persist in college and after they graduate.

**Social Integration through Leadership**

With only academic integration and not social integration, students have less of a chance of persisting and obtaining their degree (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Much like academic integration, social integration in college can be formal and informal but ultimately just involves social contact between peers related to learning and their education (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Social integration is the “fit between the student and the social systems within those communities” (Brown & Robinson-McDonald, 2014, p. 161). Social integration can occur inside or outside of a classroom but primarily it is able to flourish through “peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities and interaction with faculty [and staff]” (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). Being able to socially integrate into college should increase the possibility that a student persists and graduate college (Tinto, 1975).

It is the notion that students who socially integrate have more friends, a larger social network and a better chance of feeling at home with their college and being invested in it
(Severiens & Wolff, 2008). However, the need for the social integration to occur on the college campus outside of class could vary based on the individual students need and their life experiences outside of college. It could be possible that they are getting their needed social integration to help further their leadership skills at their job or in a community role; they have outside of the college (Grady, 2018). For many students though, they do need opportunities inside and outside of the classroom for social integration to help build their leadership skills. There is a positive association of leadership opportunities outside of the classroom in student organizations with promoting civic engagement and the public good (Besser, 2012). Sax (2004) demonstrates that there are “several measures of student involvement during college [that] appear to promote post-college volunteerism” and that these measures demonstrate how important it is for students to socially integrate with students, faculty and staff outside of the classroom (Sax, 2004, p. 13).

**Student Government**

Student governments are a way of socially integrating outside of the classroom and building leadership skills but they differ from other student organizations in that members of their body are typically elected from the entire student population and they typically “grant charters to new clubs and organizations and allocate funding to recognized clubs and organizations” (Miles, 2011b). Criticism of student governments consists about the concerns of having mainly full-time, traditional age students running the organization without representing part-time and non-traditional or commuting students and that they just carry out the wishes of the administration (Miles, 2011b). Ultimately, though the advisors for student government organizations have the power to provide institutional knowledge to students involved and help guide them on issues when needed. The advisors also have the ability of knowing when to allow
for “Failure as a teachable moment” so that it could help further develop the student’s leadership skills (Miles, 2011b). Miles, Nadler and Miller (2011) researched the importance of community college student government functions after finding out there was a lack of research in the area of student government specific to community colleges. Their findings suggested that the perceived adult non-traditional community college student and part-time student were not getting involved in their student government and thus not getting sufficient social integration (Miles, Nadler & Miller, 2011). Instead, they found that traditional age students that were non-minority and non-first generation are the ones running for student government positions the majority of times. This reveals that just like at the university level, there are specific types of students that are running for student government or to be part of student organizations leaving a large segment of student populations without exposure to valuable leadership opportunities, training and social integration.

Miles (2011a) in a qualitative study interviewed 13 student government presidents from a wide range of institutions to see what themes emerged as to why they wanted to be part of the student government and be a leader on their campus. Change was the first theme that emerged, as the students wanted the opportunity to bring their ideas forward to enact change on their campus (Miles, 2011a). Another theme that emerged in the research was related to cultivating leadership in that students wanted to help spur other students to be involved and run for student government so that they would also benefit from all of the experiences they had as leaders in student government. Not unlike other research in this area however, Miles suggests that leadership development opportunities must be included in all areas of the institution and not concentrated in a particular area of the campus or on a particular advisor.
In looking at how student government experience could affect student lives after college, Lundin, Nordstrom-Skans and Zetterberg (2016) researched students elected to student government councils and students who were not elected to see if it impacted who would go on to run for public office once out of college. They found that students elected to student government were about 34 percent more likely to become a candidate for office once out of college than someone that was a candidate for student government and did not win their election (Lundin, Nordstrom-Skans & Zetterbeg, 2016).

**Student Organizations**

Seemingly more research has been conducted involving student organizations and student government at the university level rather than the community college level because opportunities at the community college level could be more limited (Grady, 2018). Grady goes on to mention the age range of students at community colleges, number of part-time students and the range of life experiences that could also be a factor of more students at those institutions being involved in student government or students organization. Leadership development opportunities for students should not however be limited only to the university level as there are now digital ways of socially integrating and fostering leadership in students even outside of campus if some are limited by their work or life schedule.

Patterson (2012) conducted a study that “revealed the positive linkages between prior leadership training, participation in high school activities, involvement in FFA and 4-H” and current involvement in undergraduate leadership opportunities. Prior social integration in leadership activities made it easier for these students to socially integrate in college. His leadership behavior analysis suggests that the more student organizations and individuals are part
of now or was part of in the past, the more likely they are to develop socially and grow leadership skills and behaviors (Patterson, 2012).

Similarly, the work of Ahlquist (2017) reveals linkages to students’ digital leadership development based on their experience with social media while at other levels of schooling such as high school and junior high. One student in the study mentioned that they had “Always been told what not to do online. But no one has ever told me what I’m supposed to do on social media” (Ahlquist, 2017, p. 47). Ahlquist found that participants who got any type of social media training during college were more likely to post more appropriate content on social media and not hinder it by posting things that reflect poorly on them (Ahlquist, 2017). However, their digital history should be acknowledged and utilized as they further grow and learn in college. Social media can now be a bridge for students that are faced with barriers that find themselves unable to take advantage of social integration physically on campus outside of what is provided to them in a classroom (Ahlquist, 2017).

Wisner (2011) focused on utilizing the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) for measuring the behaviors commonly practiced by successful leaders as a way of trying to predict effective student leaders on campuses. Of particular importance from the Wisner study according to Wisner is the “potential outcome of increasing student leaders’ hope and goal directed thinking” (Wisner, 2011, p. 370).

Johnson and Mincer (2017) went in-depth on the positives of being an institution that utilizes the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) from the University of Maryland that first launched in 2006. Across numerous higher education institutions MSL data shows that students being involved in student organizations matter, as they are drivers of leadership development in a number of different ways (Johnson & Mincer, 2017). Students that participated
in student leadership experiences in one qualitative study made clear that the opportunities allowed them to meet and socialize with more people and build up a larger network than if they had not been involved (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998).

**Non-credit and student unions**

Student unions have historically been known as a social integration hot bed at universities where students, faculty and staff can connect with each other (De Sawal & Yakaboski, 2014; Rouzer, De Sawal & Yakaboski, 2014). De Sawal and Yakaboski (2014) laid out a guide map of everything they feel college unions need to be prepared for now through assessment, evaluation and research issues. Their argument is that professionals working in a student union need to embrace assessment, evaluation and research in their workplace so that they can make arguments why student unions are important to student leadership and social integration. Butts (1971) is still used as a guiding principle for student unions and those working in them according to the research in the field but this does not mean that the field is not going through change (De Sawal & Yakaboski, 2014). The topics De Sawal and Yakaboski tackle in their guide map include student engagement, diversity, facility design, community, fundraising, technology, college unions large and small and globalization (De Sawal & Yakaboski, 2014).

Rouzer, De Sawal and Yakaboski (2014) mention how student unions have a rich history of creating conditions for students, faculty and staff to gather for social and intellectual interactions and how student unions became known as a living room for college and university campuses. They examine in their research Milani, Eakin and Brattains’s 1992 prediction on six issues that would have a considerable impact on student unions for the year 2000 to see if those issues are still major issues or not moving into the future (Rouzer, De Sawal & Yakaboski, 2014). Those issues include diverse populations, expanded technology and the rate of knowledge
change, changes in student values and lifestyles, increased competition for resources, a more volatile political climate and increased external accountability (Rouzer, De Sawal & Yakaboski, 2014). Many of these predictions are current issues continually covered in the research of De Sawal, Yakaboski and others in relations to student unions and the challenges they are facing. Their work led to the question of “What value do college unions provide to students, not just some students, but all students that attend the institution?” (Rouzer, De Sawal & Yakaboski, 2014, p. 9). They recommended creating metrics for how the community created by the student union creates great learning opportunities for students and spurs engagement.

Yakaboski and Perozzi (2014) add the issue of globalization to student unions and how if student unions focus intentionally on international students it could help to better involve those students in the student union. It could also help them with socially integrating and developing leadership roles on campus. The thought is that these international students could create a better sense of belonging at the institution through this process and non-international students could gain more understanding and knowledge of different global perspectives on topics (Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2014). Allen, Ricketts and Priest (2007) in their research discovered that alumni perceived leadership opportunities in college as having the greatest impact on them in terms of their leadership development for life after college. Student unions are also frequently the location of free to the public expert lectures, community reading events, conferences and many other non-credit activities that could involve leadership development.

Benefits of Leadership Experiences in Higher Education

Leadership in higher education is teaching and instilling in students and staff that leadership is a process and something multiple people can do together for a common goal and positive change (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013). Nash and Jang (2015) shared five
strategic tips for encouraging students to take the initiative while in school to answer a call to service and leadership which include: 1. starting with themselves to discover what they are interested in, 2. discovering where there are opportunities, 3. learn about how the real world works, 4. pick a starting point and just start doing, and 5. share, care and glow in their own light. Leadership can be developed both inside and outside of the college classroom and is a life-long process that is not earned just by the courses or organizations attended or positions held (Shertzer, Wall, et. al., 2005). Leadership is often thought of as a skill for a select group of people but is rather an essential life skill for everyone, whether they want to be an elected leader, CEO or President of an organization, or someone that holds no formal leadership role (Shertzer, Wall, et. al., 2005).

Leadership ability is not inherent and gifted upon individuals as they are born, it is taught, learned, and developed over time and is something everyone needs, not just a select few (Rosch & Lawrie, 2011). It is of great importance then that students are involved in “intentional campus-sponsored leadership activities and training, where students learn about and apply responsible leadership practices” (Rosch & Lawrie, 2011, p. 56). For colleges it is not enough to simply have leadership opportunities, they have to find ways to ensure students in great numbers are using those opportunities. Colleges must also go beyond having leadership opportunities only being by self-selection as that means students predisposed somehow to be attracted to leadership opportunities will pursue them.

Students that are exposed to leadership opportunities are more likely to persist and be connected to the college they are attending (Tinto, 1997). Undergraduate students who take part in leadership opportunities in college are also shown to persist to be leaders in their professional
careers (Allen, Ricketts & Priest, 2007). Leadership opportunities offer a pathway to retention and persistence success for students that are exposed to the opportunities.

In addition to retention and persistence success in college, leadership opportunities also offer career development. Students develop critical thinking skills and leadership traits in college that they can utilize in their careers (Watt, 2003). Bialek and Lloyd (1998) outlined how participants in their student indicated how current leadership skills were enhanced by their college student experiences.

**Barriers**

There are some barriers as well to leadership opportunities in college based on students’ backgrounds, socio-economic status, children, and presence on campus (Stuart, Lido, et. al, 2011; Grady, 2018; Munoz, Miller & Poole, 2016). There needs to be a concerted effort to motivate and create opportunities for more students to take part in leadership development opportunities while in college as part of their academic and social integration. Johnson (2004) study demonstrated findings that support long-term benefits from leadership experiences in college for alumni that went beyond the short-term benefits like helping them persist to a degree during college. There is a barrier in access to extracurricular leadership roles, team-based activities and other university-linked leadership opportunities for minority and non-traditional students (Stuart, Lido, et. al., 2011). This disadvantage via informal out of the classroom experience access could slow social network development and “even identify/esteem development of university-linked activities, which are ultimately seen here to affect students’ experience, outcomes and career pathway” (Stuart, Lido, et. al., 2011, p. 212).

**Gap in Literature**
Because leadership is more process oriented, colleges and universities work to provide students opportunities to develop students into current and future leaders. A review of the scholarship and research done on the topic of student leadership and the roles colleges and universities play demonstrate that these institutions can indeed impact students toward pursuing positive change when it comes to developing leadership knowledge that could benefit them in college and later in life (Komives & Wagner, 2017; Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013; Kouzes & Posner, 2014; Woodard Jr., Love & Komives, 2000).

However, while “many colleges and universities recognize the importance of including courses and programs that provide education for developing effective leadership” there is still a lack of depth in research that covers the impact of leadership courses or opportunities in college and on students after they have graduated (Watt, 2003, p. 15). It is also unclear on motivating factors as to why students take the initiative in doing extra work outside of the classroom in running for student government or joining student organizations and if they are doing so with end goals they have for after they graduate.

This interpretivist study continues to support further research and variety of research into the impact of leadership opportunities on students after they graduate. The study also covers individuals that graduated without many leadership opportunity experiences in their undergraduate school career and how instead they developed leadership skills along with how that impacted them after college.

**Research Design**

This qualitative grounded theory interpretivist study explored how student leadership experiences or lack of experiences in college impacted participants’ experiences with leadership opportunities and roles after graduation. Here, grounded theory “consists of categories,
properties, and hypotheses that are the conceptual links between and amount the categories and properties” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 228). This interpretivist study, using grounded theory, helped provide an “understanding [in] the meaning people have constructed; that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Specifically, this study sought to explore how college alumni, who have graduated with a two year or four-year degree, were influenced by their experiences with leadership development or without it while enrolled in college. This study sought to better understand how individuals who held leadership roles in college or did not perceive their experiences and how they mediate their current leadership roles in their career or community after graduation.

**Methodological Approach**

This qualitative research study utilized an interpretivist approach with grounded theory, which allowed a focus on the broader issue of perceptions related to leadership experiences in college or a lack of them affecting leadership experiences after college. A grounded theory study “seeks not just to understand, but also to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). This grounded theory study is framed by interpretivism, which aims to base understanding participants’ lived experiences from their own perspectives (Schwandt, 1994). Interprevists “celebrate the permanence and priority of the real world of first-person, subjective experience. Yet, in true Cartesian fashion, they seek to disengage from that experience and objectify it” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 223). It is an attempt by the researcher to interpret human action and develop an understanding of a first-person experience provided to them (Schwandt, 1994).

An interpretive study is considered the most common type of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This methodology is appropriate for this qualitative research study
because it is about learning from individuals’ personal experience and their narratives. This method is based on the thought that social reality is not objective but is molded by individuals’ experiences and the social and historical context they find themselves in (Schwandt, 1994). This approach offered a way forward to interpret and make sense of individuals’ perceptions of their experiences rather than forming a rigid hypothesis and go through testing it.

Research Site

The site for this research study was the northern Illinois regional area. According to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC), this geographical area consists of about 124 higher education institutions, which includes profit, non-profit, private, technical and occupation based institutions (ISAC, 2019). The research was not bound to any particular college or university but instead utilized the northern Illinois region as a place for participant recruitment. There is roughly 89% of the Illinois population with a high school degree or higher for persons age 25 and above and 33% with a bachelor’s degree or higher for persons 25 and above (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Racial demographics within the state consists of 77% white, 14% black, 17% Latino, 6% Asian and 2% two or more races with median household income in 2017 dollars of $61,229 (United States Census Bureau, 2019). All 14 participants that participated in the study live in the northern Illinois region.

Participants

To be eligible to participate in this research study, participants must have held a two and/or four-year college degree and be over the age of 18 at the time of being interviewed. They needed to identify as someone who currently holds a leadership role or practices leadership from their perspective either in their career or in the community after having graduated college. This study sought between 10-12 participants and ultimately interviewed 14 participants, 7 self-
identified women and 7 self-identified men utilizing a convenience and network sampling method in recruiting participants for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The convenience sampling is based on the convenience related to “time, money, location, and availability of sites and respondents” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). This sampling method does not place much importance on being a representative sample and focuses more on the researcher’s convenience in participant selection (Delamont, 1992). In addition, network-sampling method, which is considered one of the most common of purposeful sampling and involves a strategy of “locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria…established for participation in the study” was also utilized in recruiting participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98).

Data Collection Methods

Interviews took place in a face-to-face format and through phone conversations and were semi-structured in nature (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews are between structured and unstructured interviews with a mix of questions, most open-ended and can be guided by a list of questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 109). The questions asked were open-ended and sought to get each individual participants personal perspective and narrative related to their leadership experiences.

A pre-interview list of questions served as a guiding map however, each interview was not subjected to use each question and new questions not on the list were asked during the interview. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 60 minutes in length for each interview, were audio recorded utilizing the Otter Voice Notes app, and were listened to by the researcher to verify accuracy in the transcript of each interview. The Otter Voice Notes app does a real-time transcription of the interview that later was reviewed and adjusted when needed for accuracy. Prior to each interview, participants were informed that the interview would be recorded and that
each participant would be given a pseudonym, which was used, for each participant for reporting purposes. Each participant was interviewed once and interviews spanned from 30 to 60 minutes. After each interview, transcriptions were examined for accuracy. Demographic information was also collected about each participant to provide some additional information for the study.

**Data Analysis**

An analysis of the interviews was performed after each individual interview was over and transcribed. The transcriptions were reviewed and coded based on the types of experiences and responses participants provided. Axial coding was utilized as a way to group open codes and is coding that “comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning” so it goes beyond descriptive coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 206). Themes and patterns were sought out in the interviews and transcripts in order to further the research and open new potential avenues for research on the topic of student leadership experiences and its impact on them after graduation. Similarity and different perspectives of participants in each interview became clearer through Axial coding as a process of “relating categories and properties to reach other, refining the category scheme” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 229).

**Trustworthiness**

As a criteria of quality, the term trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is used to provide support for findings that reveal something that should warrant attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The aim of this term in a qualitative study is to lend support for the argument put forth in the study and of the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis conducted.

As part of upholding trustworthiness with this study, I conducted member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which are also referred to as respondent validation, with the idea being that one solicits feedback on findings from those that are being interviewed (Merriam &
Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). The actual process involved in a member check “is to take your preliminary analysis back to some of the participants and ask whether your interpretation ‘rings true’” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). For the member checks, participants did not receive the entire transcript of each of their interviews or the audio recording but instead were informed about a list of themes that arose from the interview for accuracy. The member checks were done over email and Facebook messenger so that everything is in print and participants were spared time and effort in not having to have another face-to-face or phone meeting.

Member checks were important also in determining if my interpretation of the participant’s interpretation of their own narrative matched. It was determined that my interpretations matched that of participants with only a few small corrections that were typically handled during the interview itself.

**Positionality Statement**

As a graduate of a community college and a university where I took part in student organizations such as student government, student newspaper and other student organizations with leadership opportunities, I am interested in how student leadership experiences impacted others. I went into a career in higher education teaching and administering where I have also served as a faculty advisor for multiple student organizations and have served as a mentor. After graduating college, I ran and was elected to be a community college board trustee and later as a county board member and chair of the county board. My position and experience helped guide the interview process and provide perspective.

**Limitations**

Limitations to the study included geography and having access to participants able to meet for in-person interviews. There is also a limitation based on the self-reporting of alumni
about their past college experiences. Participants could have embellished their experiences in college or could have tried to frame their answers in ways they think I wanted them to answer. It is important to recognize my own bias as someone that had a rewarding college leadership experience that helped lead to leadership experiences outside of college. This does not mean others that had leadership experiences in college will share the same experiences as myself and the semi-structured interviews should not lead participants toward particular types of answers. I took effort in the interviews to not lead participants toward answers and instead listen to their narrative and experiences from their perspective.

**Significance**

Colleges and universities are expected to prepare students with leadership skills they can use in their careers and in their life but there are barriers to all students having access to join student organizations or student government. Further, there is very often not a mandated leadership based course in a student’s general education or in their major of study making it possible that they could get a two or four year degree without building up any leadership skills inside or outside the college classroom.

It is important and significant then to look toward alumni for their perspectives on how college leadership experiences have impacted their life and career. The information and personal experiences gathered in this study could be useful for colleges and universities as they seek to engage their alumni base for donations and involvement (Weerts, Cabrea & Sanford, 2010). If students participate in leadership experiences in college, also, they typically also advocate for their school to state or federal legislators more often than typical graduates do and if they donate or participate in alumni activities, it is at higher levels than graduates that did not do leadership opportunities in college (Weerts, Cabrea & Sanford, 2010).
Several studies demonstrate that participants indicate that their current leadership skills were enhanced by their student leadership experiences (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998; Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon & May, 2003; Sax, 2004; Rosch & Lawrie, 2011). There is also a link to student involvement in leadership opportunities leading to an increase in social and political awareness (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998).

Ultimately, it is students in higher education that are having to choose to do leadership experiences on their own initiative, even if barriers exist as there are not many wide spread credit or non-credit efforts at colleges or universities that are engaging a large diverse segment of students. Through further research projects like this one that focuses on alumni perspectives and experiences there can develop more ways to expose larger amounts of the student population to leadership opportunities during college (McCannon & Bennett, 1996).

Understanding the experiences and perspectives of alumni can help higher education institutions reach current and upcoming students with more leadership engagement and to know what types of experiences seemed to have been perceived as working well and which ones did not. With a general lack of investment by state and federal government in higher education, it is critical to discover ways colleges and universities can not only truly create more leaders after college and in professional fields but also create advocates for higher education and individual institutions. An investment in the right type of programming could engage students and keep them engaged as alumni leaders, which could pay dividends to higher education institutions with more alumni donors, volunteers, mentors and advocates.

**Findings**

From the 14 participants who shared their individual experiences with leadership opportunities in college, three clear findings emerged. The first finding from participants was
that leadership experiences they had in college had a profound impact on them after graduation, in many cases, their leadership experience helped chart the pathway they took in their life and career. The second finding that emerged was that participants came into their college experiences with their own personal motivations and that the institutions themselves were not responsible for students pursuing those opportunities. Students were motivated and encouraged by factors not specifically driven by the institution itself. No matter what the institution did, these students would have found a way to get leadership experience. The third finding is that students did not experience leadership inside of the classroom and instead relied only on out of class leadership experiences. It was completely up to the students themselves if they pursued a leadership opportunity and those experiences were not widely provided inside of the classroom. It was possible then for participants to go through their whole undergraduate experience without any leadership experience gained in the classroom and any gains being completely reliant on the leadership opportunities they pursued outside of the classroom.

Additional issues that came up from the interviews included participants general lack of knowledge about specific leadership courses or degree pathways that included leadership training at their college, with some stating if they knew one was being offered they would have enrolled in it. Another issue that became clearer during the interview process was the acknowledgement by some interview participants that having a faculty member be encouraging and tell them to pursue an opportunity or that they would be particularly good at something was so incredibly important ultimately in the path they took in college. Some acknowledged that without that mentor figure or encouraging educators their pathway and ultimately their career or community involvement after graduation could have been much different.
Conclusion

Chapter one of this dissertation served to outline the research questions, literature on the importance of involvement and leadership for college students, as well as provide details about the study’s design. Chapter two of this study is designed to be a publishable paper in a peer-reviewed scholarly publication focused on education and leadership. Finally, chapter three will be the summary chapter that includes implications and reflection of the study.
CHAPTER II
PUBLISHABLE PAPER

Abstract

This research study sought to better understand how individuals perceived leadership experiences they had in college after they graduated. The study examined the impact they believe these leadership opportunities had on their life after graduation. Findings from this study suggest that participants were profoundly impacted by the leadership experiences and opportunities they had during their undergraduate degree. They also suggest that the institutions themselves while offering plenty of leadership opportunities for students were passive in ensuring students pursued those opportunities. Students came into their college experiences with their own internal motivations that acted as a guiding force more so than any concerted effort by their college to guide them toward leadership opportunities. Students also needed to search outside of the classroom for meaningful leadership experiences and opportunities. Recommendations suggest that colleges and universities offer a mandated leadership course to ensure exposure to all undergraduate students. Recommendations also include having mentorship and encouragement of students as a factor in professor tenure and merit wage increases for staff. Having staff provide positive encouragement and guidance for students can play a critical role in students pursuing leadership opportunities.
Introduction

As purported by so many institutions of higher education, undergraduate students in college have the potential to be exposed to numerous leadership opportunities inside and outside of the classroom. College and universities cite leadership development as a key outcome from graduation and it is even included in some institution’s mission statements, strategic plans and taglines (Shertzer, Wall, et. al., 2005; Miles, 2011; Cho, Harrist, Steele & Murn, 2015; Rosch & Lawrie, 2011).

Leadership studies have moved past “trait theory or heroic-leader model toward a recognition that shared leadership is appropriate and meaningful as students take on leadership roles in the community” (Stephenson, 2011, p. 337). Komives, Lucas and McMahon (2013) see a leader as “any person who actively engages with others to accomplish change” and that helps shift the paradigm “from seeing the concept of leader as only the person in charge to all those who are actively engaged with each other to accomplish the groups goals” (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013, p. 33). The authors further go on to define leadership as a “relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change” (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2013, p. 33). In addition, “contemporary theories of leadership prioritize self-awareness, ethics, morality, and social responsibility” (Ahlquist, 2017, p. 49).

Bialek and Lloyd (1998) discovered through interviewing alumni about their college student leadership experiences that the skills they claimed to have gained from the experiences are the very ones colleges regularly say are very important for students to obtain before graduation. Further, they reported increases in students’ ability to work with diverse groups, interpersonal communication and public speaking and ability to lead and work in teams. Miles (2011) also reports how leadership roles increase student interactions with others and helps them
to develop new skills not otherwise obtained. Allen, Ricketts & Priest (2007) study results indicated that college clubs and organizations were indeed influential in leadership development and that they should receive college support. Rosch and Lawrie (2011) found in their research and others that leadership development also aids in students becoming more self-efficient, civically engaged, more fully develops their character, enhances their academic performance and their own personal development.

Yet, while these leadership opportunities provide positive outcomes for undergraduate students, both concerning their academics and their social integration, finding these leadership opportunities are often left up to the individual student to pursue. Moreover, there can be barriers for students if the opportunity is not within the classroom, specifically issues of time and access (Tinto, 2012). Moreover, little research exists that looks at how leadership opportunities impact students after they graduate. While research is clear that leadership opportunities provide academic and social integration (Tinto, 1997), a feeling of belonging on campus (Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2014) and opportunities to explore campus and community (Bonsall, Harris & Marczak, 2002; Besser, 2012) few studies examine how those experiences impact students and their leadership experiences after college.

Thus, this interpretivist grounded theory research study sought to explore how college leadership experiences inside or outside of the classroom or the general lack of those experiences impacted alumni of all different ages. Overall, this study explored how college alumni who participated in leadership experiences perceived how those experiences as having helped shape their life and/or career. The primary guiding questions for this study included:

(1) What do individuals perceive leadership as being and what are examples of successful leadership?
(2) What do individuals cite as barriers to obtain leadership experiences while in college?

(3) How do individuals perceive their past leadership experiences in college as influencing their current career or life pathway?

Findings from this study suggest that participants perceived their leadership experiences while they were undergraduate students as a major influence on them during and after college. Many of them pursued careers or learned much needed skills for their career through the leadership experiences they had while in their undergraduate studies. Findings also suggest while the institutions themselves typically had multiple leadership opportunities happening on campus, they did not often play an active role in pushing students toward those opportunities. Instead, participants were led to those opportunities by their own motivations or by a faculty member or peer that encouraged them to pursue an opportunity. Students also needed to search outside of the classroom for meaningful leadership experiences and opportunities rather than having many leadership experiences within the classroom.

Recommendations that emerge from this study encourage colleges and universities offer a mandated leadership course for all undergraduate students as a way to ensure leadership development for all students before they graduate. Recommendations also include having mentorship and encouragement of students as a factor in professor tenure and merit wage increases for staff. There have to be ways colleges and universities become more active in the leadership development of their students rather than relying on the students to discover and do leadership development opportunities on their own before graduation.

Research Design

This qualitative interpretivist, grounded theory study examined how student leadership experiences or lack of leadership experiences in college impacted participants’ perceived career
and life pathway after graduation. A grounded theory “consists of categories, properties, and hypotheses that are the conceptual links between and amount the categories and properties” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 228). This interpretivist, grounded theory study helped provide an “understanding [in] the meaning people have constructed; that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15).

Specifically, this study sought to explore how 14 college alumni perceived their leadership experiences in their two or four-year undergraduate experience and how it impacted them after graduating. This study sought to better understand if individuals felt these leadership opportunities and experiences or lack of them, influenced their career or life pathway after graduating.

**Methodological Approach**

Grounded theory here is framed by interpretivism, which aims to base understanding participants’ lived experiences from their own perspectives (Schwandt, 1994). Ultimately, this study sought to explore and better understand how participants were impacted by their leadership experiences post-college. Using an interpretivist approach, this study focused on participants’ perceptions and sought to explore how participants made meaning regarding their experiences in college around leadership experiences and leadership development.

**Participants**

Participants were recruited using convenience and network sampling. Convenience sampling is based on “time, money, location, and availability of sites and respondents” (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, p. 97). Network sampling is considered one of the most common methods of purposeful sampling and involves “locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria…established for participation in the study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98).
Participants were all 18 years of age or above and consisted of 14 participants, 7 self-identified women and 7 self-identified men.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racial Demographic</th>
<th>Other Information</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
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Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) were used for this study. Each participant was interviewed once and were asked open-ended questions to gain their perspectives. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. In addition to one semi-structured interview, the researcher jotted notes and observations during the interviews and completed a follow up interview to ensure accuracy and goodness.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews, each was transcribed using Otter Box. After each interview was transcribed, the researcher reviewed the transcripts for accuracy, axial coding was
utilized as a way to group open codes. Here, axial coding “comes from interpretation and
reflection on meaning” so it goes beyond descriptive coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 206).
An example of in this study includes open codes of wanting to do leadership experiences in
college, gaining experience for future career, having an experience that encompasses their
interests which leads to an axial code of wanting a meaningful college leadership experience.

**Trustworthiness**

As a criterion of quality, the term trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is used to provide support for findings that reveal something that should warrant attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As part of upholding trustworthiness with the study, member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which are also referred to as respondent validation, were conducted with the idea being that one solicits feedback on findings from those that are being interviewed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). The process involved in a member check “is to take your preliminary analysis back to some of the participants and ask whether your interpretation ‘rings true’” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). Participants were provided a list of themes that arose from the interview and asked to comment upon its accuracy.

**Findings**

Analysis of the interviews revealed three findings that emerged across participants’ interviews, interestingly, these themes were congruent across different races, genders, and experiences with leadership. Participants universally acknowledged the leadership experiences they had while in college, regardless of what type of experience it was, had an impact on them and the direction their life and/or career after they left college. Secondly, participants discussed how they self-selected and were self-motivated to pursue leadership experiences in college rather than being educated and/or informed of these opportunities by their institution. Thirdly,
participants did not receive meaningful leadership experiences inside of the college classroom that they can recall. Rather, participants spoke of serendipitously finding these leadership opportunities outside of the classroom. It meant taking the right course at the right time with a faculty member or peer that suggested an outside the classroom leadership opportunity to them or just discovering it on their own. As such, participants identified little institutional support to inform them of both the opportunities of leadership and/or the benefits of leadership experiences in college.

**Impact of Leadership Experiences in College**

As participants shared about their experiences, it became clear that their involvement in leadership during their time in higher education had lasting impacts upon their lives and careers. For example, Rebecca, a white 63-year-old woman spent her career in theatre and education that was focused at a community college. In her interview, she remembered fondly the leadership opportunities and experiences she had at her community college she attended. She shared,

I went to a community college right at the moment when the ERA (Equal Rights Act) was attempting to get passed and I was in the first women’s studies and women’s English classes that were ever on the books during when I was around 17 and I was lucky enough to experience that. I had the impetus then to be a really big voice on campus for women’s rights and I got to be a co-chair of a women’s group on campus and experience amazing speakers like Jermaine Greer, who was just as important as Gloria Steinem, come to campus and I was able to sit with her and speak with her and had those kinds of experiences in my undergraduate.

For Rebecca, involvement in a woman’s group during her time at her community college provided her access to speakers and experiences that gave her the opportunity to engage in feminist discussions and ideas. Even after Rebecca transferred to a four-year institution and lost that connection to the campus, she discussed the impact that leadership experience had on her, even in her major of business and marketing. She also talked about her motivation to go for her
MFA after getting her business degree and the support it took of others believing in her, much of that was from her leadership experiences and encouragement she received.

John, a white 37-year-old man who shared that he self-identified as part of the LGBTQ community, had a career in equal rights advocacy work. For John, he heavily involved himself at his college, creating and joining student organizations, plays, and other leadership opportunities while working at McDonald’s at the same time to help pay for his education.

I had some wonderful leadership experiences to develop and hone my skill set throughout my college career like writing for the student newspaper, editing for the campus journal of political opinion, Model United Nations, and forming my own student group. I will also say as an undergrad I ran for student government in my freshman year and I didn’t win. It taught me that losing is not the end and that there are many ways to serve communities and sometimes electoral politics is one way, but not the only way.

John took full advantage of the leadership opportunities provided to him in college and along with his work experience during college was able to help develop his skills interacting with people and engaging with people. He was also able to build his own values, networks, and develop strong relationships with other students, faculty and administrators through leadership opportunities during college. These leadership opportunities taught him many impactful lessons such as the recognition that losing “is not the end,” and different ways to serve the community. For John, these experiences were essential and served to help him in his current role in advocacy work.

Tammy, a white 38-year-old marketing professional shared that she was very involved in her community. In college, Tammy took advantage of joining the student newspaper and student organizations, even serving as a president in one of her organizations. She offered,

I would put most of the credit for my leadership development on my college years. I think it was definitely a formative time for me and I think there were a lot of opportunities for leadership and I had a really good foundation. I was lucky with my upbringing to have confidence put into me so if there is something I want to do I could do
it. College was the first time in my life where I started making my own connections and not ones that were kind of helped by my parents.

While Tammy took full advantage of leadership opportunities in college, she noted that it was likely because she was self-motivated due to her upbringing. She went on to share that she noticed that many of her peers were not taking advantage of the opportunities around the campus:

I’ve always looked at how there were so many people that weren’t involved in extra activities or not consistently involved where they would just go to an opportunity if there were extra credit available or part of an assignment and I feel like that one time boost didn’t really do anything for people.

Tammy noted that while she was self-motivated to engage in these leadership opportunities, many of her peers were not.

Thomas, a 43-year-old Black man, who self-identified as part of the LGBTQ community, spent 20 years in journalism before going into the seminary to become a minister. After becoming a minister, he then became a policy fellow for a church at their Washington D.C. office. For Thomas, his leadership opportunities provided him strategies to engage in social change. He shared,

It took me awhile to finally get into a position where I was able to participate in activities creating change. I think being a journalist in college and after college allowed me to see how people make change and then finally as I kept observing there were doors that opened and allow me to use what I had observed to finally implement those strategies to create change.

Through his self-motivation to discover his values and viewpoints, Thomas joined the college Republicans group after believing for a time he was aligned with their values. He offered,

I learned firsthand what the policy issues were and just overall stances. I couldn’t abide by being part of the organization any longer given from my standpoint, the ideological philosophy that humanized myself as a person and as a person of color.
For Thomas, he was able to really examine his philosophies, his identities, and how those shaped his political views through his leadership opportunities. This led to lasting impacts that continued with him after graduation and into his careers.

**Participants’ Motivation for Leadership Experiences**

In addition to participants sharing about the lasting impact their leadership experiences had on their lives, they also shared their motivations for seeking out leadership opportunities. For example, Isabella, age 33, was a Latina woman with a career in education. Her goal was to be a positive example to other non-dominant women and provide a voice for them. Thus, she was self-motivated to seek out leadership opportunities to be active and to demonstrate for social justice. She shared,

> Truthfully, I have always been extremely outspoken. I have always found it my calling to call out injustice. In pursuing several degrees, I always felt a need to become actively engaged in leadership roles to enhancing my learning opportunities. As a minority, I never really saw that many in those roles. I developed a strong desire to actively demonstrate that we should have a place at the table when addressing issues that affect us as a whole. In short, my leadership involvement stems from a place of equity and justice. As a minority woman that has endured a lot, I felt it was necessary to give a voice to many that are voiceless.

Isabella also found motivation to in pursuit of a degree in having to help raise her sisters when at the age of 16 both her parents were incarcerated and at age 19 she had full custody of her sisters.

> So I can tell you that the drive, the motivation and sense of wanting something different in my life and fighting to have my sister’s back with me and getting them out of the foster care system was very much deeply imbedded in me.

These life experiences served to motivate Isabella to engage in and advocate for social justice for women and for people of color. These leadership opportunities provided her a venue to use her voice.
Larry, a white 67-year-old man, spent his career as an educator and upon retirement, started a non-profit to help battle against poverty. He was largely inspired because of his leadership experience while in college. While he was shy in high school and college, his teachers and faculty encouraged him to engage in leadership. He was part of a hunger committee in college and was chosen to represent his college at the world conference for hunger issues. Ultimately, though, Larry felt that while leadership can be taught, it is the inner drive and motivation cannot be and comes from somewhere inside. While he had some encouragement, he continued engaging in the work because of self-motivation due to life experiences.

So I saw poverty as I was growing up so that probably affected my identification with poverty and trying to do something about it. I think experiences can help lead someone to become a leader and I think it is teachable to a certain extent but that core motivation, core drive or passion to get something accomplished in that area you want to get something accomplished in, I don’t know if you’re born with that but it comes from somewhere inside, it is not teachable.

For Larry, his motivation to make a positive impact on others came from life experiences and he was able to channel in his leadership experiences. He further shared,

I felt motivated to try to find a way to have a positive impact and like I said, that is why I majored in education. When I was a teacher, I always looked for ways that I could work with students and encourage them to move forward.

Larry’s advocacy and motivation for leadership was utilized throughout his career.

Faith, a Black 29 year old woman was drawn to study social services while she was in college. She shared that while many different college experiences had a big impact on her path in her career, her motivation to engage in advocacy and leadership was motivated by how she, as a Black woman, was often told, “No.” She shared,

I was motivated to pursue becoming a social worker because of my ability to advocate for others, even when it’s challenging. I discovered I had the capacity to influence others in a positive way despite being so used to hearing the word no when growing up. I think my
experiences allowed me to see that I had a bigger ability to be able to advocate and convince, even after they already had their mind made up in a lot of ways.

Faith’s experiences, coupled with her experiences in college, provided her a foundation to become an advocate who could work to educate others.

While participants shared that many felt self-motivated to engage in leadership due to life experiences, Bill, a white 36 year old man shared that he became involved in leadership because his motivation to have fun while in college. Bill became heavily involved in the Greek system at his college because he felt that it would be fun and support social engagement. Yet, while this was his first motivation, he quickly realized that it was not the only motivation. Bill said,

I focused when I was an undergraduate on the Greek system. I got that there were lots of student opportunities out there but for me it was being a Greek and I jumped into my fraternity at first very slowly and didn’t want a whole lot of leadership, I wanted the fun and the social aspect of it. That didn’t last very long, quickly I was put in charge of the finances. From there I learned different responsibilities and became motivated to take ownership on ensuring the fraternity was fiscally stable and successful.

While Bill’s motivations were first to have fun and socialize, he quickly realized that his motivations were to be responsible and to ensure fiscal stability. Bill cited his leadership development and experiences, and the applied nature of these experiences, as being responsible for his ultimate future career in public service. Bill said,

My involvement in college was how do you do as little as possible and get by. I mean, that was the game in college is how do you do as little work in class as possible in class and make it through. My extracurricular took up, tons and tons of time and commitment. Those experiences were life changing for me. Again, the classroom stuff was what it was, you have to get the stuff done to get the degree. My motivation was to have fun and from there I actually did learn responsibility and it led to my career and also my running for and serving on city council.

Bill, like other participants, found that they were motivated to engage in leadership opportunities and experiences because of life experiences and self-motivation. It was through these
experiences that they were able to learn key skills and, in many cases, provided a foundation for careers using leadership skills.

**Lack of Leadership Experiences in the Classroom**

Participants noted that they experienced very little classroom leadership studies, experiences, and/or related materials. While those participants who went on to earn advanced degrees reported taking leadership related courses in their fields of study or having courses that involved leadership in the curriculum, nearly all participants reported that there was a lack of leadership related courses and/or material in their undergraduate courses and degree programs. Specifically, participants shared that leadership opportunities, both inside and outside of the classroom, were generally left to students to discover on their own. There was little effort on the part of institutions to engage in any organized method for students to learn more about leadership opportunities, theories, or the positive impacts these experiences have on students.

River, age 49, was a white man who spent his career as an educator in higher education. He recalled that primarily he and his peers guided his leadership development almost as a rebellion against what was being taught in the classes he was taking. He offered,

> In my undergraduate years a lot of times my leadership opportunities came as almost like a reaction against my classroom experiences. I found often that the opportunities I was offered in the classroom didn’t match up with what I saw as what was potential. I was able to interact with other people who were leaders outside of the classroom and sort of learn from them that if I wanted to have certain kinds of experiences I needed to make them happen on my own or through collaborating with other people. That led me to starting opportunities that I saw lacking in my university experience.

River shared that not only did he have to create opportunities on his own; his classroom experiences were almost at odds with what he felt should be the practical applications of the
classroom material. Instead, his classroom was a space that was seemingly at odds with the experiences he had outside of the classroom.

Sarah was a 58-year-old woman who self-identified as a white and Native American Navy veteran. Her career was in agriculture and she attended several different colleges in her undergraduate and graduate studies. She noted that she did not experience formal leadership experiences or material in her classroom and that her faculty did not seem to exhibit leadership in their own practices. She offered,

I don’t think I learned a lot of leadership inside the classroom, I found myself often judging instructors who didn’t themselves have good leadership skills. I worked while I was attending college and there I would have good examples from managers and would pay attention to what they did and how they interacted with others. I would also learn from bag managers and examples of why they were ineffective. I think outside the classroom is where I got more of my leadership experience and the military especially as I think the military forces you to be a leader.

For Sarah, her leadership development did not come from formal classroom experiences. Moreover, she was disappointed that faculty did not seem to exhibit leadership skills.

Similarly, Rick, a 36-year-old white Air Force veteran did not experience leadership in his classroom experiences, either. While in college, Rick engaged in a veterans group on his campus, ran, and won a race for student government. He shared that he only could recall one experience where leadership development occurred in his classroom setting:

There was a systems analysis course where I learned some soft skills I think but it was not like here take systems analysis to develop leadership skills. It was not advertised like that at all and the word leadership probably didn’t even show up in the syllabus. The only thing related to leadership. Nothing else comes to mind except little training sessions that were not leadership experiences in the classroom.

Rick, much like other participants discussed, had little formal study of leadership while in the classroom. Importantly, while the colleges and universities could have provided opportunities for students to learn more about leadership or even offer courses that centered leadership, each of the
participants shared how there was not formal curriculum or mention of leadership and its importance in or out of the classroom. While participants had a wide array of leadership experiences, these were never connected to in their courses of study.

**Discussion**

As participants in this study indicated, leadership was an important part of their time in college and served to teach them important aspects that would serve them long after they graduated. For some participants, those experiences provided a foundation for their careers while others were provided opportunities to try new things. Findings from this study indicate that participant noted the transformational and impactful role their leadership experiences played in their education. Participants also shared that it was their own self-motivation that served as a foundation for their participation in these leadership experiences. Finally, participants noted that leadership experiences were not formally taught in the classroom, rather, they had to seek out those leadership opportunities on their own.

In each of the participants’ interviews, it became clear that leadership experiences that participants had during college had an impact on them whether they obtained them in an extra-curricular student organization or outside of the college entirely. This finding mirrors research that discusses the benefits students gain from leadership opportunities during college. For Rebecca, she had the opportunity to learn more about feminism, engage with others about these important topics, and be a “really big voice on campus for women’s rights” while she attended college. For participants like John and Tammy, they were provided a foundation that would serve them in their future careers, providing them opportunities to engage in skills that they would use for the rest of their careers. Thomas, who shared that it was through his leadership experiences
where he finally learned how to “implement those strategies to create change”, further discussed these impacts.

The finding that participants had lasting and transformational experiences is well documented and supported in the literature. It has been well documented that those who participate in leadership experiences have been shown to increase leadership behavior (Patterson, 2012), and are likelier to utilize those skills in the workplace. Salisbury, Pascarella, Padgett and Blaich (2012) found that students who worked while enrolled in college reported a positive impact on their leadership skill development in ways that nonworking students were not able to develop those skills.

Some participants discussed how taking part in leadership opportunities in college helped shape their values and what they cared about after having graduated college. Being socially integrated into college and being able to experience more than just course work also helped them to become better connected to their institution. This finding matches research about importance of leadership opportunities for students overall development. Dugan, Bohle, Gebhardt, Hofert, Wilk, and Cooney (2011) mention how leadership educational experiences provide opportunities for development of core beliefs, leadership knowledge that transfers across a variety of different contexts. While assessments of leadership programs in research has typically revealed positive educational gains from participation in them (Dugan, Bohle, et. al., 2011). Importantly, leadership experiences and development have also been shown to “strengthen a sense of purpose, ethical authenticity, commitment, collaboration” as well as “…respect for others, and civic responsibility” (Salisbury, Pascarella, Padgett & Blaich, 2012, p. 303). Participants in this study discussed how these leadership experiences impacted them and provided them purpose, taught
them about commitment, standing up for what they believed, and provided them a vehicle to use their voice.

In terms of motivation, participants in this study demonstrated consistently that they had an inner self-motivation or that their pursuits of leadership opportunities were self-guided due to life experiences. While some participants mentioned being mentored and encouraged by faculty, staff, or peers toward leadership opportunities, ultimately, the motivation to go forward in that direction came from within them. Numerous studies go in-depth on student motivations and relationships between internal and external motivations and their interest. Research into motivation shows that capability, sense of self-worth, goals, internal and external factors can all play a role in individual students’ motivations (Seifert, 2004; Weber, 2003; Pew, 2007; Etten, Pressley, McInerney, & Liem, 2008). Higher education institutions need to assume students are responsible for their own motivation since external environment factors can be beneficial but do not encourage the same type of responsibility (Pew, 2007). This does not mean, however, that universities and colleges should continue to be passive in engaging students toward leadership opportunities or continue to rely on students to be self-motivated and guided to pursue those opportunities. Rather, higher education institutions should focus on creating environments that can allow students to discover or draw upon their own internal motivations to ensure they go through leadership experiences.

Participants stopped short however of citing that their colleges provided them formal leadership development within the classroom. Each participant acknowledged that while college played an important role in offering leadership opportunities, it was largely because they were already self-motivated to seek out these opportunities, not because the institution offered formal curriculum. Indeed, interviews by participants indicated that there was little awareness or
knowledge of for-credit courses and/or degree pathways geared toward leadership when participants were undergraduates. Each said they would have been interested in taking a leadership course in their undergraduate work. As such, this was a missed opportunity for both participants and institutions to capitalize on those interested in learning more about leadership in the classroom and participants learning more about how to apply their experiences to their coursework.

This finding of limited formalized study of leadership is echoed in other research studies (Dugan, Bohle, et. al., 2011, Miles, 2011a). One study of seniors in college found that 65% of seniors reported never having participated in an individual leadership experience (Dugan, Bohle, et. al., 2011). The narrow scope of who college and university leadership opportunities are reaching represent a major issue, as only small fractions of students are graduating from their undergraduate program with a leadership experience. The benefits of leadership experiences on students in college and after they graduate in this study and others demonstrate the importance of a concerted effort by institutions to reach more students with leadership experiences before their graduation. It also demonstrates that teaching leadership has to be emphasized in the classroom, as “the seed for producing engineering leaders must be sowed in basic engineering classes. However, leadership is rarely discussed in traditional engineering courses” (Kumar & Hsiao, 2007, p. 19). Participants in this study felt that it was up to them to ensure they received leadership development outside of the classroom since they were not getting the development needed inside of the classroom. While opportunities existed in college outside of class, it was up to students to seek out those opportunities and pursue them, which means those opportunities, were being experienced by a small percentage of self-motivated students and not reaching a large enough base of students.
Recommendations

The findings show that colleges can provide transformational environments and tools for offering leadership opportunities for students while they are pursuing their undergraduate degree. Moreover, this study indicates that those who participate in leadership opportunities already have the self-motivation to do so. It is more of a passive offering of opportunities these participants experienced and the onus was placed on the students themselves to have the motivation and drive to pursue opportunities. From a credit course perspective leadership development was not a focus participants in the study could remember in their courses and they do not recall specific leadership focused courses being offered for undergraduate students.

Leadership is indeed an integral part of higher education. Research has clearly illustrated a link between engagement in leadership and positive rates of persistence, feelings of connectedness to their institutions, and personal development (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Patterson, 2012; Brown & Robinson-McDonald, 2014; Haber-Curran, Allen & Snakman, 2015). Undergraduate students who take part in leadership opportunities in college are also shown to persist to be leaders in their professional careers (Allen, Ricketts & Priest, 2007). Leadership experiences offer a pathway to retention and persistence success for students that are exposed to the opportunities. Leadership, then, is a key outcome of higher education. As such, the primary recommendation that emerges from this study is that higher education institutions formally include leadership and leadership development within for-credit courses. In formalizing the study of and engagement in leadership through course credit, students will have more opportunity and motivation to engage in leadership experiences.

These findings have important implications. Specifically, if higher education only passively offers leadership opportunities and/or does not formally address leadership in the
curriculum, students who are unaware of leadership opportunities and their benefits may suffer. Thus, colleges and universities should formally include leadership studies to better reach all students regarding the opportunities and benefits of leadership. According to Stephenson (2011), college courses should include “formal leadership development as an academic component of all students’ education” (p. 338) and be supplemented by bringing in community role models as mentors, and classroom leadership activities that allow the students to have active learning experiences (Stephenson, 2011). A formal undergraduate leadership course or leadership development sections in particular existing college courses would help provide a leadership mandate of sorts that all students experience learning about leadership in the classroom. This could then help make up the large gap between students that self-select leadership courses and experiences and those that do not and end up graduating from college without the major impact of having had leadership experiences during college.

Academic leadership programs have an opportunity to transform students and develop not just during college, but also after graduation as well to help them achieve personal, educational and career goals (Peck, 2018). Leadership experiences regardless of what they were in were shown to have had major impacts on each of the 14 participants interviewed in the study. Students learned from great experiences and learned from their experiences that were not so great. This study shows that not only are students successful in college when they take part in leadership experiences but they are also set on a pathway for after graduation that is influenced in a major way on the opportunities they took part in during college.

Conclusion

Leadership opportunities during college had a positive impact on participants, their engagement with leadership after college, and on their core values when they were asked to look
back on their experiences. Many indicated a desire to have done more experiences while in college but were limited by either internal or external factors. While many did not recall leadership courses being offered for credit while they were in college, several indicated they felt that could be an important piece to expose more students to leadership experiences when factoring in the many barriers that exist for students. Colleges and universities through their efforts could reach more students with concerted efforts inside and outside of the classroom instead of merely offering opportunities that are being self-selected by a select few.
CHAPTER III
IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Project Overview

The goal of this study was to explore how college leadership experiences impacted alumni and their current leadership experience in their career and life. Numerous studies (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Patterson, 2012; Brown & Robinson-McDonald, 2014; Haber-Curran, Allen & Snakman, 2015) recognize the positive impact leadership experiences have and the role they play in helping students become socially and academically integrated, help develop a student’s sense of belonging, increase levels of persistence, and the ability to succeed during college. There was a gap in the literature when it came to the perceived impact these experiences had on alumni when they were able to look back and reflect.

This study further provides colleges and universities feedback about the positive impact students’ leadership experience can have even after graduation. Further, this study can provide higher education important insight as to why it is so important that all students be actively told about leadership experiences and experience formal education about leadership development. It is key that all undergraduates have this access to leadership opportunities to develop these skills before they graduate instead of just a small segment of the student population that self-selects and seeks out those opportunities (Miles, 2011a). This study also provides insight regarding how students are motivated (and not motivated) to participate in these opportunities. Finally, this study provided opportunity to read about participants’ experiences and not having leadership
mirrored for them in their classes. Participants noted a lack of any mandated leadership
development courses or trainings in their undergraduate degree path and signaled that they would
have been interested in taking a college leadership course for credit if it were offered.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications from this study confirm research that demonstrate the important impact
leadership experience can have on a student’s skill development, sense of belonging, and self-confidence. Participants looking back on their college leadership experiences did so fondly and
credited the experiences partly for helping establish who they were and what values they would
maintain and work toward after graduation. However, despite the important positive impact
leadership experiences can have on students, it was clear that participants only gained these
experiences through their own self-motivation to do so outside of class. Participants did not get leadership experiences/curriculum in their undergraduate classrooms. Thus, this study offers the
following practical recommendations for colleges and universities:

1) Ensuring that students know about leadership opportunities and courses offered at
institutions of higher education are vital as students may not always search for these
opportunities on their own and instead rely on peers or faculty recommending the
opportunity to them. Colleges and universities should ensure that leadership opportunities
are easy to find on their websites, social media pages, and calendars. These opportunities
should also be emailed out weekly to students ensuring the information is being provided
directly to them rather than them having to search it out on their own. Finally, informing
students about leadership opportunities should be something particular staff/faculty
members of each department can take on to ensure each student in their department is
being reached with leadership opportunities. These opportunities should also be
interwoven into classroom curriculum when possible to best reach the largest amount of
students possible. Specifically, there could be more formal leadership curriculum in first-
year student success seminars. Starting students out with leadership curriculum in their
first-year could increase the possibility they would join a student organization or
leadership opportunities outside of the classroom prior to graduation.

2) It is not enough to passively offer leadership opportunities for students. Colleges and
universities must make a concerted effort to reach every college student and have them
participate with in-class and outside of class leadership opportunities. Colleges can show
the importance of leadership opportunities outside of class by offering extra credit for
students that attend along with an extra credit option students could complete at home if
they have barriers to them attending the opportunity. Having a leadership pathway
students could take in their undergraduate studies that adds a leadership certificate or
something involving leadership to their transcript could also work as an incentive for
students to take part in these opportunities once they find out about them. There are also
numerous online professional development opportunities now that students can take part
in that can be tracked to ensure they complete it. A test or quiz could also accompany the
opportunity.

3) Faculty and staff need to be incentivized to mentor and encourage students. Incentives
could include a mentoring provision in tenure processes and merit pay increases linked to
student forms about role faculty or staff played in informing them of leadership
opportunities or mentoring them. Mentoring and student interaction could also be added
to job descriptions at institutions for faculty and staff. Participants that reported shyness
only participated in leadership opportunities in college because at least one faculty or
staff member believed in them enough to tell them to go out for the opportunity and that they were good. This could become an institutional cultural issue as well. Mentoring and positive faculty/staff/student interactions encouraged by institution leadership could also work to improve participation.

4) Many barriers exist for students (raising families, work schedule, finances, commute) so institutions of higher education need to utilize technology and other ways to reach larger amounts of students with leadership opportunities.

5) Colleges and universities should utilize formal curriculum in the classroom for all undergraduate to ensure that students graduate with leadership development and experience. This could entail a required leadership experience prior to graduation, a capstone type project that ensures no student graduates without having some type of leadership experience where leadership skills are developed even if a formal leadership course was not taken for credit during their undergraduate experience.

6) Colleges and universities can work with their alumni to establish a pool of mentors and accessible leadership opportunities for their undergraduate students. Having an official college or university supported initiative for mentoring and leadership opportunities will work to provide a safe and formal method for students to access the opportunities that can be tracked by the institution. These opportunities could align with faculty and courses or be independent for credit opportunity or non-credit. These experiences could also take place online where alumni could be engaged throughout the world and not just those that still live near campus.

7) Institutions should each have an interdisciplinary approach to teaching leadership on their campus. This would mean departments and faculty would need to open up
communication across disciplines to see how this approach could be best achieved.

University and college existing interdisciplinary centers and cultural centers could play an important role in how to best establish interdisciplinary leadership curriculum into the classroom.

8) Faculty and staff on campuses should be offered specific professional development training in leadership development and how to best work with students. Having training would allow faculty and staff to gain more comfort in the development of their own leadership skills and be taught how to best teach and encourage the students they meet in regards to leadership development.

9) Acknowledge that race, ethnicity and gender could play a role on campuses in terms of which students are provided or told of leadership opportunities and which ones are not. After acknowledging the issue, colleges and universities should provide identity and implicit bias training to faculty, staff and students.

**Future Research**

There are several future research possibilities that came from this study. Researchers could focus on doing an in-depth look at race and or gender and leadership opportunities in college to see if different types of students are getting the same encouragement and mentorship from faculty and staff. There may be implications regarding who is encouraged to participate in these leadership opportunities and who is not. Moreover, while this study identified participants as being self-motivated to participate in leadership opportunities, it may have also been that these students simply had more free time than other students who are perhaps juggling school, family, work, and other obligations. Thus, a future study may look at how students who have families and work engage and/or do not engage in leadership experiences.
Another area that may be further explored is the role that alumni play at institutions of higher learning in terms of offering leadership opportunities, internships, funding, and other resources for students could be studied to determine ways to best utilize an alumni base. Future research could look at how an active alumni base bolsters and provides certain opportunity for students.

**Self-Reflection**

I was drawn as a researcher toward the issue of leadership opportunities and experiences in college and how they impact students after they graduate because of my own personal experiences with leadership opportunities in my undergraduate studies. As an undergraduate student at a community college and then a four-year university to complete my bachelor’s degree my life after graduation was dramatically impacted by the leadership opportunities I had in college. I had supportive teachers and professors in high school and college that encouraged me and I sought out opportunities and made the most of them.

In college, I stepped beyond the classroom to be part of student government, professional career oriented student organizations, the student newspaper, department student advisory council and other opportunities and internships. I also worked and paid my own way through my undergraduate degree. My experience as a first-generation college student would not have been nearly as rich or life impacting if I would have only taken college courses without the leadership experiences outside of class.

In this research project, I wanted to see if others had similar experiences as myself in college and if they credited their leadership experiences in college with helping shape their values and pathway in life. While participants had journeys that often differed from my own and other participants, the end result is that it did not matter what the leadership experience was so
much as that they simple had the experience to be able to learn and grow from. Some participant’s spoke of the failures and bad leadership experiences they had and how that helped them learn and others spoke of the great experiences they had and how it helped guide them in a direction after graduation.

There is a need for colleges and universities to take an active role in ensuring their undergraduate students are utilizing the leadership opportunities offered to them. Passively allowing students to graduate without an internship and without any defined leadership experiences is not doing all the institution can to set them up for success in college and after graduation. Research has shown the positive impact student organizations and leadership opportunities can have on students’ ability to socially and academically integrate and to persist (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012). This study further shows the impact leadership experiences can have on college students still deciding what they want to do in life and what values they hold.

My career is two-sided. I have spent 15 years in higher education instructing and administering programs while I have spent 11 years in elected office as a community college board of trustees’ member and a county board chair. My mother told me growing up the simple phrase, “be a leader and not a follower.” That phrase would get me in trouble some in my youth but it also became a quiet mantra that I used in life. That initial encouragement to be a leader as a young child shifted my thinking at a young age and persisted in how I thought throughout my life. I know how important positive leadership development has been in my life and career and it is something that can be and has been just as impactful for others in their lives.

This project will impact my career moving forward as I will seek out ways to offer and enhance leadership opportunities for students inside and outside educational institutions. I will seek changes and reforms at institutions so more undergraduate students are able to have
valuable leadership experiences before graduation. It is not enough for students to graduate with knowledge about their individual field of study. They have to be provided the tools and guidance to be leaders in that field of study and in life. The world needs more leaders and perhaps less followers.

**Conclusion**

Research consistently demonstrates the importance leadership experiences can have on providing positive impacts on students during college and even after graduation. This study corroborated those findings through in-depth interviews with alumni of varying ages. While colleges and universities offered many leadership opportunities outside of the classroom, they did not provide leadership skill building inside of the classroom for participants in this study. Participants indicated a desire and willingness that they would have taken a leadership course or leadership opportunity had it been offered and communicated to them from their educational institution. Further, it appeared that colleges and universities passively offered opportunities for students and relied on those students self-discovering the opportunities. As a result, many researchers indicated a low percentage of students that actually reported doing a leadership opportunity in their undergraduate program prior to graduation.

With the breadth of research available about leadership opportunities in college and the impact leadership programs and experiences can have on students during and after graduation there are no more excuses for colleges and universities not addressing the glaring problem of large percentages of their graduates graduating without leadership development inside or outside the classroom.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

IRB EXEMPTION LETTER
Exempt Determination

13-Dec-2019
Mark Pietrowski (00124938)
Continuing Prof Educ

RE: Protocol # H1S20-0201 "College leadership experiences impact on life after college"

Dear Mark Pietrowski,

Your application for institutional review of research involving human subjects was reviewed by the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety on 13-Dec-2019 and it was determined that it meets the criteria for exemption.

Although this research is exempt, you have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research and must comply with the following:

Amendments: You are responsible for reporting any amendments or changes to your research protocol that may affect the determination of exemption and/or the specific category. This may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted.

Record Keeping: You are responsible for maintaining a copy of all research related records in a secure location, in the event future verification is necessary. At a minimum, these documents include: the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB, and any other pertinent documents.

Please include the protocol number (HS20-0201) on any documents or correspondence sent to the IRB about this study.

If you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM
Title of Study: College leadership experiences impact on life after college

Investigators

Name: Mark Pietrowski Jr. Dept: CAHE Phone: 815-762-2054
Name: ____________________________ Dept: ______ Phone: ___________
Name: ____________________________ Dept: ______ Phone: ___________

Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on college alum and their experience with leadership opportunities in college and the perceived impact it had on them after college.
- This qualitative interpretivist study with grounded theory involves participants who are 18 years and older to be interviewed at a length between 30 – 60 minutes each interview.
- The benefits include expanding research into how leadership opportunities impact students after they graduate and how engaged students could turn into engaged alum that help benefit the college by becoming a donor, mentor, etc…; the risks include no inherent risk to participants. If any participant should become uncomfortable with the interview, they can stop at any time with no issue.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore how college leadership experiences impacted alum and their current perceived leadership role in their career or community. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: complete a 30 minute to 60 minute interview that will take place either face-to-face or via phone at a mutually agreed upon place and time. The interview will be recorded and transcribed.

Risks and Benefits

There are no reasonably foreseeable (or expected) risks for this study. If any participant should at any time feel uncomfortable in the interview, they can stop participation and leave with no penalty.

There are no direct personal benefits to participants deciding to be part of this study. Findings from this study however could benefit researchers, students, colleges and universities, help structure, and expand leadership opportunities.

Confidentiality [or ANONYMITY]

- This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: all information collected will be stored on a password-protected computer. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.
With your permission, your identity will be made known in written materials resulting from the study. However, you will be given the opportunity to review and approve any material that is published about you.

Compensation
There are no costs or compensations for this study.

Your Rights

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Mark Pietrowski Jr. at markpietrowski@gmail.com or by telephone at 815-762-2054. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

Your information collected as a part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research, even if all identifiers are removed.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

_________________________________________  _____________________
Participant’s Signature                         Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded during the interviews conducted for this study.

_________________________________________  _____________________
Participant’s Signature                         Date
APPENDIX C

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS
Individual Interview Protocols

Interview 1

Part 1: Review Informed Consent Document

1. Provide participants the informed consent document (via email) prior to interview.
2. During interview, discuss and review
3. Collect signed informed consent document

Part 2: Open-ended discussion questions, themes and representative questions

Questions will be semi-structured in nature, be allowed to flow, and adapt with each interview.

Leadership opportunity experience:

1. How would you describe your experiences with leadership opportunities you had while attending college, both credit and non-credit?
2. How would you say these leadership opportunities impacted you during college?
3. Did the experiences deepen your connection to the college you attended and your peers and faculty?
4. How did engaging in leadership opportunities impact what you majored in?
5. How did engaging in leadership opportunities affect you after graduating college?
6. How do you currently engage with the college you graduated from as an alum? Do you donate, volunteer or advocate for the institution?
7. Were there any barriers to leadership opportunities when you attended college?
8. What is your own understanding of what makes someone a leader? How did you come to that understanding?
9. What did you learn about leadership while attending college both inside and outside of the classroom?
10. How do you currently practice leadership in your community and in your career?
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT TABLE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racial Demographic</th>
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<td>Elected Official</td>
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<td>Veteran/Agriculture</td>
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<td>33</td>
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