

## Women's Leadership Competencies in Mixed Gender and Single-Gender Environments

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*This study looks at eight female student leaders enrolled at a large, coeducational, public research institution in the Midwest, who are also executive board members in on-campus organizations. The authors utilized interviews and self-assessments to identify perceived leadership competencies in these female positional leaders, who serve in single- and mixed-gender campus organizations, and further correlate the results with the Social Change Model of Leadership. The authors identified similarities and differences in competency, including stronger internal motivation among mixed-gender organization women and more efforts towards collaboration among women in single-gender organizations.*

With the opening of the 113th Congress in 2013, the United States saw a record number of women in Congressional seats – 20 in the Senate and 81 in the House of Representatives (Parker, 2013). As women continue to engage in significant leadership roles in all levels of society, from government to local organizations, educators and researchers must not assume that women's leadership styles and competencies will mirror those of men who have held similar positions. Rather, an understanding of women's leadership competencies in their own right should be developed. College is often an early opportunity for women to seek leadership positions before they enter the workforce (Boatwright & Edigio, 2003); therefore, this paper will explore the rise of women's leadership in college settings, the differences in women's leadership experiences and competencies, and how those competencies align with the Social Change Model of leadership. This model, which states that change occurs as a result of development in seven separate competencies (Dugan, 2006), is an ideal framework because it allows leaders

within varying types of organizations explain their own perceptions of how well they have grasped these competencies.

Women first entered the coeducational landscape in the early nineteenth century (Rudolph, 1962). The Morrill Act of 1862 led to an increase in state universities, and this, along with post-Civil War rights expansions, made coeducation "the rule rather than the exception" (Newcomer, 1959, p. 35), but women transitioning into this educational landscape experienced isolation and separation from their male counterparts (Horowitz, 1987). As men continued to develop their own extracurricular activities, "women were kept out of key activities on campus: student government, the newspaper, honor societies, and athletics" (Horowitz, 1987, p. 202). In response, women began creating their own opportunities for extracurricular involvement (Gordon, 1990; Horowitz, 1987). Today, women have not only been integrated into coeducational organizations, they also lead these organizations. However, knowledge of their leadership history provides a framework for understanding

some of the residual challenges women may still face when leading their male peers.

Although collegiate women have been integrated into these various student organizations at coeducational institutions, literature suggests that these women have very different university experiences than their colleagues in women-only institutions. For example, women attending coeducational institutions reported fewer faculty interactions, less self-understanding, and less support (Umbach, Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, & Kuh, 2003). In contrast, women at women-only colleges and universities are more career-driven, they pursue advanced degrees, and they stay in school (Riordan, 1994). These examples show the academic and professional differences of women in single-gender and coeducational universities.

When considering these differences, it is important to also address the role women play in leadership positions. Zenger Folkman (2011) found that women outscored men in 15 of 16 professional leadership functions and that "women were seen as better leaders at every level" (para. 3). Despite this, research conducted at Lipscomb University (2010) showed that women make up more than 47 percent of the workforce in the United States, yet comprise only 15% of executive, director, or board positions. A recent study from researchers at Princeton University found this to be true on college campuses as well, for "women, more than men, tend to hold behind-the-scenes positions or seek to make a difference outside of elected office in campus groups" (Stevens, 2011, para. 3).

While this information about women in leadership can prompt educators at coeducational institutions to

work towards offering opportunities for women that will provide them with successes similar to those of their counterparts at women-only institutions, previous research speaks only to women's overall experiences at institutions. Little research has been conducted to explore if leadership differences translate to other areas of engagement for women – specifically, differences in women-only and mixed-gender organizations. This prompted the question: What differences, if any, exist in the self-perceived leadership competencies of women in leadership positions in single-gender and mixed-gender organizations? This project uses the Social Change Model as a framework to identify whether women's leadership competencies vary within single- or mixed-gender environments. By determining collegiate women's perceptions of their own leadership, student affairs administrators and advisors will better understand how leadership is experienced and exercised by women. With this additional knowledge, appropriate support can be developed and extended to prepare collegiate women to lead in various environments. This work can be used to help collegiate women overcome barriers they might face as a result of incorrectly perceived incompetence while leading within a single- or mixed-gender environment. It may also encourage them to continue to persist and thrive despite the gender makeup of an organization.

### Literature Review

#### Women and Leadership

Leadership opportunities are present in professional or collegiate environments, yet women tend to be underrepresented in higher-level

professional leadership positions (U.S. Department of Labor, 2006). Gerber (1987) notes that leadership traits have often been associated with a masculine personality and researchers have explored how the social construct of gender has affected women's presence in leadership positions. Boatwright and Egidio (2003) found that although previous research suggested that women's need for supportive peer relationships might deter them from seeking out leadership positions, women with a strong, relational leadership style may be more intentional in seeking out leadership positions in order to maintain and increase those peer relationships. This idea of relational leadership is found in the post-industrial paradigm, which posits that leadership is based on relationships, is not exclusively positional, and is meant to create change (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). However, in environments that are more closely aligned with the industrial paradigm, that is, in environments that are patriarchal and hierarchical, women may be less likely to seek out leadership roles because of a fear of being negatively evaluated by peers or supervisors (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003).

The fear of negative evaluation is linked to both gender status beliefs and gender stereotypes (Ridgeway, 2004). Ridgeway (2004) states that because gender is easily "entwined in the processes of self-assertion, performance, evaluation, and influence by which people attain leadership and authority" (p. 644), the expectation of women's behavior in the workplace – and by extension, in student leadership positions – is impacted by the gender role norms and expectations of others. Yoder (2001) found that in male-dominated environments, women who adopt

stereotypically masculine strategies of leadership are disadvantaged and not as effective in their roles. In order to be considered more effective, women in male-dominated environments must mitigate the social status disadvantage that is confounded by gender by either enhancing their own status within the group or by minimizing the perceived status differentials between women and men (Yoder, 2001).

According to Renn and Lytle (2010), the decision to become involved in student leadership opportunities at women's colleges stemmed from encouragement from peers and advisors and created a desire to develop skills and make a difference in their environment. Student leadership experiences that fostered the development of interpersonal and communication skills, a sense of self-efficacy and responsibility, confidence, and self-esteem further sustained the women's desire to be involved (Renn & Lytle, 2010). Even in an all-female classroom setting within a coeducational institution, women emerged with greater skills in "working with groups, making decisions, communicating, understanding self and leadership" than women who participated in a similar but coeducational class (Thorpe, Cummins, & Townsend, 1998, p. 60). By further examining the differences between collegiate women's leadership competencies in single- and mixed-gender organizations, administrators and advisors can identify the support needed for women to diminish fears and more confidently lead in both single-gender and mixed-gender environments.

### **Social Change Model**

Several well-known theories have been developed to explore and explain leadership development in college

students. One of these theories, the Social Change Model, is based on research involving interactions with student leadership groups and effective leaders. The model encourages students to embrace “leadership as a *process*, rather than a position” (Komives & Wagner, 2009, p. xii). By using the model as a framework, students can better understand leadership as a value-based collaborative process involving themselves, their interactions in groups in which they are involved, and their contributions to the community or society.

The Social Change Model examines seven dimensions of leadership (see Table 1), which are grouped into three categories –Individual, Group, and Community – with the ultimate goal or outcome being change. The Individual category considers dimensions of Consciousness of Self, Congruence, and Commitment. Consciousness of Self describes an awareness of internal values that influence a leader’s actions. Congruence relates to the

consistency of action based on internal values, and Commitment describes the energy directed from the leader towards a purpose. The Group category includes the dimensions of Collaboration, Common Purpose, and Controversy with Civility. Collaboration is characterized by the leader’s ability to work with others towards the purpose, while Common Purpose describes the combination of collaborative action with shared values. Controversy with Civility describes the leader’s ability to value differences of approach or opinion while maintaining the vision of the group. With regard to the Community category, the final dimension is Citizenship. Citizenship represents the unification of individual and group dimensions and manifests as the identification with and action for a greater community. Each of the dimensions work together to create Change, an integral part of leadership as defined by authors of the model (HERI, 1996).

The Social Change Model has been used to examine leadership development

Social Change Function	Description
Consciousness of Self	Awareness of the beliefs, values, attitudes and emotions that motivate one to take action; consciousness of self is interdependent with congruence
Congruence	Thinking, feeling, and behaving with consistency, genuineness, authenticity, and honesty towards others; actions are consistent with their most deeply held beliefs and convictions; congruence is interdependent with consciousness of self
Commitment	Psychic energy that motivates the individual to serve and drives the collective effort; implies passion, intensity and duration; directed toward the group activity and its intended outcomes;
Collaboration	Work with others in a common effort; cornerstone value of the group leadership effort; empowers self and others through trust
Common Purpose	Work with shared aims and values; facilitates the group's ability to engage in collective analysis of issues and tasks at hand and the tasks to be undertaken
Controversy	Recognizes fundamental reality of any creative group effort; differences in viewpoint are inevitable and must be aired openly, but with civility, implying respect for others, a willingness to hear others' views, and the exercise of restraint in criticizing the views and actions of others
Citizenship	The process where an individual and group become responsibly connected to the community and the society through leadership development activity. To be a good citizen is to work for positive change on the behalf of others and the community
Change	Ability to adapt to environments and situations that are constantly evolving while maintaining the core functions of the group

Figure 1. Social Change Functions. Adapted from Dugan, Komives & Segar (2008).

among college students, specifically the differences across genders (Dugan, 2006). Researchers have found that women tended to employ a more democratic, relational approach to leadership while men “relied more on task-related behaviors” (Dugan, 2006, p. 218). While this finding informs this research study, it is limited in that it does not examine the differences of leadership among women, or how organizational environments can contribute to leadership development gains.

Utilizing the Social Change Model as a framework, the researchers aim to discover how women’s perceptions of their own leadership competencies vary in different student organization environments, specifically, in single- and mixed-gender organizations. Conducting the study at a large, coeducational institution implies that participants had a choice to join a wide variety of organizations whose membership may be single- or mixed-gender. Further, participants may have experience in both mixed- and single-gender organizations and be able to discuss why they chose to lead in the organizations from which the researchers selected them.

### **Organizational Environments**

Just as socially-constructed gender roles and gender stereotypes affect women’s leadership behavior (Ridgeway, 2004), socially constructed organizations can be greatly influenced by “powerful, external factors such as demographic, economic and political conditions” (Tierney, 1988, p. 3). However, organizations also possess an internal dynamic rooted in their own history and mission, as well as in the “values, processes, and goals” (Tierney, 1988, p. 3) held by those strongly involved in forming the organizational culture. In

particular, the way that leaders interpret their organization’s goals and values affect their understanding of the organizational culture (Tierney, 2008) and, thus, how it is viewed by members and others on campus.

The focus of this project will be on the organizational environment, whether static or dynamic, and specifically on the aspects of complexity, centralization, stratification, and morale as these most closely tie to the role of leadership and engagement within the organization. Complexity refers to the division of work and responsibilities, who is best suited for the tasks, and what their positions entail. Centralization involves the decision-making and power aspect of the organizational environment. The chain of command, the perks of positions, and status levels can describe stratification. Finally, morale can be a strong indicator of the success in the other components (Strange & Banning, 2001). Ultimately, are members happy to be a part of the organization? A high morale shows that members are invested and engaged. Understanding the organizational environment will allow stakeholders to manipulate structures in order to provide an environment that promotes effective leadership and significant engagement.

### **Methods**

#### **Site and Sample**

The sample for this study was comprised of women enrolled at a large, coeducational, public research institution in the Midwest, who are also executive board members in on-campus organizations. Some organizations were chosen because the researchers had previous exposure to the organization, while others were determined by identifying organizations that have a long-

standing reputation, or that have been a key component of student life on the campus where the study took place. The mixed-gender organizations include a student governing body, a residence hall governing body, and a programming board. The single-gender organizations include a women’s student governing body, a Greek council executive board, and an academic organization.

Participants were recruited via e-mail (see Appendix A) after collecting contact information from public leadership rosters. The recruitment e-mail was sent only to female leaders on the Executive Board, as defined by the individual organization. An additional invitation was sent to potential participants who failed to respond to the first invitation. Following confirmation of intent to participate, researchers were assigned to participants to independently

coordinate a two-on-one interview. Overall, 32 students from the six chosen organizations were contacted. Among the 13 students who responded to the email contacts, eight students were interviewed, three students declined and two students expressed interest but did not provide any availability.

Of the eight women who were interviewed, two were members of the Greek council Executive Board, one was a member of the academic organization, two were members of the residence hall governing body and three were a part of the student governing body (see Table 2). No members of the women’s student governing body or the programming board responded or participated. The participants included five seniors, one junior, and two sophomores. Seven of the participants identified as White and one participant identified as Asian. Three of

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Class Rank</b>
Allie	Women-Only : Academic	President	Senior
Sabrina	Women-Only : Greek Council Executive Board	President	Senior
Ellen	Women-Only : Greek Council Executive Board	Vice-President	Senior
Gwendolyn	Mixed-Residence Hall Governing Body	President	Senior
Katie	Mixed-Residence Hall Governing Body	Programming Director	Junior
Jessica	Mixed-Student Governing Body	Vice-President	Senior
Sally	Mixed-Student Governing Body	Co-Director of Outreach	Sophomore
Jenna	Mixed-Student Governing Body	Co-Director of Outreach	Sophomore

Figure 2. Human Subject Data

the participants were the presidents of their organizations, while other positions included vice-presidents, directors of outreach, and directors of programming.

### **Interview Questions and Self-Assessment**

Participants were asked about their leadership style using questions adapted from Haber's (2011) interview guide (see Appendix B). Since Haber's (2011) study looked at leadership experiences, influences, and motivations, the questions were adapted to include aspects that could provide insight into the participants' experiences as they related to their perceived competencies and the Social Change Model of Leadership. The initial questions were broad, addressing the student's involvement in the organization and their position's description. Subsequent questions addressed leadership style and perceived challenges and expectations of their role.

The self-assessment, loosely modeled after St. Cloud State University's (2011) Leadership Assessment questionnaire, included 24 statements corresponding to the eight dimensions of the Social Change Model of Leadership (see Appendix C). Each dimension is associated with three statements that are designed to identify which competencies positional leaders believe they possess. These questions were stated as fact (e.g. *I am passionate about my organization; I am comfortable adapting to new situations*) and participants ranked their perceived competency for each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (*Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*). Although participants were given the option to rank their competencies on a scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, participants only selected answers ranging from Neutral to Strongly Agree. The answers provided comparisons not

only across specific statements, but also across each of the eight dimensions, which address the specific competencies of the Social Change Model.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The interviews began with a pre-designed set of questions based on Haber's (2011) instrument, designed to understand the participant's perception of their leadership competency (See Appendix B). The interviewers were selected to avoid any potential bias based on affiliation with the organization (e.g., no graduate supervisor affiliated with a Greek organization interviewed a member of the Greek council's executive board). Responses were audio recorded using a laptop. In addition, handwritten notes were taken by one of the two interviewers. To ensure participant anonymity, each participant selected a pseudonym and listed their position title as well as indicated their membership in a participating organization based on organizational type (e.g., residence hall governing body). Position titles were also, as applicable, changed to general titles rather than organization-specific ones. This allowed researchers to identify participant information while protecting identities. After the interview, participants were asked to fill out a paper self-assessment ranking their personal perceived competencies in leadership qualities based on the eight dimensions of the Social Change Model of Leadership (see Appendix C). Audio files, handwritten notes and the self-assessment were logged electronically and filed based on the organization type and listed under the general position title to further protect participant anonymity.

Both the audio recordings and the interview notes were used in the data analysis of the interviews. The interview

data were coded for themes regarding leadership competencies using the process outlined by Creswell (2012). After a preliminary open coding of each interview by one researcher, all researchers used open coding across the interviews to find codes. From the original codes, the researchers further narrowed to identify broad themes across the interviews. Although the researchers primarily used the notes in the coding process, the audio recordings were used to supplement any shortcomings of the notes and to provide specific quotations. In addition, the self-assessments were examined to identify any significant similarities or differences between participants. The data from the self-assessments were then compared to the data gathered from the interviews to act as a supplement to the quotes provided by participants.

### **Limitations**

Due to the potential for human error in data collection and analysis, the researchers employed various methods to minimize limitations throughout the research process. First, the researchers had to confront the issue of having a research team comprised entirely of women who had been leaders in campus organizations and who recognized the potential for personal bias in the interview analysis. This fact may have served as an advantage as well, when considering the openness and honesty of those interviewed.

The next limitation was the fairly small sample size. Only eight students participated out of a sample of 32 students, yielding a response rate of 25%. In addition, only four organizations from about 750 organizations available on the institution's campus were represented in this study. This small sample may limit

the applicability of these results to more organizations or campuses. Three of the respondents were members of single-gender organizations, while the other five were members of mixed-gender organizations. This unequal balance could have skewed the obtained results. In addition, none of the participants were freshmen, which could be due to the emphasis on executive board members in the sample selection. The results may have been different if a higher number of younger students were included. Finally, the interviewed participants did not represent a racially diverse group of students. A sample consisting of women from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds may yield different results or have different leadership competencies. In addition, the use of a Likert scale on the self-assessment limited the variability in answers. Providing a different type of assessment could have allowed for a more nuanced assessment of leadership competencies among the participants.

### **Findings**

After reviewing all participants' responses to the interview questions and the leadership competencies self-assessment, various themes emerged related to how these women perceive themselves and their approach to leadership within their organizations. Throughout this section, the self-selected pseudonyms will be used to identify the eight participants of this study (see Table 2).

High levels of commitment to their organization existed among most of the women. Six of the eight participants indicated that they had been almost exclusively involved in their particular organization since arriving at the university, progressing from general

membership to increasingly higher leadership positions each year. When asked why they pursued their particular position, many of the women said that they were comfortable being a leader, having been involved in various leadership positions since high school. Six of the women stated that another leader within the organization mentored them and encouraged them to pursue further leadership opportunities. It is interesting to note that while the responsibilities of their particular positions varied in specificity, five of the eight women mentioned that either their responsibilities or the goals for their organization involved programming initiatives surrounding safety and security on campus. These initiatives particularly focused on women's safety and sexual assault.

### **The Role of Gender in Leadership**

All of the women commented on developing a particular leadership style because of their gender, with many comments reflecting development over time with components of Consciousness of Self and Controversy with Civility. One participant, Sabrina, stated that when she first worked with the president of the fraternity council, she felt less confident when leading along with him. Over time, she felt she developed more confidence and competence within her own organization and she realized that her leadership style differed from his. She now considers the two of them equals. Similarly, Jenna said that although she has been influenced by strong, independent women throughout her life, she has "learned not to become afraid of men." She used to feel like men knew more than her, but she has since realized that her opinions have value. The perceptions by both Sabrina and Jenna, that they initially

felt less competent compared to men in similar positions, is supported by the gender status research. Due to gender stereotypes, men are generally attributed with possessing more ability and competence in areas of leadership (Ridgeway, 2004).

Several of the women described needing to adopt certain behaviors when interacting with male leaders or members of their organization. Jessica, Gwendolyn, and Jenna, leaders of mixed-gender organizations, all indicated that they have felt a greater need to prove themselves to male leaders, or that they need to work harder to be taken seriously. Jessica said that she tries to have a leadership style that she feels is more masculine, and Gwendolyn chooses to be more assertive when interacting with people in her organization than she would be in daily life. When working with her male advisor, Sabrina said that she is not as emotional as she was with her previous advisor who was female.

Allie, who leads an all-female organization, stated that she does not want to be perceived as "aggressive or intimidating" but rather wants to lead more as a friend. Allie said that men may want to act more like leaders, rather than modestly keeping in mind that they are still members of a club or organization. This is a behavior that she has actively rejected in her leadership. Research has shown that women in leadership roles tend to be more concerned with interpersonal relationships, particularly because they may not want to be seen as dictatorial, while men tend to be more autocratic in their leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

Both Sabrina and Ellen, who are leaders on the Greek council executive board, described their leadership positions as being very personal to them.

Ellen explained it: "I take my position very personally, like I can't, like, I can't dissociate me with my position and so, and I think that's a very like girly thing to do, you know, I think guys are a lot less emotional that way." Similarly, Sabrina stated that leading her organization is an emotional experience, one her male counterparts would not understand.

### Self-Assessment

The data from the self-assessments were analyzed according to organizational type and reflected each component of the Social Change Model. The ratings help inform the self-perceptions of the participants in relation to their interview responses. While elements of each of the dimensions of the Social Change model emerged in the interviews with the participants, three of the seven dimensions – Consciousness of Self, Congruence, and Controversy with Civility – revealed differences in the leadership competencies between women in single-gender organizations and women in mixed-gender organizations.

**Consciousness of Self.** This competency explores whether women could identify the individual beliefs and talents that guided them in their leadership, as well as whether or not they attempted to develop into what they deemed an "appropriate leader." While the interview questions did not directly ask about Consciousness of Self, many of the responses from women in both groups touched upon ways in which they have experienced personal growth as a result of leading. In addition, the women's responses revealed ways in which they feel they have come to be strong leaders, based upon organization members' responses to their leadership styles, as

well as ways in which their values led them to pursue their specific position.

For the single-gender organizations, Sabrina expressed an understanding of what types of leadership roles were not suited for her, even if the decision to not pursue those roles was a difficult one. However, she embraced leadership roles that aligned with her personality. In the mixed-gender organizations, Jenna expressed her passion for working with students and placed a high value on student voices being heard. Similarly, Gwendolyn knew her strengths upon entering her leadership position and she knew that she could make a difference in her organization.

Based on the self-assessment, women from single-gender organizations tended to rank themselves as more competent in Consciousness of Self than their peers in mixed-gender organizations even though Consciousness of Self comments were more prevalent in the mixed-gender organization interviews. This difference was most evident for the statement *I identify and pursue opportunities for growth*, as women from single-gender organizations ranked themselves as high as possible while most women from mixed-gender organizations ranked themselves slightly lower. The five oldest women also ranked themselves as high as possible while younger women perceived their competencies in this area to be slightly lower. This could be because of less time spent in the institution and, inherently, fewer opportunities for personal growth.

**Congruence.** Women from both organizational types expressed some challenges to their sense of congruence within the context of the organization's expectations and their own leadership. Both Gwendolyn and Jenna remarked that

they modified their behavior, either personally or as a student leader, due to being held to a higher standard. Jessica and Gwendolyn also both stated that they have changed their inherent leadership behavior in order to present a certain image. Gwendolyn stated that she chose to be more assertive in her leadership, whereas Jessica said that she tries to adopt what she feels is a more masculine leadership style when working with male colleagues.

In contrast, women in single-gender organizations described embracing their natural leadership style. Ellen remarked that, occasionally, people do not take her seriously because of her leadership style but she acknowledges that she will not please everyone. Allie described her leadership style as being hands-off and that she has grown to be more comfortable with it since beginning her leadership position.

According to the self-assessment, women of single-gender organizations expressed a greater ability to act in a manner that reflects their personal thoughts and opinions as well as engage in honest communication. Women of mixed-gender organizations ranked themselves higher on the statement *I am authentic and genuine with others*. Nonetheless, women of single-gender organizations had a consistent rating for each statement and reported an overall higher level of agreement with the statements than women of mixed-gender organizations. For both organizational types, women felt most competent with being authentic and genuine with others and least competent regarding honesty.

**Controversy with Civility.** Sabrina, Ellen, and Allie, each from single-gender organizations, had similar comments about controversy within this dimension.

Ellen specifically identified that she does not enjoy confrontation but rather works to please people. All three women indicated that they see growth in themselves with regard to handling confrontation with others. The women in the single-gender organizations indicated a lower competency on two components within the self-assessment, specifically, *I engage in constructive criticism with members of my organization* and *I am prepared for others to have differing viewpoints in my organization* with the majority of the women answering with a Neutral response. By contrast, most of the women in the mixed-gender organizations ranked these statements as Agree. A possible explanation for this difference could be reflected in the fact that women in mixed-gender organizations previously referenced a lower incidence in collaboration, and therefore, may have more experience in handling controversy with civility. For example, Jessica referenced trying to actively work with a challenging colleague to figure out how to make their roles work better together. In contrast, women in single-gender organizations seek to please their group members and make sure everyone is happy, rather than work through conflict to a positive resolution.

**Change.** The Social Change Model operates with each of the seven dimensions working towards the ultimate goal of Change. Statements 22 through 24 of the self-assessment addressed principles of Change including personal and organizational adaptability and the organization as a change maker. Women of single-gender organizations identified greater competency regarding personal and organizational adaptability but women of mixed-gender organizations

reflected a higher competence concerning the organization's effort to create campus change. Overall, women of single-gender organizations expressed a higher competency regarding Change.

### Discussion

While the self-assessment cannot stand alone as proof of leadership competencies, it can be used to identify areas where the participants' ideas about their leadership competencies are similar to or different from how they act as leaders. It can also assist in examining how this plays into the single-gender or mixed-gender environment. For example, seven of the eight women indicated that they were passionate about their organization and that their leadership is quite personal to them. However, the women in single-gender organizations selected Strongly Agree to the statements *I am passionate about my organization* and *I am internally motivated to be a leader*. In contrast, the women from the mixed-gender organization had answers ranging from Neutral to Strongly Agree.

An important finding to take away from the self-assessment comes from the statement *I am comfortable collaborating with others on projects or events*. Each of the women in the single-gender organizations indicated that they Strongly Agree, while each of the women in the mixed-gender organizations indicated that they Agree. While many may argue that Strongly Agree and Agree are similar, the implications of their differences are great. Selecting Agree is an indication of agreeing with disbelief – meaning, “I am fairly certain I agree, but I can't be 100 percent sure.” Strongly Agree is a bold statement, indicating complete positivity and confidence. This finding aligns with Thorpe, Cummins, and Townsend's

(1998) finding that women in an all-female classroom setting had more skills regarding collaboration than peers in coeducational classes.

A general theme that can be taken away from the self-assessment lies in the type of statements that were ranked highest by the women in single-gender environments. The statements that appeared to be more collaborative, encouraging, and empowering of others were ranked as Strongly Agree. However, understanding differing viewpoints and criticism appears to be a consistent struggle for these women. While the women from single-gender environments indicated they can respect varying opinions, they had much lower self-ratings regarding engaging in constructive criticism with others and preparedness for others having differing viewpoints. In contrast, the women in the mixed-gender organizations indicated that these issues were easier to manage and resolve which aligns with their previous statements indicating that they have more experience in environments that are slightly more hostile or aggressive.

Another important theme surrounds the topic of Change. The assessment suggests that there is a disparity between the breadth of change that women in single-gender organizations and women in mixed-gender organizations are able to induce. Though women of single-gender organizations display a higher level of personal and organizational perceived competence, this does not translate to a confidence in creating higher level, systematic change. Women in mixed-gender organizations feel competent in the ability of their organization to create change, but they do not identify with personal and organizational skills related

to adaptability. This indicates a competency gap for women of both organization types as they appear unable to translate skill sets from individual to organizational levels.

### **Implications for Practice**

Despite the limited generalizability of this study to other institutions, there are implications that student affairs professionals can take away and apply. Multiple women in mixed-gender organizations mentioned the role of female mentors in the process of applying to leadership positions. By role modeling leadership and taking the time to mentor female students, female student affairs professionals can promote female leadership in mixed-gender organizations. Mixed-gender organizations can also promote this leadership by having female advisors easily accessible to women (e.g. other women who work in the same student affairs division). Some participants mentioned feeling less competent compared to male students in similar positions. Mixed-gender student organization advisors should keep this dynamic in mind during their advising efforts and may provide additional support to women in leadership roles. An important part of this research is the fact that some participants specifically mentioned a difficulty adjusting their leadership style around male leaders. - While all student affairs professionals can play a mentorship role, some may be better able to serve populations of various genders by going through training that addresses the differences student leaders experience in their various roles.

Although the results for many of the eight dimensions were similar for the women in mixed-gender and single-gender organizations, some differences

were found for the dimensions of Collaboration, Controversy with Civility, and Change. Women should be aware that joining a different type of organization may have an effect on the types of skills they gain through their participation. Being involved in both types of organizations may provide women the opportunity to gain a wider variety of skills. However, as women seek out leadership roles, advisors could provide insight into the types of skills more likely to be gained. If a woman is strongly interested in working collaboratively, she may be more comfortable joining a single-gender organization, which tends to promote collaboration. Women who enjoy exchanging viewpoints or who wish to gain more experience handling conflict may find these experiences in mixed-gender organizations.

### **Future Research**

Multiple future research projects can be identified based on the limitations of this project. This study could be repeated on other campuses with more participants in order to obtain results that are a better representation of the female population. In addition, this study focused specifically on executive board members, which may have led to a sample comprised entirely of upperclassmen. Including first year women and women not in positional leadership roles may provide a more comprehensive view of women's leadership competencies in single-gender and mixed-gender organizations.

As noted in the study, women in single-gender organizations ranked themselves much higher in the statement *I identify and pursue opportunities for growth* than their mixed-gender organization counterparts. Research that attempts to identify motivations for

growth, variances across organizations of single- or mixed-gender status, and in relation to gender is encouraged. Lastly, the focus of this study was on women. Findings in regard to the role of gender in leadership could be supplemented by including the perspective of male leaders in mixed-gender organizations. Some participants mentioned a belief that current leadership dynamics in their respective organizations were a result of personalities or the responsibilities of their position. Interviewing male leaders could help identify if this is a shared opinion across genders.

### Conclusion

It has been proven through research that women have different experiences in women-only institutions than they do in coeducational institutions (Smith, 1990). After identifying a gap in student affairs literature, researchers used qualitative methods to pursue a more complete understanding of women's experiences in leadership. Specifically, this study sought to examine whether the experiences and leadership competencies of women also differed in an organizational environment context, and utilized the Social Change Model as a framework.

Overall, some similarities and distinctions were identified in the leadership competencies of women in single-gender and mixed-gender organizations. Gender and gender stereotypes influenced leadership for these women, as some mentioned being intimidated by male leaders and needing to tailor their leadership style based on the gender of the person they were

working with. Additionally, collaboration played differently into their evaluations of their role within their organizations, with women's only organization leaders having positive reflections about collaboration, and mixed-gender leaders speaking less positively about the role of collaboration. Finally, in harmony with generalities made in previous literature about the woman leader's experience in single-gender institutions, women show more passion about their purpose, and more internal motivation, when engaging with other women, or when engaging in an environment that is dedicated to supporting achievement of women. Some small differences were identified through the participants' self-assessments; however, they are not prominent enough to generalize across organizations.

While the findings of this study may seem apparent, it is important to be reminded and informed of the challenges that young women face in leadership positions and how student affairs professionals can ease some of these struggles. Support of women in leadership can only occur when those in positions of authority are able to accept that experiences in varying environments impact leadership competencies. Those in an advisory capacity should remember that collaboration and frequent interaction with figures in authority have historically proven to engage the female leader on multiple levels. In addition, these findings can better inform practice on mentoring women in leadership roles as well as provide an understanding of external or internal barriers that female members may face in becoming leaders within their organizations.

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Appendix A

E-mail Recruitment Message

Invitation to Participate in Study of College Women's Leadership

Dear (insert student's name),

Your name was chosen due to your position as a student leader in (insert organization). Our group is conducting a study about how women's leadership styles relate to the types of campus organizations they lead and we would like your input. Participation in the study will only take about 45 minutes. You will be asked to fill out a short survey and will be interviewed about your role as a leader. When reporting findings, identifying information about you and your organization will be masked to protect the confidentiality of your responses.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please contact me at [mrlooney@indiana.edu](mailto:mrlooney@indiana.edu) and I will work with you to accommodate your schedule in scheduling an interview. All interviews need to be conducted by (two weeks from email date).

I have attached the study information sheet to this email for further review. Dr. Thomas F. Nelson Laird is the principal investigator this study. His contact information is available on the study information sheet if you have any additional questions. We look forward to hearing from you!

Thank you,  
Melissa Looney

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Describe the organizations that you are or have been involved in with and any formal leadership roles you now hold or have held in these organizations.
2. Tell me more about your position of (insert name of position) in (insert name of organization).
3. Why did you pursue this position?  
*Probing Questions:*
  - *What were your main motivations?*
  - *Was there anyone who influenced you?*
4. What are some of your goals for the position you currently hold? What are some of your goals for the organization?
5. Please describe your leadership style.  
5a. How would you describe how your leadership style has changed over time?
6. Please describe the ways in which you interact with the members in your group.  
*Probing Questions:*
  - *How do you best communicate with them?*
7. How do people react to your leadership?  
*Probing Questions:*
  - *Are members receptive?*
  - *How was the transition from member to leader?*
8. Do you believe people have certain expectations of you as a leader? Please explain.  
*Probing Questions:*
  - *How have these expectations influenced the way you lead?*
9. What are some challenges you have faced in your leadership role?  
*Probing Questions:*
  - *How have you dealt with these challenges?*
  - *How do you resolve conflict in your leadership role?*
  - *What have been some experiences you have had in adapting to change?*
  - *How would you describe your experience in adapting to change/lead your organization toward change?*
10. Based on what you have shared thus far, do you believe your gender has played a role in how you exercise leadership? Please explain why or why not.

Appendix C

Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_ Position Title \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Organization Type (Check One)

Year in College \_\_\_\_\_  Student Governing Body  Women's Student Governing Body

Major \_\_\_\_\_  Residence Hall Governing Body  Greek Council Executive Board

Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_  Programming Board  Academic Organization

Areas	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Consciousness of Self	I know my personal talents, values and interests					
	I identify and pursue opportunities for growth					
	I model appropriate behavior as a leader					
Congruence	The way I think and the way I act are closely matched					
	I am authentic and genuine with others					
	I am always honest with others					
Commitment	I am passionate about my organization					
	I am internally motivated to be a leader (positional or otherwise)					
	I devote time and energy towards organizational outcomes					
Collaboration	I am comfortable collaborating with others on projects or events					
	I appreciate multiple perspectives and talents					
	I enjoy empowering others					
Common Purpose	I enjoy working with others towards a goal					
	I believe the members in my organization should have a shared vision					
	I am happy to engage in collective analysis of problems and situations					
Controversy with Civility	I always respect others' views, even if I disagree with them					
	I engage in constructive criticism with members of my organization					
	I am prepared for others to have differing viewpoints in my organization					
Citizenship	I believe it is important to be engaged in the community					
	I encourage members in my organization to become active in the community					
	I work to be a good citizen and work for positive change on behalf of others					
Change	I am comfortable adapting to new situations					
	I can lead my organization even when things do not go as planned					
	I believe my organization strives to make changes on campus					