

College Student Perceptions of Leadership: Empowering and Constraining Beliefs

John E. Shertzer

John H. Schuh



This study investigated college student perceptions of leadership and beliefs that both empower students towards and constrain students from involvement in leadership. Interviews were conducted with student leaders (students who held leadership positions) and disengaged students (students who had not held leadership positions). The student leaders generally regarded leadership to be an individualistic phenomenon pertaining to positions of power and influence, which require possession of particular qualities. They received more encouragement and opportunities from others, and had a background that fostered their desire to be leaders. The disengaged students demonstrated a lack of confidence, a lack of interest in leadership, a self-perceived deficiency in leadership qualities, and fewer opportunities to lead.

Introduction

Leadership development has been a focus of higher education since the inception of colleges and universities; and the earliest institutions

John E. Shertzer is the coordinator of residential life, and John H. Schuh is a distinguished professor and chair in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University.

of higher education helped prepare many of the nation's first political, social, and professional leaders (Astin & Astin, 2000). Although people have defined leadership in different ways, it still resonates as a desired outcome for students at many institutions of higher education (Astin & Astin, 2000). While the commitment to leadership development has remained strong over the years, more recent times have brought different perspectives on leadership into prominence. With this growth, a plethora of models, perceptions, theories, and definitions concerning leadership and leadership development have emerged (Bass, 1990). One of the major questions currently addressed in higher education is how student affairs staff can help more students become involved in collegiate leadership opportunities, thus empowering them to lead lives as leaders beyond the college environment (Astin & Astin, 2000).

A student's definition of leadership may play a significant role in whether or not the student perceives him/herself as a leader. Asking students to share their definition is a very difficult task when one considers the struggle scholars have simply defining leadership. Bass (1990) asserted: "There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (p. 11). Thus, trying to make sense of leadership is a challenge, because, as James MacGregor Burns (1978) noted: "Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (p. 2).

Influences on whether or not students choose to get involved in leadership opportunities, or consider themselves a leader, might be external to the student. Student leaders often receive substantial praise, support, and opportunities, while those who are not engaged as leaders do not. For example, in their research on perceptions of social justice, Chizhik and Chizhik (2002) found that many students believe that access to options and opportunities often is what separates the privileged from the oppressed. These students noted that mentoring, intelligence, personality, a supportive family, and health are all opportunities that influence an individual's success (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002). These opportunities may also influence a student's efficacy in regards to leadership (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Astin and Astin (2000) asserted that some perceptions of leadership promote constraining beliefs that limit student participation in leader-

ship experiences. Constraining beliefs, according to Astin and Astin (2000), lead to disempowerment, which limit a student's perception of him/herself as an active participant in leadership and change efforts. These beliefs can result in external actions such as students being disengaged in campus life, being passive learners in the classroom, and self-selecting themselves out of leadership opportunities (Astin & Astin, 2000). Many students may be unaware that they possess these limiting beliefs. Astin and Astin (2000) also concluded that the goal of leadership development initiatives should be to instill empowering beliefs in college students. They defined empowering beliefs as liberating thoughts that allow a student to believe that he or she can have an influence and make a difference. Empowering beliefs encourage students to become involved in multiple ways on campus and in the community.

A better understanding of student perceptions of leadership, as well as their empowering and constraining beliefs, can help student affairs practitioners work more effectively with students at various points in their leadership development. The purpose of this study was to investigate student perceptions of leadership and through the perceptions, identify beliefs that either constrain students from being engaged in leadership or empower students to be involved. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How did student leaders and disengaged students perceive leadership?
2. What constraining and empowering beliefs, if any, limited or promoted student involvement in leadership opportunities?

For the purposes of this study, traditional student leader roles were defined as those where students held positions on a college campus or within a student organization such as president, vice president, and chair.

Conceptual Framework

Leadership perceptions can fall easily into two distinct paradigms, which Rost (1993) discussed as the industrial paradigm and the postindustrial paradigm. The *industrial paradigm* contains many conventional views of leadership that have dominated leadership percep-

tions throughout most of the twentieth century, which include: (a) leadership is the property of an individual, meaning that one person provides leadership for a group; (b) leadership pertains primarily to formal groups or organizations; and (c) the terms “leadership” and “management” can be used interchangeably (Rogers, 1996; Rost, 1993). The industrial paradigm contains what many leadership scholars label as the “myths” of leadership (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998). Such myths include: (a) leaders are born and not made, (b) one needs charisma to be an effective leader, and (c) there is one standard way of leading (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998). The *postindustrial paradigm* has emerged from more recent literature and thoughts on leadership, and through criticism of the traditional paradigm. Some of the assumptions within this paradigm include: (a) leadership is based on relationships and does not belong to any individual; (b) leadership is meant to create change; and (c) leadership can be done by anyone, not just by people who are designated leaders (Rogers, 1996; Rost, 1993). Many of the “truths” of leadership described by Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998), such as (a) leadership is a discipline that is teachable and (b) leadership occurs at all levels, would fit into the postindustrial perspective.

While the industrial paradigm has dominated leadership perceptions in society (Rogers, 1996), and quite possibly on college campuses as well, some signs of the postindustrial paradigm also are present. For instance, research has demonstrated that women tend to perceive leadership in a more nontraditional way (Kezar, 2000; Romano, 1996). In a study of women student leaders, Romano noted that women use words such as “nonhierarchical, interactive, accessible, one-to-one, equality, and team member” (p. 679). In addition, Kezar (2000) stated that: “Women and women of color tended to describe leadership as collective, collaborative, empowerment-based, nondirective, process-oriented, facilitative, team-oriented, and characterized by equal power relations” (p. 8).

Method

This research used qualitative methods, including focus groups, interviews, and document review. The researchers chose qualitative methods for this research because of the desire to understand student per-

ceptions of leadership, and how these perceptions may contribute to empowering beliefs that promote, and constraining beliefs that limit, student engagement in leadership. Qualitative methods allowed for more questioning and probing, which led to a more in-depth understanding of the perceptions (Merriam, 1988).

The site for the research was a large, publicly supported university in the Midwest. Two different sampling methods were used to obtain participants for this study: criterion sampling and snowball sampling. Criterion sampling refers to selecting participants based on predetermined criteria (Merriam, 1988). For this study, students who met the criterion of being involved in traditional student leader roles, hereafter referred to as *student leaders*, were invited to participate. Students who have never been involved in traditional student leader roles, hereafter referred to as *disengaged students*, also were invited to participate. Snowball sampling, a method in which participants identify other potential participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997), was used to identify the disengaged students. The student leaders provided names of their peers whom they believe have been disengaged from leadership experiences.

Overall, 24 student leaders, and five disengaged students agreed to participate in the study. Five focus groups, each lasting approximately 90 minutes, were conducted with the student leaders. Individual interviews, also lasting about 90 minutes each, were chosen for the disengaged students in order to have more time to explore their personal stories and reasons for not being as engaged.

The focus groups and interviews consisted of a semistructured interview protocol as well as written definitions of leadership provided by the participants (which they were asked to complete before interview questions began). The researchers asked questions, which were constructed on the basis of the literature review, that specifically addressed how the students perceived leadership. In addition, each focus group and individual interview yielded new possibilities for questions. The researchers collected data from focus groups and individual interviews until a point of redundancy had been achieved, meaning that subsequent focus groups and interviews would have most likely not yielded new information (Merriam, 1998). The constant comparative method was used to analyze the interviews, which

were transcribed from tape recordings and analyzed immediately following each focus group and individual interview (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997).

The researchers used several methods to achieve trustworthiness. Most important was member checking, which involved providing drafts of the data analysis to the participants in order to ensure that the data had been properly represented (Glesne, 1999). In addition, the data analysis was shared with three of the investigators' peers for their feedback, suggestions, and assistance in developing conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Multiple data collection methods (including focus groups, written definitions, and document review) added to the trustworthiness of the study as well as did an audit trail. The researchers compiled the data in an organized manner, which allowed the researchers to access the research information easily.

Results

The data revealed that industrial perceptions of leadership were dominant at this particular institution. This was not a surprise, since many leadership development programs at the university were industrial in nature. At the time of this study, institutionally sponsored leadership development conferences and programs catered to students in positions (e.g., president, treasurer). Some of the leadership development programs were highly selective and exclusive. Students in leadership positions were valued and sought whenever additional leadership opportunities became available.

How did student leaders and disengaged students perceive leadership?

The students were asked a broad range of questions with the intention of discovering their perceptions of what leadership is, who leaders are, and what the process of leadership entails. Several themes emerged through the analysis of the interview, including: (a) leadership is an individual possession, (b) leadership is positional, (c) leaders possess particular qualities and skills, and (d) leaders act from internal motivations.

Leadership is an individual possession.

The first assumption of the industrial paradigm of leadership, that “leadership is the property of an individual” (Rogers, 1996, p. 302), was affirmed by most of the student leaders. Their dominant perception was that leadership is what a single person does. While a few student leaders deviated from their peers, most seemed to believe that only certain people can be leaders. The students were proud to call themselves leaders and they wanted to maintain ownership of this distinction.

While there was some debate, most students felt that leaders were very special individuals, often born with their qualities. For instance, Laurie (all names are fictitious), a senior who cochaired a large-scale campus program, felt that some people could learn to be leaders, while others are “natural leaders.” Jared, a former fraternity president and senior, believed that “some people are predisposed to learning faster how to be a better leader.” Overall, it seemed that while some were willing to concede that leaders can be developed, most believed that they were indeed born with some special leadership qualities. Gwenyth, a senior who was heavily involved with a religious organization, believed that leaders were born:

I think there might be certain types of people who are genetically prone for leadership positions—not that you can’t fine-tune your leadership skills, but I think certain people gravitate towards that role.

Leadership is positional.

Related to the notion that leadership is an individual pursuit was the dominant student leader perception that leadership is positional. Kristy, a senior and cochair of a service organization, reflected many of the student leaders’ thoughts when she stated, “In any organization you need to have a person at the top who is making all the decisions; you need that.” Many of the student leaders equated positions with titles. And, they believed that positions were important in order to exert influence in an organization. Erik, a student government president, felt that a position gave a person the “authority to act.” Thus, in his perception, leaders cannot accomplish much unless they have a position. Jared agreed:

Sometimes in the end the members would be more willing to follow whatever the elected leader, appointed leader, is going to do, rather than just someone from the group who comes up with an idea.

Thus, a position provides opportunities for action, according to the student leaders. Gwenyth felt that in order for a group to accomplish goals, it needs a “point person” and someone to direct the work of the group. In addition, some student leaders felt that they were more successful as leaders because of the perceptions that accompany a position. Laurie commented on that point: “I think sometimes it helps [to have a position], depending on the situation. When you have a title, it gives you a certain amount of respect and people will listen to you.” Whereas the student leaders generally appeared to consider *leader* as a part of their identity, the disengaged students clearly did not. However, they felt that at some times, and in some situations, they have been leaders. They may not have perceived that they were leaders at the time, or consciously sought out situations in which they could be leaders; it just happened. Danny, a disengaged student, commented: “I think everyone has some leadership ability, but I at least don’t sit around and think about whether or not I can be a leader.”

Leaders possess particular qualities and skills.

When asked to consider who leaders are, the discussions often revolved around a common belief that leaders have particular qualities and skills, which set them apart from others. The students all felt very strongly that this was true.

Many of the qualities that the student leaders felt leaders needed to have reflected their perceptions that positions of leadership favor extroverts. Mel, the president of an academic club, discussed the importance of charisma, and how that often determines who is chosen to lead an organization. She also cautioned that sometimes the most charismatic individuals are not the best leaders. Mel also likened leaders to salespeople, in their ability to persuade and sell their ideas. Jack, a student government president, felt that leaders had a different psyche, which then caused them to be more motivated.

All of the student leaders identified themselves as extroverted, with their definition based on whether or not someone has an outgoing and

gregarious personality. They believed that extroverts had an advantage over introverts in securing leadership roles and positions at their institution. Anna, a senior, helped to implement a leadership training program on campus, and she was fairly clear about the benefits of being extroverted:

I think that if you throw people together in a group and a leader hasn't been chosen, I think you get the same type of people that emerge as the leaders—the ones who don't mind being in front of the group. So when you're electing people to a position or you're conducting interviews, you know what you're looking for—you're looking for a person who's outgoing, who's going to be inspirational, motivational, and take charge of a group. You're probably less likely to give it to somebody who is less vocal because you wonder if they can really control that group.

Anna was not alone in her belief, and this issue generated more agreement between the student leaders than any other that was discussed. Jared commented: “Most people would rather be with someone who is outgoing and can sit there and wants to have a conversation with them than someone who doesn't.”

The disengaged students shared more thoughts about how introverted people can be leaders without providing a strong vocal presence in the group. They believed that quieter, more introverted people could contribute in different ways, mainly as individuals who work behind the scenes. Marj, who has been involved in student organizations but has never aspired to be a positional leader, preferred to lead by example:

To me, leadership can come in different ways. There's the traditional kind of leader—you know, who can stand in front of a room and show people how to do things. I think the most effective way of leadership is by example.

Julie, a disengaged student, shared the same feelings, and along with Marj felt that their actions spoke louder than their words. They generalized a great deal about personality types, indicating that extroverted people always are the ones who direct a group orally, while introverted people lead by example and in less traditional ways.

The participants' thoughts on requisite leadership skills varied a great deal. Communication ability was the skill most often mentioned by the participants. Other identified skills included motivational skills, empathy, persuasiveness, organizational skills, networking skills, professionalism, listening skills, mediation skills, ethics and morals, vision, people-skills, intelligence, and having the ability to make quick decisions.

Can people be leaders if they do not possess the aforementioned qualities and skills? Erik, a student engaged in leadership, might have expressed his opinion on this when he stated: "I don't think it's possible to be any Joe Shmoe and walk on as president—you have to have the capabilities." The idea that skills are necessary found some agreement from the disengaged students, including Marj, who felt that some skills are necessary, but not all. However, she did not identify those skills.

Leaders act from internal motivations.

One word that was stated repeatedly throughout the interviews and through the written definitions was *motivation*. Working with people, interacting with others, and making friends were reasons that the student leaders identified as to why they became involved. However, they did not connect these reasons with their philosophy or definition of leadership. In other words, working and interacting with others was a positive result of being a leader, but very few of the student leaders indicated that a group working together was the best way to create leadership. They still wanted to hold on to their position and control over their organization, and they continued to make distinctions between leaders and followers. Kristy stated, "In order to be a leader you need to have help along the way, and it just can't be you (sic) doing it; you have other people to help you achieve that goal." Her use of the word "help" in this observation can be interpreted to mean that followers exist to assist the positional leader.

Another primary motivation for being a leader given by the student leaders was personal development. Laurie offered a strong comment on the benefits of being a student leader when asked how she plans to be a leader in the future:

I don't know how I'll use my leadership, but I know I will. My experiences have made me a better person—a more outgoing person—a more motivated person and so no matter what I do, it's a part of me now. I want to change things, and make things better.

Trevor, the president of a special interest club, was inspired to pursue a graduate degree in higher education because of his involvement. Katie, a sorority president, could see herself working at a university as well. For others, leadership experiences have helped prepare them for their careers and life after college. Many of the future aspirations were to find positional leadership opportunities, such as a CEO in Kristy's case, project management for Robert (the president of a sports club), and Kimberly's (a sophomore president of a religious organization) desire to have a leadership role within a church. Jamie, a sorority president, felt so much passion for her sorority that she wanted to remain involved on a national level after graduation. Rebecca, a student leader and junior, wanted to find a way to contribute in her community.

In addition to personal development, the student leaders demonstrated passion for the organizations and causes with which they worked. Lisa, a sorority president, even went so far as to say that passion can create leadership: "If someone finds something that they're passionate about, they can be a leader. Thus, a motivation for the student leaders was as Emory (president of a multicultural group) referred to it, "the love." She continued, "It's like my child; it's a part of me. I love it, I spend time with it, it gives me back stuff, and it grows."

The chance to create change and improve something was another major motivation to serve as leaders. Ariel, a senior majoring in education, shared that the reason she took on the presidency of her sorority was to "make something better or make people better." Timothy, a student government leader, summarized this concept when he stated, "I have a burning desire to help people and to help make this world a better place."

Another frequent response for what motivates student leaders was the need to have control over a situation, and possess some type of power. Jack's definition of leadership reflected this: "Leadership is when, during any given situation, a person or persons assert control over the

group to better attain a specific result.” When Erik was asked to share words that he associated with leadership, his first response was “control over decisions and thoughts.” Moreover, Mel commented, “it’s nice having a little bit of control; it can help you steer the group in a direction.” Emory reflected on why she worked to get elected president of her organization: “I felt like it was me—I had to do it and it wasn’t going to get done right if I didn’t do it, so I needed to do it.” The disengaged students discussed how power and control contributed to their frustrations with popular perceptions of leadership. Julie felt it was simply a myth that leaders need to be “controlling and powerful.” Marj commented, “I do think it is about power and control sometimes; I think that leaders who like power and control can’t stand it when someone else does something.”

Student leaders have different motivations for what they do, and the ones shared by the student participants were very personal. No one felt an obligation to serve as a student leader; they made purposeful choices to get involved on their own, and none of the student leaders displayed any feelings of regret. For them, involvement has been an extremely positive experience. So, why do some students avoid opportunities with such positive results? The interviews turned to this question, and empowering and constraining beliefs were discovered.

What constraining and empowering beliefs, if any, limited or promoted student involvement in leadership opportunities?

The participants identified beliefs that empowered leaders as well as constraining beliefs that limited participation as leaders. These are identified in the next section of this report.

Empowering Beliefs

All of the students felt strongly that there are intrinsic beliefs that encourage some individuals to attain roles of leadership in any setting. In addition, many of the student leaders felt that extrinsic forces were at work as well. The researchers did not ask direct questions related to empowering beliefs, but the student leaders revealed several of them during the course of the interviews. The beliefs could be separated into three categories: (a) support from others, (b) opportunities, and (c) background and environment.

Support from others. It is clear that the student leaders enjoyed a great deal of support throughout their experiences. This support ranged from role models in the case of Todd (a student leader), to advisors and faculty whom Anna found to be helpful: “I think a lot of it has to do with advisors and faculty that I’ve met and that gave me a chance to meet them.” Rebecca was able to link support back to her organization:

That’s one thing I’ve seen a lot in my sorority is that if you encourage somebody or suggest things to people, they get involved and the confidence builds. It’s not that they don’t want to; it’s just that they never really thought about it.

The kind of support that the student leaders received varied. But one constant for all of them was encouragement. Laurie observed that receiving encouragement was important to her: “I think part of being a leader is being encouraged, and having people tell you that you are doing a great job.” Bill, a disengaged student, felt that some people are “almost expected to become the leaders.” Thus, in his view, they receive the support that is necessary to build their confidence and, as a consequence, assume traditional student leader roles.

Opportunities. Related to support is the large number of opportunities that student leaders receive. Kimberly stated, “I get a lot of opportunities, which I offer to other people; but I get offered every single one.” In many cases, the student leaders felt that all they needed was one opportunity, and if they took advantage of that, others would follow. Katie commented on the opportunities she got in high school: “My teacher in high school got me involved. She gave me a chance. All she needed to do was give me that opportunity and I took it.”

When asked to think about where leaders come from, Todd, a student government leader, made the following observation: “Most of the time, in my experience, it’s been someone who has been there and led before—that are more willing to stand out and get things going again.” Thus, based on the student leaders’ perceptions, once a person becomes a leader, the experience creates other opportunities to lead.

Background and environment. It was mentioned earlier how important some student leaders felt that background and environment was in

determining who might become a leader. Mel believed it was a significant reason: “I think a lot has to do with how you grow up and the experiences and examples that you’ve had in your life.” She made this account personal: “My parents never said, ‘No, you can’t do that,’ even if I wanted to do something really outrageous. They were always there and really supportive.”

Thus, empowering beliefs emerge from a variety of sources, including school and family. Family experiences and support were the components that the leaders cited most. While the student leaders felt that a background that was supportive helps leaders develop, Timothy added that providing challenges was just as important: “If you weren’t challenged as a young person, then you might not look to challenge yourself in college.”

Constraining Beliefs

Constraining beliefs were discussed more directly than empowering beliefs in the interviews. The student leaders shared them in relation to what they believed others experienced, while the disengaged students made them more personal. Three significant themes emerged from the constraining beliefs, which are (a) lack of capabilities, (b) lack of confidence, and (c) lack of opportunities.

Lack of capabilities. The student leaders generally felt that a big reason why some people do not become leaders or engage in leadership activities is because these people do not think they have the capability to be leaders. Rebecca felt strongly that this was the case:

I think a lot of people don’t think they can. It’s not that they don’t want to; it’s just that they never really thought about it. They might think, “I’m not smart enough for that.” I think they look at some people and think, “wow, how do they do that—I could never fit that into my day,” and then they don’t even try. Ally, the president of an academic club, reflected on that idea as well: “I think at [this institution] there are so many people, and some just figure that if they don’t do it, there are 20 other people who are more qualified than I am who could do it.”

Lawrence and Julie, disengaged students who have both avoided positional leadership, offered perspectives that validate the student lead-

ers' beliefs. Lawrence stated, "A lot of people just don't have the motivation, and some feel that they don't have the skills to do that either, much less the desire." Julie offered a poignant personal reflection:

I sometimes think I could do a better job than those people, but then why aren't I in a position? Maybe I'm afraid that other people wouldn't want me to, or they won't like my ideas, or maybe some natural leaders don't care and are gonna say I don't belong there.

Lack of confidence. In addition to lacking the capabilities, the student leaders felt that some disengaged students may lack the confidence to be a leader. Their perspective that confidence is necessary to be a leader can help to perpetuate this constraining belief. So, where do the disengaged students lose confidence? Ariel shared the following response:

Intimidation—they [disengaged students] feel like if they're not part of a certain group or part of a certain organization, then they don't have a chance to obtain a leadership position. I know that's really evident on this campus—"I'm not this, so I'm not going to be able to get that position."

The disengaged students also discussed the importance of confidence in taking on leadership roles. Marj commented, "I think some people don't want to be in the spotlight or be up for criticism—they don't want to risk it." Julie related confidence to personality type: "Or maybe they're just an introvert and they don't feel confident enough in their abilities."

Julie was asked if she ever tried to attain a leadership position, and her response revealed many constraining beliefs:

No, and I don't know why. Maybe it is just lack of confidence—I can't see myself doing that. Yeah, I think there are so many people smarter than me who could do that. Some even think, "Why would somebody want to listen to me?" I think I have good ideas, but I don't see myself as a leader like that.

Emory, a student leader, stated simply, "Some people just don't think they can be leaders." She continued by sharing several constraining beliefs which some disengaged students might have: "I'm not smart enough for that, I'm not a 3.5 [G.P.A.] student, no one's gonna like me,

I don't speak loud, I hate speaking in public, et cetera, et cetera. They don't realize that you can pick up on those things as long as you have the drive."

Lack of opportunities. Whereas the student leaders have found many opportunities to be leaders, such was not the case for the disengaged students. Some of the disengaged students would have appreciated more support and more opportunities that potentially would have resulted in their being more likely to serve as leaders. For instance, Julie stated, "It would be nice for people to show that confidence in you." Bill felt that more opportunities enhance a person's confidence: "It's kind of like the first time you give a speech in speech class. You're kind of scared, and you're kind of shaky, but the more and more you do it, the easier it comes." Bill also felt strongly that some student leaders do not make leadership opportunities available to others:

I think sometimes the people with the power, the people who are leaders, don't give other individuals the chance, because they're scared that they might do something better than them. Some people never have the chance to do something, even though they'd like to.

Overall, the disengaged students shared many observations about their constraining beliefs. Lawrence stated it most succinctly when he said, "Personally, I don't think I'm much of a leader at all."

Discussion

The student leaders felt quite empowered, and extremely confident in themselves. They had support from others, had a breadth of opportunities available to them, and came from a background and environment that helped them build their confidence. The disengaged students definitely identified a number of constraining beliefs, and the student leaders concurred in their analysis of why some students do not become leaders. The disengaged students indicated that they did not feel qualified for leadership, that they were not intelligent enough for the responsibility, and that their personality limited their ability to lead.

The fact that the industrial paradigm was present in both the student perspectives and the context in which the students practiced their leadership suggested that the environment might influence perceptions. The institution, although displaying a few signs of postindustrial perspectives, could have been viewed as highly industrial in nature at the time of this study. This was due largely to the type of leadership programs offered, most of which were focused towards students in leadership positions and based on the acquisition of specific skills. This environment was perfect for students with traditional leadership skills and extroverted personalities who prefer structure, formality, and designated leaders. This environment supported those students, and favored their contributions more than those who would thrive in a postindustrial environment.

Why does this occur? It is simply easier to locate student leaders; and in the busy days of student affairs professionals, they can spend only so much time helping individual students develop. The student leaders generally will emerge without needing to be pushed and can be trusted to serve in their roles without much supervision because of their leadership experience. In addition, student affairs divisions and student activities departments have a finite number of financial and human resources. Staff cannot always seek out disengaged students and provide the experiences necessary to prepare them for leadership positions. The fact that both the student leaders and the disengaged students discussed extroversion as an asset for leaders may influence this as well, in that student leaders are easier to find because they make themselves more visible. Experienced student leaders are also easily engaged in developmental initiatives and easily convinced to take on an empowering role within a college or university.

Implications for Practice

Colleges and universities should spend time reflecting on how the environment helps to shape how their students perceive leadership. How many awards programs exist for disengaged students that strive to lead by example? How often are nonpositional leaders discussed in the campus newspaper? When the time has come to establish a university committee, how many disengaged students are asked to serve?

Generally, the same student leaders participate repeatedly and dominate campus life. They are relied upon and in turn feel encouraged and supported.

If all students are to be encouraged and empowered in leadership, then those charged with developing college students' leadership need to shift to a new paradigm as well. Of course, just as the students had their own individual perceptions of leadership, so do student affairs staff. Many practitioners have held student leader positions in their undergraduate and graduate years, and thus developed in an environment that most likely was industrial, and at the very least traditional. It could be possible that these staff, who would consider themselves to be leaders, have the same pride and ownership in the *leader* distinction as the student leader participants in this study. Indeed, it takes a great deal of selflessness to shift from the view of "leading by the chosen few" to "leadership by all."

If student affairs staff are unable to reach out to inexperienced students in the breadth that is needed to empower them for leadership, two potential options exist: (a) increase the number of resources granted to student affairs divisions, including paraprofessional staff and student staff, so that more programs can be created and more professionals will be available to students; or (b) shift the campus environment to a more postindustrial perspective that welcomes and encourages student initiative from any level, and operates in a more collaborative and less hierarchical sense. In an environment where resources are scarce, changing the campus culture, while difficult (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt and Associates, 1991), appears to be more viable. Much the way individuals can empower and constrain others, so can the environment. The student leaders reflected this in their perceptions, as did the disengaged students. Following are some recommendations for practice:

- Provide staff development opportunities so that practitioners can be educated on emerging perspectives of leadership, such as the postindustrial paradigm. Such programming would be invaluable for staff members who have direct daily contact with students, placing them in the best positions of empowerment, such as resident assistants and Greek house resident advisors.

- Develop an institutional leadership statement, which outlines the university's fundamental beliefs about leadership and leadership development.
- Develop an ongoing recognition process for students who make contributions to campus and community life.
- Discontinue the use of the word *follower* in any public statement and/or approach to leadership.
- Further assess leadership attitudes and perceptions to gain a sense of the current paradigms under which the institution operates.
- Discontinue leadership programs that are selective or broaden them to include or invite others into leadership. Make opportunities available to every student. There is no doubt that students with the characteristics traditionally assigned to leaders will continue to be present, and continue to emerge into leader roles. Student affairs staff cannot ignore these students during their attempts to reach out to disengaged students. They can challenge student leaders to understand and accept the postindustrial paradigm perspective.

Clearly, many of the disengaged students are distrustful of student leaders because they perceive the leaders to only want power and control. Student leaders can be made aware of this perception, and reflect more deeply on their identity as leaders. Perhaps through this process, they can become the best catalysts for pulling more students into leadership.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, one should exercise caution when generalizing the results to other students or institutions. The researchers chose a small group of participants based on their level of involvement in leadership, and the participants were not necessarily representative of other college institutions. Only one site was chosen for the study, further limiting its generalizability. Overall, our conclusions are limited to this case study and one would need further studies in order to generalize beyond this case.

The number of disengaged student participants also limits the study. This number was disproportionately smaller than the student leader sample. While the researchers identified many disengaged students, these students were less motivated to participate in the study. This could be attributed to many of the same reasons they were not engaged in leadership.

The research conducted for this study may generate potential topical ideas for other research studies in the realm of college student leadership. Most of the study's participants were White, traditional-aged students. Students of color, students with disabilities, older students, and students in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community have dealt with constraining forces throughout their lives; and how these constraints have affected their perceptions of leadership and engagement in the leadership process would be a valuable addition to contemporary studies of leadership. In addition, although this study did not yield significant differences in leadership perceptions of men and women, research more directly focused on the influence of gender on student perceptions of leadership could be very helpful.

This research relied on students' verbal expressions of their leadership perceptions. An excellent follow-up would be a study that uses observation in addition to interviews and document review to assess leadership. Observing student leaders in their environment possibly could add richness to the findings of this study.

References

- Astin, A. W., & Astin, H. S. (2000). *Leadership reconsidered: Engaging higher education in social change*. Battle Creek, MI: W. K. Kellogg Foundation.
- Bass, B. M. (1990). *Handbook of leadership: Theory, research, and managerial applications*. New York: The Free Press.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Chizhik, E. W., & Chizhik, A. W. (2002). Decoding the language of social justice: What do privilege and oppression really mean. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43, 792–807.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

Kezar, A. (2000, July-August). Pluralistic leadership: Bringing diverse voices to the table. *About Campus*, 6–11.

Komives, S. R., Lucas, N., & McMahon, T. R. (1998). *Exploring leadership: For college students who want to make a difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, W. J., & Associates. (1991). *Involving colleges*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1994). Conducting assessment and program evaluation studies: Technical aspects. In J. S. Stark & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Assessment and program evaluation* (651–658). Needham Heights, MA: Simon and Schuster.

McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (1997). *Research in education: A conceptual introduction* (4th ed.). New York: Longman.

Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rogers, J. L. (1996). Leadership. In S. R. Komives & D. B. Woodward (Eds.), *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (3rd ed.) (pp. 299–319). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Romano, C. R. (1996). A qualitative study of women student leaders. *Journal of College Student Development*, 37, 676–683.

Rost, J. C. (1993). Leadership development in the new millennium. *The Journal of Leadership Studies*, 1, 91–110.