The Influence of Student Interactions on College Student Leader Change in Opinion: Differences by Frequency of Involvement

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In

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(ABSTRACT)

Leaders are generally viewed in a positive frame as having the ability to influence and motivate others (Tierney, 2005). They are frequently required to make choices in order to lead their organizations. Those choices are often influenced by the opinions of followers and public opinion in general (McIntosh, Cacciola, Clermont & Keniry, 2001). Understanding the opinion formation process, how leaders formulate opinions and how they make choices in leading their organizations is still at issue (Burns, 1978; Gardner, 1990).

One of the goals of higher education is to create student leaders who are contributing members of society and who are able to generate informed opinions. The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of student-student interactions on change of opinion among student leaders (SLs) and non-student leaders (NSLs). This study compared differences between student leaders and non-student leaders, and sought to examine which types of discussions with students different from oneself, best predict change in opinion.

Data from the 2004 College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) (Pace, 1984) were used in the study. The CSEQ asks respondents about their involvement with leadership experiences and the degree to which they have influenced others’ opinions and been influenced by others’ opinions. Participants also report how often they have become
acquainted with or had discussions with other students who are different from themselves based on several characteristics. These characteristics referred to individuals who had different interests, philosophies of life or personal values, political opinions, religious beliefs, race or ethnic backgrounds, family backgrounds or were from different countries. Data were analyzed via logistic regression and t-tests.

Findings revealed that discussions with other students who are different from oneself in regards to political values and country of origin lead to higher levels of opinion change. Opinion change, then, is influenced by specific types of discussions, and these discussions have an even greater influence on SLs than NSLs. In addition, highly involved SLs engage in discussions with others different from oneself significantly more often than less involved SLs for each of the seven types of discussions.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements............................................................................................................................. iv
Table of Contents ....................................................................................................................................... vi
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................... vii
List of Appendices .................................................................................................................................... ix
Chapter One - Introduction..................................................................................................................... 1
  Purpose Statement................................................................................................................................. 13
  Research Questions .............................................................................................................................. 14
  Significance of the Study...................................................................................................................... 16
  Delimitations......................................................................................................................................... 18
  Organization of the Study.................................................................................................................... 19
Chapter Two - Literature Review .......................................................................................................... 20
  Literature on Opinion Formation ....................................................................................................... 20
    Opinion Expression ............................................................................................................................. 21
    Social Influence Network Theory .................................................................................................... 21
  Student Leaders & Non-Student Leaders ........................................................................................... 27
    Student Leaders ................................................................................................................................. 27
    Non-Student Leaders ......................................................................................................................... 30
  The Influence of Student-to-Student Interactions .......................................................................... 31
    Academic Outcomes .......................................................................................................................... 32
    Non-Academic Outcomes ................................................................................................................... 34
    Interactions with Others who are Different from Oneself ............................................................... 36
    Race and Ethnic Background.............................................................................................................. 37
Chapter Three - Methodology.................................................................................................................. 43
  Sample Selection .................................................................................................................................. 45
  Instrumentation ...................................................................................................................................... 47
  Reliability and Validity .......................................................................................................................... 50
  Data Collection Procedure .................................................................................................................. 52
  Data Analysis Procedure....................................................................................................................... 53
Chapter Four- Results............................................................................................................................. 58
  Sample .................................................................................................................................................. 58
  Results of Data Analyses ..................................................................................................................... 60
Chapter Five- Discussion......................................................................................................................... 85
Discussion…………………………………………………………………………………………………85
Relationship of the Findings to Prior Research………………………………………..90
Implications for Future Practice, Research, and Policy…………………………….94
Limitations of the Study …………………………………………………………………………102
References ………………………………………………………………………………………106
Appendices…………………………………………………………………………………………120
List of Tables

Table 1: College Classifications and Institutional Types of the Sample .................. 48
Table 2: Variables, Codes, and Descriptions ................................................................. 54
Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample ....................................................... 59
Table 4: Student Leader (SL) Frequency ........................................................................ 61
Table 5: Results of Internal Consistency Estimates for the CSEQ Sub-Scales .............. 63
Table 6: Sample Mean and Standard Deviation for Student Acquaintances
Scale Items .................................................................................................................. 65
Table 7: Factor Loadings for the Student Acquaintances, Information in Conversations
and Clubs and Organizations Scales ............................................................................. 67
Table 8: Results of Exploratory Multiple Regression Analysis of SLs ..................... 71
Table 9: Results of Exploratory Multiple Regression Analysis of NSLs .................... 73
Table 10: Results of Logistic Regression Analysis of SLs ........................................... 74
Table 11: Classification Table: Observed and Predicted Frequencies for SLs for Logistic
Regression Analysis ........................................................................................................ 76
Table 12: Results of Logistic Regression Analysis of NSLs ......................................... 78
Table 13: Classification Table: Observed and Predicted Frequencies for NSLs for
Logistic Regression Analysis ......................................................................................... 79
Table 14: Results of T-tests between Highly Involved SLs and Less Involved SLs .... 81
List of Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter........................................................................................................... 120
Appendix B: 2004 CSEQ Instrument....................................................................................................... 121