

## Following the Leaders: Examining Factors Contributing to Undergraduate Students Pursuing Campus Leadership Roles

Rachel Downey, Samantha Huang, Jill Romack, Maddie Stephens, & Bekka Zawisza

### Abstract

While nearly every campus has student leaders at some level, the ways those student leaders operate, the roles they have, and the traditions passed down in student leadership communities vary widely by the individual campus communities and their specific cultures. Understanding *who* becomes student leaders and *how* these leaders act is critical to understanding factors of a specific campus's culture. This qualitative study analyzed 140 questionnaires completed by undergraduate student leaders at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB). The results of these questionnaires were used to identify influences contributing to students becoming leaders and the demographic makeup of the undergraduate student leadership community compared to the larger undergraduate student demographic makeup of IUB. Findings suggest that the student leader demographics in the sample generally represent the demographics of IUB as a whole and opportunities for a variety of identity groups are present on campus. Overall, students are motivated to pursue leadership opportunities because of their desires to gain meaningful experiences and personal growth, to explore passion for the organization and subject area, and to become lifelong leaders who make meaningful change.

### Keywords

Undergraduate student leaders, leadership development, student involvement, student engagement, campus culture

### Suggested Citation

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### Following the Leaders: Examining Factors Contributing to Undergraduate Students Pursuing Campus Leadership Roles

Student leadership has been a hallmark of higher education campus communities since the earliest days of American higher education (Thelin, 2004). Campus involvement has long been shown to positively contribute to student success (Astin, 1984), and student leadership further contributes to student success as a subset of student involvement activities (American Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.). Campus communities highlight their student leaders on plaques, marketing publications, and in promotional videos. But what is a student leader? And which students become leaders?

The study of student leadership is important because student leaders are representative of key subcultures in the campus community (Kuh et al., 2001). Student leaders represent the voice of the larger student body to the administration in many ways: from formal student government association positions and amendments to more informal student events planned, concerns raised, and through the facilitation of community conversations. While student affairs professionals have a sizable influence on their communities, the student “leadership climate” of campus (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 6), is just as important as formal, professional campus leadership through administration and senior student affairs officers. While virtually every campus has student leaders at some level, the ways those student leaders operate, the roles they have, and the traditions passed down in student leadership communities vary widely by the individual campus communities and their specific cultures. College student leaders are both contributors to campus culture and products of their campus’s culture—they embody the artifacts (symbolic aspects of culture) and values (ideas espoused and enacted on campus) of the specific culture they are in, whether they know it or not (Renn & Patton, 2017). Studying this synergistic relationship between undergraduate student leadership and campus culture can also give invaluable insight into the differences in college student leadership across various demographics and identities. Ultimately, understanding *who* becomes student leaders and *how* these leaders act is critical to understanding factors of a specific campus’s culture. For these reasons, this research will examine the influences contributing to students becoming leaders and the demographic makeup of the student leadership community compared to the larger student demographic makeup of Indiana University Bloomington.

### Literature Review

#### Defining Student Leadership

“Undergraduate student leadership” is a term often used interchangeably or in close relation to other terms in student affairs literature such as: “student involvement,” “student engagement,” and “student voice” (Black et al., 2014, p. 6; Andrews & Crowther, 2006). Many definitions of leadership exist in literature with some scholars striving for concise definitions (Davis, 2003), while others grapple with the term’s broad complexity (Bass, 1990). Nevertheless, defining undergraduate student leadership is essential to assessing how this group intersects with campus culture and environment.

To conceptualize undergraduate student leadership, student affairs scholars have used developmental approaches and theories resulting in the creation of various developmental student leadership models. One of the first to take this approach was theorist Alexander Astin in his (1977) Theory of Student Involvement, where his Transformative Leadership Model outlined a definition of leadership as fostering change (Astin & Astin, 2000), promoting the tie between student development and leadership. As a field of study, student leadership has expanded substantially in higher education in the past three decades due to the expansion of campus leadership programs in higher education (Komives et al., 2011) as well as additional leadership models (Amiranzadeh, 2012; Amiranzadeh et al., 2010; Astin et al., 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Although there is still no distinct, commonly accepted definition of leadership at the collegiate level (Jenkins & Owen, 2016), there is general agreement that learning leadership transcends the formal classroom (Burns, 1995; Buschlen & Guthrie, 2014; Guthrie &

Jenkins, 2018) and that leadership learning outside of the classroom is equal in value to student leadership learning within the classroom (Buschlen & Guthrie, 2014; Nelson, 2010). Currently, leadership is still broadly defined but viewed as a relational process (Komives, 2007) where leaders and followers work together to achieve a shared objective (Northouse, 2019).

### **Leadership Across Demographics and Identity**

In considering the definition of leadership and its development as a relational process, we must also consider the ways in which individual and intersecting personal identities contribute to how a student views, practices, and engages with leadership. More recent scholarship looks to adapt foundational models of leadership to encompass “non-traditional” practices of leadership historically associated with and executed most often by minoritized groups. Examples include advocacy work, system challenging, liberation, and fostering fellowship (Harper & Kezar, 2021). Whether or not students consider themselves a leader and feel the confidence to practice leadership can be influenced by their identities and how those identities are perceived and embraced within their campus contexts. This phenomenon is outlined more fully in the culturally relevant leadership model which explores the relationship between leader identity, leader capacity, and leader efficacy (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021). As we assess IU’s student leadership population and consider their identities within our campus context, this is an important connection to make in discussion.

### **Leadership Identity Development Model**

A prominent leadership development model that has emerged from grounded theory that recognizes leadership as a relational process is the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model (Komives et al., 2006). This model has proved to be beneficial due to its focus on leadership as a complex and cyclical process where an individual develops their personal leadership identity, but also acts as a model that helps groups cultivate empowering environments for collective leadership identities (Komives et al., 2006). LID research shows how promising the model can be in positively impacting campus culture and environments (Komives and Sowcik, 2020; Priest and Paula, 2016; Martinez et al. 2020). Lastly, more recent literature of LID reveals that this complex and dynamic leadership model is still put into practice by skilled leadership educators today (Yamanaka et al., 2023) and that it can be strengthened when paired with critical theories and prospectives (McCarron et al., 2023).

### **Campus Environments and Leadership**

Much of the literature concerning campus environment indicates that information about individuals in a campus environment “informs the aggregate components of an environment” (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 52). Therefore, examining undergraduate student leadership through the LID model can help connect aspects of the campus environment, particularly the human aggregate, to the student leadership experience. Stages within the model specifically reference group influences as well as developmental influences which are often mentors, peers, advisors or other community members that make up the collective human aggregate of a campus (Komives et al., 2006). The LID model examines how those environmental factors can impact a student’s self-understanding and perceived leadership capacity (Komives et al., 2006).

Additionally, the LID model evaluates the collective leadership identities and personalities in an environment, which is essential to understanding the dominant features of the environment (Holland, 1973; Strange & Banning, 2015). Analyzing undergraduate student leaders reveals which types of student leaders experience a high level of congruence, or who shares the most in “common with the aggregate component of the environment” (Strange & Banning, 2015, p.74). This information gives researchers a sense of an environment’s satisfaction and stability. Overall, these connections are

important to make when studying a student's leadership development path as campus culture heavily influences the student experience.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study approaches student leadership from three key frames: the Leadership Identity Development model (Komives et al., 2006), Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984), and environmental theory (Strange & Banning, 2015). In considering these frameworks, this study assumes leadership is a process that can be taught, student leadership development occurs in stages, increased student involvement supports student success, campus environments impact student leaders, and social identities inform leadership practice.

#### **Leadership Identity Development Model**

The Leadership Identity Development model is a stage-based model that spans the development of a student through six main stages: 1) awareness, 2) explorations and engagement, 3) leader identified, 4) leadership differentiated, 5) generativity, and 6) integration and synthesis (Komives et al., 2006). The awareness stage involves a student recognizing that leadership is happening around them as they are getting exposure to different involvements (Komives et al., 2006). The exploration and engagement stage involves students assuming responsibilities and intentionally engaging with external groups as they build self-confidence (Komives et al., 2006). The leader identified stage involves a student taking new roles, achieving individual accomplishments, managing others, and learning to adjust their style (Komives et al., 2006). The leadership differentiated stage involves a student joining with others in shared goals, committing to the community of the group, and demonstrating trust in releasing control (Komives et al., 2006). The generativity stage involves a student accepting responsibility for the development of others (Komives et al., 2006). Finally, the integration and synthesis stage involves a student seeking congruence and internal confidence, while viewing leadership as a life-long learning process (Komives et al., 2006).

Each stage includes developmental influences and environmental factors such as strong group membership, learning about leadership, and mentors to assist students through their development and transitions. Although this is a stage-based model, development is complex, and its progression can be viewed as both linear and cyclical, meaning students can move through these stages multiple times and in multiple contexts, while also being influenced by these external factors (Komives et al., 2006). This framework is applicable to this study as it considers how identity plays a role in leadership practice in addition to external environmental factors. Furthermore, this study also recognizes participants may be in various stages of their leadership development. As students move through different experiences, they also adopt a deeper understanding of leadership.

#### **Student Involvement Theory**

Astin (1984) defined involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to their academic experience (as cited in Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The more involved a student is, the more successful they will be in college. Such investment of psychological and physical energy contributes to learning and educational effectiveness. At its core, involvement accounts for the time and energy that students spend but also acknowledges the contribution of their environments (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Astin coined the Input-Environment-Output model which helped define the relationship between personal energy investment, behavior, and environment in relation to retention and student success (outcomes) (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). This framework is useful to this study as involvement has been linked via research to almost every positive outcome of college and is foundational to most student leadership journeys. While involvement theory is a useful framework, it is

important to recognize valid critiques to its application. Scholars have aptly noted that the construct is more applicable to full-time, traditional age, and residential students (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

### **Environmental Theory**

Student leadership is also influenced by campus environments. Campus environments consist of, “the physical, psychological, and socially constructed spaces that shape the behaviors and experiences of those who lead, work, and study in colleges and universities” (Akens et al., 2019, p. 44). And conversely, the campus environment is molded by members of its community. Strange and Banning (2015) identified four interconnected components of the campus environment: 1) physical, 2) human aggregate, 3) social construction, and 4) organizational. This study closely examines the human aggregate and socially constructed dimensions of Indiana University Bloomington by examining a subpopulation on campus — student leaders — to assess insights related to participants’ perceptions of themselves, their campus environment, and how that might influence their overall involvement and behavior as student leaders.

A student is congruent with the campus environment if their type is nearly the same as the dominant type within the setting, and the degree of person-environment congruence can be predictive of a student’s attraction and satisfaction with the environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). Once in the environment, the student is likely to be encouraged for the behaviors, values, attitudes, and expectations that attracted the student to the environment, thus reinforcing person-environment similarities (Strange & Banning, 2015). While utilizing typologies to characterize student leaders can be reductionistic, it is beneficial to investigate the behaviors, values, attitudes, and expectations that attract students to the environments that house their student leadership roles and whether students perpetuate or are excluded by those characteristics. Student subcultures are known to have a significant influence over peer groups as well as maintaining and contributing to campus norms (Strange & Banning, 2015). In considering student leaders as their own subculture, this study is also examining a highly influential part of the campus environment.

### **Methods**

To answer the research questions, our instrument provided opportunities for students to share their perspectives and experiences to articulate their “how” of student leadership. For this reason, we decided to develop a qualitative questionnaire as our research instrument (Schuh, 2016). The open-ended nature of qualitative measurement allowed students to have a multi-faceted approach to the questions by building on their experiences and providing necessary context and stories. This allowed us to understand the students’ history, experience, and passion for campus leadership. Not only did this provide convenience for the researchers, but also for participants, as questionnaires allowed students to engage in the material in their own time and pace, communicating details that they are comfortable with without pressure from interviewers. Rather than conducting interviews or focus groups where students may or may not have felt comfortable fully expressing their experiences, our questionnaire asked students to disclose their perspectives anonymously. This allowed the student participants to authentically engage in the questions. For these reasons, a qualitative-style questionnaire suited this study best.

### **Detailed Description of Instrument**

The instrument is a questionnaire broken into two sections to allow our participants to logically move through the questionnaire, starting with providing their demographic information and ending with leadership questions. Introducing the types of questions before each section prepared students to reflect on their responses while they were answering. This also allowed us to articulate the purpose for

each section at the beginning to set expectations for participants when we were seeking more than a yes/no binary answer, to prompt comprehensive responses of their leadership experiences.

The demographic section asked questions about racial identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, geographic home, and year in school (United States Census Bureau, n.d.; “New Content for NSSE,” 2022). Considering relevant critiques, we utilized the National Survey of Student Engagement and the U.S. Census Bureau to write our demographic categories for consistent categorization in the field of higher education by matching two well-known and established demographic instruments. This not only helped us gauge if our participants fit into our questionnaire population, but also provided relevant information to our research questions about the leadership habits of specific student demographics. Collecting identity and demographic data in our questionnaire helped us better understand and perceive potential patterns.

The leadership section of the instrument focused on our participants’ leadership experience, self-awareness, and personal leadership identity (Komives et al., 2006). We asked our participants to explain what makes them student leaders and share general information about where they hold their positions and what these positions are called. These selections also answered our overarching research questions about how students become student leaders. We chose these questions because we were interested in students’ personal leadership development and how these experiences interacted with each other and general campus engagement. We intentionally examined the connection between personal leadership, student behavior, and campus culture (Komives et al., 2006; Strange & Banning, 2015), as well as personal leadership and individual development. We asked additional questions about how student leaders learned about their role(s), what led them to pursue their role(s), and if there are any other spaces on campus that they are interested in leading in that they are currently not leading in.

### **Participants**

For the purposes of this research, we defined student leader as an undergraduate student who holds a named leadership role in a registered student organization, or an undergraduate student employed by the institution in a relational and development-centered student employee position (Komives, 2007). This definition is broad enough to encompass all types of student organizations (including student government, athletics, Greek-affiliated, professional, and academic organizations, among others), as well as certain student employee roles. Some student employee roles were included in this study of student leadership due to the inherent student development and relational peer-to-peer leadership responsibilities of students employed as Resident Assistants, Orientation Team Members, IU Ambassadors, and student peer facilitators, among others (Allen & Cherrey, 2000, as cited in Komives et al., 2006; McEwen, 2003a, as cited in Komives et al., 2006).

These students are not only leading their peers by the nature of these paid roles, but they are also learning from developmental influences (Komives et al., 2006). Such influences like supervisors and student affairs professionals are ideally engaging in key development of these students as leaders through preparation for these roles. This student development includes training on university policies, interpersonal skills, conflict management techniques, and institutional resource use, all of which contribute to the student leader’s personal development and ability to lead others through their paid role(s) and elsewhere on campus. While these students may or may not involve themselves as named leaders in Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) or University Sponsored Organizations (USOs), they are engaging in developmental and relational leadership through their paid roles and are therefore included in the results of this study.

The demographic questions at the beginning of our instrument allowed us to determine which responses we evaluated. Any student who responded that they held a leadership position in a named RSO or USO or that were employed in what we defined as paid student leadership role responses were included in our analysis. However, we did not include respondents who indicated that they were

graduate students or enrolled in an IU campus other than Bloomington. We included respondents who served in either RSOs or paid employee roles, regardless of if they self-identified as a student leader or not. Although we have narrowed the definition of leadership here, we recognize that leadership is more than named leadership roles or paid leadership positions and that student leadership encompasses a larger philosophy than the scope of this study.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment for participants was achieved through intentional outreach in several forms: emails and newsletters to campus organizational leaders, recruitment flyers in high-traffic areas of campus, and distribution at strategic executive board meetings for student leaders. We began recruitment with targeted emails to all registered student organization presidents and vice presidents listed in BeInvolved, Indiana University's official system for managing student organizations on campus. This email list was received from the Student Involvement and Leadership Center (SILC) to ensure we had the most accurate data. Distribution to strategic groups included contacting directors in the Office of First-Year Experience Programs (FYE), Office of Residence Life, Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education (OVPUE), and all six culture centers. These units on campus manage groups that fit our definition of student leader for the purposes of this study and helped ensure our sample was representative of various subcultures of campus (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). Directors were provided with a summary of the study, a recruitment flyer, and our group's contact information to answer any questions. We also requested permission to post recruitment flyers in the physical spaces of these units. Finally, our group used word-of-mouth to recruit eligible student leaders within the authors' own networks.

Students were invited to participate through these means of outreach, however there was no incentive to participate (prize, advantage, or otherwise). Participation was completely voluntary. Messaging encouraged participation for the betterment of IU's community and to help future graduate and professional staff members to support student leaders on campus. After the first wave of communication was sent, follow-up outreach took place two weeks later as a reminder to elicit more responses. We considered responses from any undergraduate student leader enrolled at IU Bloomington who fit our previously stated definition of a student leader.

We recognize this study may have included some inherent risks to participants such as exposing personal identity questions, psychological trauma describing potential negative leadership experiences and exploitation, or pressure to participate from a supervisor or advisor. To address these risks, we carefully curated questions to be as inclusive as possible and made each question voluntary. Additionally, resources such as contacts for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and other care and support services were included in the conclusion message at the end of the questionnaire. Since we did not provide an incentive, there was no inherent reward for the study outside of executing an act of goodwill in contributing to a data project which will be used to help enhance the student leader experience at IU Bloomington. The disclosure of the contents of the questionnaire, the potential risks and benefits, and the measures to protect participant data are detailed in the Indiana University study information sheet for research.

### **Data Analysis**

To distill data, we removed 79 incomplete questionnaire responses and 24 responses from students who were not full-time undergraduate students. These respondents included part-time undergraduate students and graduate students. These students were not included in our sample as—for the purposes of our study—they are not members of our population. Students who did not answer some questions for part of the questionnaire but did engage with the rest of the questionnaire



remained in our data and may have impacted some results as blank respondents on some questions. This data remained because we allowed them to engage with our questionnaire at their comfort level.

To code the data, we focused on our qualitative questionnaire responses, and sorted data according to categories of response content. Q11: “Do you consider yourself a student leader? Why?” was coded in an initial umbrella response and then into the reasoning that the respondent provided regardless of the umbrella. Q17: “How long have you held each of your leadership positions?” was coded into more specific breakdowns within the first year of leadership, as a majority of respondents were within that timeframe to differentiate their service time. Q23: “Do you want to lead in more spaces?” was only coded into yes, no, or unsure, as there were no cohesive patterns to this data when students would select this umbrella response. See Table 1 for a comprehensive breakdown of coding categories per question.

**Table 1**  
*Method of Coding Data Per Question*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Coding</b>
Q8: Do you consider yourself a student leader? Why?	Yes No Unsure Holding a position Founding a club Academic leadership (classroom participation, project leadership) Student interaction Job/duty to lead, skill-based For the students/greater whole/change
Q14: How long have you held each of your leadership positions?	Less than 1 semester 1 semester Between 1 semester and 1 year 1 year 1-2 years 2+ years
Q17: How did you learn about your current leadership position?	Friends/acquaintances (within the organization or not) Was already in the organization, looking to rise up Created the organization Nominated/voluntold Email/professional recruitment Careers/involvement fair/BeInvolved/social media (IU or other)
Q18: What motivated you to pursue your position?	Personal values Gaining experience/resume boost Lifelong leader/want to make change Passion for the topic of the club/organization/position Being told they should Giving back/helping people Friends/social mobility Financial need/gain.
Q19: Do you want to lead in more spaces?	No Yes Unsure

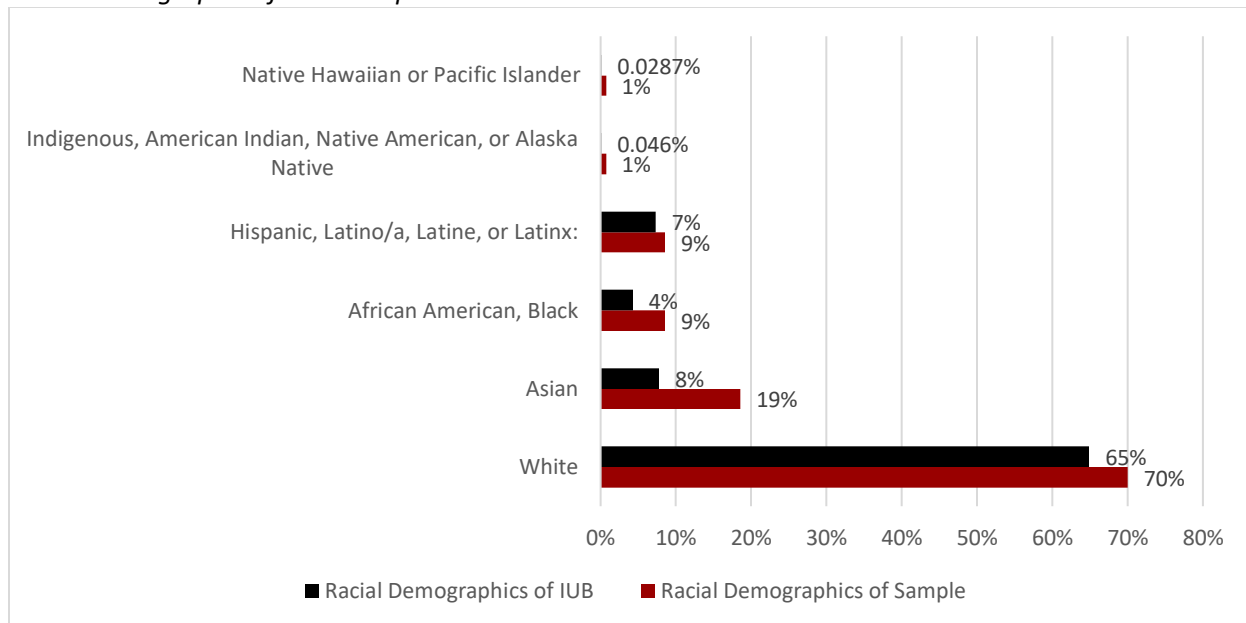
**Results**

**Demographic Results**

After removing unusable responses from the data, our questionnaire yielded 140 total responses from student leaders at Indiana University. All of these students, as dictated by our sample characteristics, were full-time, undergraduate student leaders at IUB. Because some of the questions within the instrument allowed responders to select multiple answers that apply, some answers have more than 140 responses. Percentage representations of these answers represent the percent for a certain answer group out of the total number of responses for that question, as per the coded responses listed in Table 1.

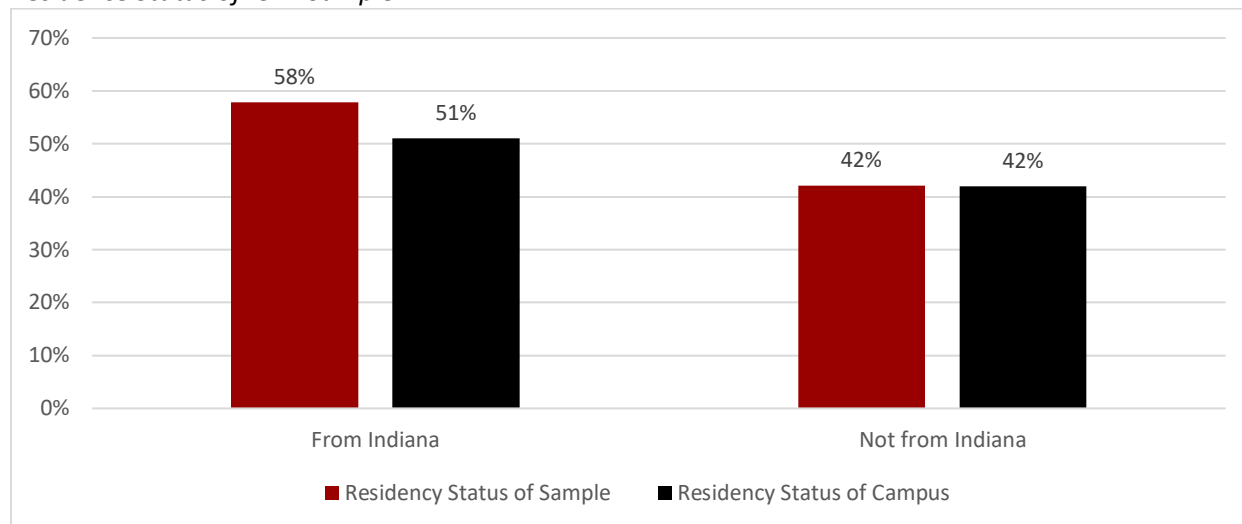
Out of the 140 responders, 70% of those students self-identified as white, and 58% are from the state of Indiana. 65% of respondents identified as a woman, meaning the largest demographic category of respondents were white women, whom there were 64 of the total or 46% of total respondents. 70% of students identified as being straight or heterosexual. Many of these percentages resemble the overall demographic breakdown of Indiana University as a whole, as displayed in Figure 1 and Figure 2 (Data USA, 2021). The majority (77%) of student respondents identified as being in either their third (40%) or fourth year (37%) at the institution, understandable since many student leadership roles are only open to students who have already participated in an organization or role for a certain amount of time. 1% of students said they were in their first year and 21% in their second.

**Figure 1**  
*Racial Demographic of IU v. Sample*



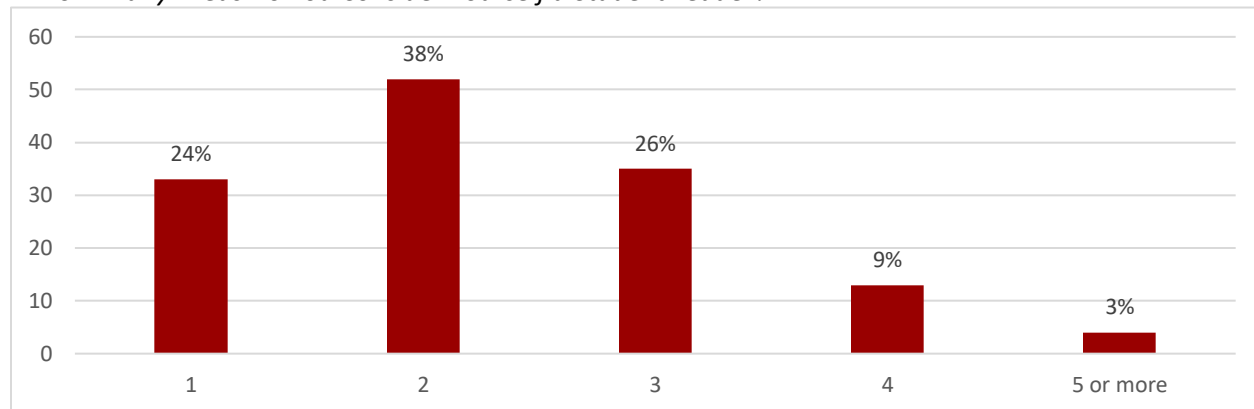
Note. IU Data from (Data USA, 2021).

**Figure 2**  
*Residence Status of IU v. Sample*



Note. IU Data from (Data USA, 2021).

**Figure 3**  
*In How Many Areas Do You Consider Yourself a Student Leader?*



### Leadership Results

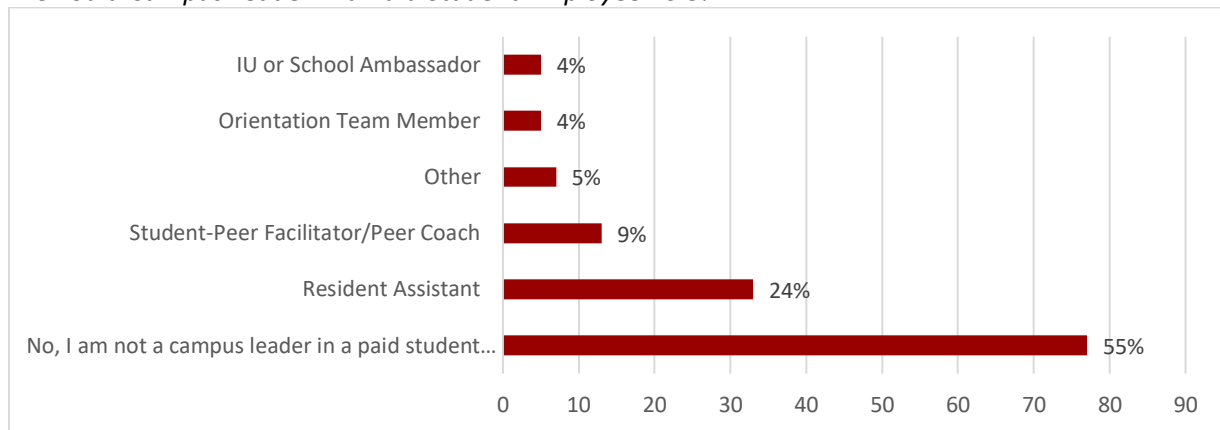
When asked the question “Do you consider yourself a student leader?” 91% of students responded that they do consider themselves a student leader. 6% indicated that they were unsure if they did or did not, and 3% did not consider themselves a student leader. Figure 3 shows responses for the follow-up question “In how many areas do you consider yourself a student leader,” 38% of students responded that they considered themselves a leader in 2 areas, 26% in 3, and 24% in only one area. The smallest amount was 5 or more, with only 3% of respondents indicating they were a leader in that many areas.

Next, we asked about the nature of the types of organizations these students were leading and involved in. Indiana University’s Student Involvement and Leadership Center has specific criteria for what constitutes a student organization and how these organizations function. When asked if the organization(s) they were involved in was a Registered Student Organization or University Sponsored Organization as defined by the SILC, 72% indicated that they were. 10% indicated that they were a part of some organizations that are USOs or RSOs, and one or more that are not. Next, we wanted to know

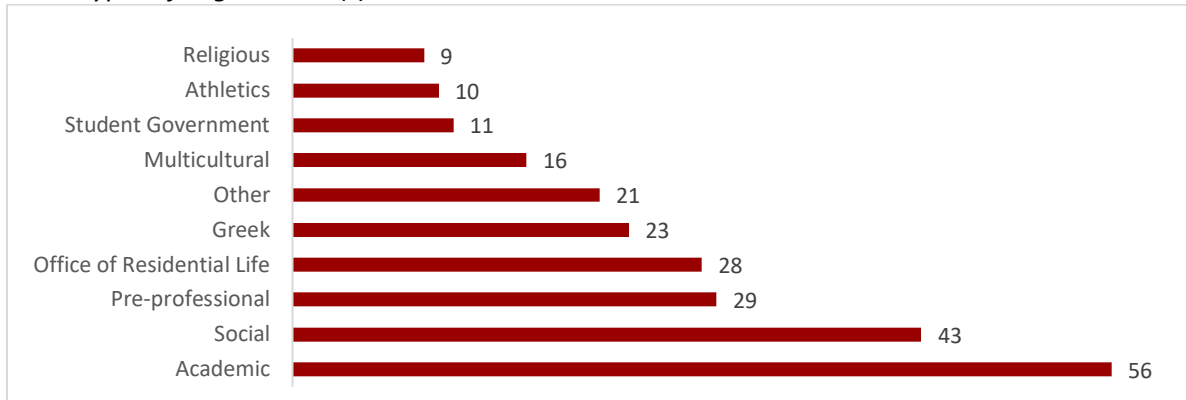
how many students considered themselves leaders in paid student employee roles. Although we provided some examples of common student employee positions on campus, we also allowed them to write-in other responses. As shown in Figure 4, 55% of students who responded to the questionnaire were not in paid employee roles, while 45% were. When asked in what types of organizations they lead in, 140 respondents replied with 246 total organization types, with many students selecting more than one type of organization in which they are involved. As shown in Figure 5, the largest organization types were Academic (56 respondents), and Social (43 respondents). The Pre-Professional and Office of Residence Life categories were similar, followed by lower numbers for the other organization types. Common write-in responses for which we did not provide a category included recreational or club sports (which we had intended to be included in the “Athletics” category, which at least some respondents did not understand), and volunteer/community service organizations.

To conclude the questionnaire, we hoped to gain a better understanding of how students heard about and became involved in their current leadership positions, the factors that motivated them to pursue those positions, and if there were particular spaces or organizations they wished to lead in but were not able to. As shown in Figure 6, 28% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they learned about their current position(s) because of prior involvement in the organizations, and 25% indicated that their friends and other acquaintances within the organization told them about the role(s) they now hold. When asked about their motivation to pursue their current positions, three main responses were repeated by respondents: their desire to gain experience and/or boost their resume (21%), their passion for their organization and/or its mission (20%), and their personal identity as a leader or wanting to make specific change within their club (20%). This is represented in Figure 7.

**Figure 4**  
*Are You a Campus Leader in a Paid Student Employee Role?*



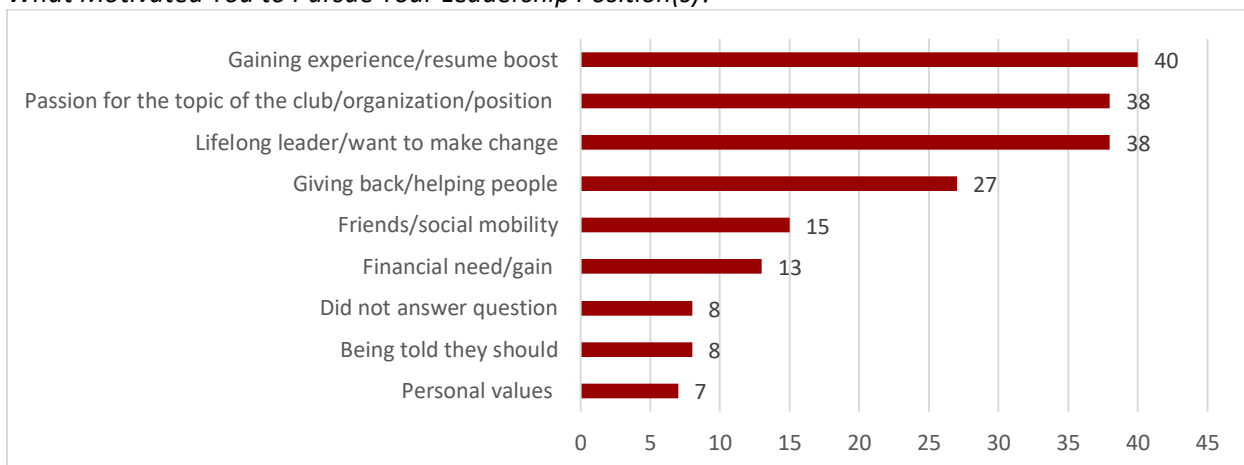
**Figure 5**  
*What Types of Organization(s) Do You Lead in?*



**Figure 6**  
*How Did You Learn About Your Current Leadership Position(s)?*



**Figure 7**  
*What Motivated You to Pursue Your Leadership Position(s)?*



### Discussion

Considering relevant results in tandem with our research question of “who becomes a student leader at IUB,” student leaders on IUB’s campus are both representative of a predominately white campus but also exhibit a decent level of racial diversity. 70% of participants identified as white, with the other 30% identifying as a racially minoritized group. Proportionally to the demographics of campus, this breakdown makes sense. Roughly 65% of students enrolled at IUB identify as white, so a sample that identifies as predominately white reflects campus enrollment (Data USA, 2021). However, to still have 30% of respondents identify with a racially minoritized group suggests those students are still practicing leadership in an environment that does not always provide adequate representation. Furthermore, IUB’s campus culture seems to provide space for racially minoritized students to seek out leadership positions despite being smaller in number. Of note, only about half of our multicultural student leaders are leading in explicitly multicultural student organizations and Greek life, meaning opportunity for these students exists in both in special interest, affinity groups and campus-wide serving organizations. This finding is noteworthy because it suggests those practicing leadership on campus are not limited by identity-based roles, nor does it seem their leadership efficacy is hindered to embrace those roles on campus (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021).

Continuing to assess who is leading on campus, 65% of participants selected woman for their gender identity, 31% of participants selected man, and 4% selected agender or gender neutral. This difference in response rate could be indicative of an over-representation of women in our sample. However, if this difference is representative of IU’s leadership subculture, woman identifying student leaders outpacing man identifying student leaders is an interesting finding considering the lack of women in leadership in the workforce (McKenzie, 2018). Investigating the woman student leader experience on IUB’s campus to assess what factors (be it campus environment or others) contribute to their success in practicing leadership could be a promising future study to learn more about this phenomenon.

It is also worth noting that the few students (12) who selected “no” or “unsure” in response to identifying themselves as a student leader, all identified as a woman. In contrast, all men who answered the questionnaire all assuredly self-identified as a leader. These responses speak to typical gender roles that have longstanding societal implications for who is and is not typically considered a leader. Furthermore, the women who answered “no” they are not a leader indicated in their responses that they did not associate acts of “helping others” or “serving as a resource” as student leadership. Failing to make that association suggests these students have not reached the generativity stage in their leadership development and cannot see how supporting the development of others is another key part of leadership (Komives et al., 2006). Although this is a small group within our limited sample, it is worth considering what types of leadership education IUB is offering to teach students the different acts of leadership in all its forms.

Other notable identifying characteristics include 83.6% of participants stating they were student leaders in high school and 16.4% stating they were not. It is interesting that those previously involved as student leaders in high school sought to continue that involvement in college. From a developmental standpoint, the ease with which a student can practice leadership and self-identify as a leader in college may very well be tied to how they identified in high school, making the first-year transition that much more integral to a student’s leadership trajectory. Essentially, the awareness and leader identified stages of development can happen for a student prior to arriving on campus and thus jump starting their path once enrolled (Komives et al., 2006). Furthermore, the socially constructed environment of campus encourages and reinforces the traditional type of student engagement through a plethora of student organizations and classic involvements (Strange & Banning, 2015). Because of this expectation, it makes sense that students who took part in that culture in high school reengaged with it in college.

In analyzing how and why students become leaders, most participants learned about their leadership position through 1) friends/acquaintances (within the organization or not) or 2) already being in the organization/looking to rise up. This finding emphasizes the importance of external encouragement to take on leadership roles. One respondent stated:

I learned about it my freshman year, I was at the freshman induction ceremony and the person giving the speech was the Student Body President at the time and I felt inspired by him. I then learned more about [the specific organization] through the activity fair and signed up for the first-year internship program. I was then paired directly with the president as his intern, and from there we spent a semester doing a deep dive on myself and the type of person and leader I am. This was a critical step in learning to become a leader, because how can I be expected to lead others when I did not know who I was?

Environmental factors like the presence of mentors to assist students through their development and transitions have always been highlighted in literature but the emphasis on peers and their influence can sometimes be lost in this discussion. Mentorship can present itself in several forms and based on our data, the act of serving as a mentor from a fellow student is just as impactful, especially when considering how students gain awareness of opportunities in large campus environments that have several subcultures, silos, and offerings.

Once aware of the opportunity, what motivated respondents to pursue their leadership position was most often 1) gaining experience/resume boost and 2) a desire to be a lifelong leader/wanting to make change. One participant stated:

I've always liked to stay busy, and in high school was involved in 3+ leadership positions as well. Not only does it provide a good academic/leadership aspect, it also has a social aspect that comes with being in a leadership role with others. Additionally, there is so much opportunity to talk about these positions during interviews and coffee chats to explain who you are and what you do.

These reasons reflect the dominant priorities for our sample and potentially a majority Generation Z student body (Perna, 2019). In considering the impact the coronavirus pandemic had on these students in high school and the early years of college, an increased emphasis on gaining experience makes sense, since so many previous opportunities were limited. This is further reinforced by the types of organizations these respondents are leading in: Academic (56 respondents), and Social (43 respondents). The Academic selection implies a desire to align their studies with practical career readiness experiences outside the classroom and reinforces our data linked to resume building. The Social selection speaks to this generation's need for community and peer engagement.

The second motivator identified—a desire to make change—can speak to this generation's limited agency through the past few years in the wake of a global shutdown as well as their lack of access to community building experiences. Research suggests Generation Z is more activist minded, with 65% of Gen Z wanting to personally create something world changing (Perna, 2019). Operating through that value lens seems to affect the motivating factors for student leadership as well. Furthermore, 55% of students who responded to the questionnaire were not in paid employee roles, while 45% were. This data reinforces our top motivating factors identified, rather than money or other influences driving student leader engagement. It is worth noting that further research may be needed to address whether those findings are more representative of who is *not* represented in the sample and thus not serving as a student leader for potential financial reasons.

Finally, most of the students in our sample only cited two or three areas of involvement where they identified themselves as student leaders. This data suggests more selectivity from IUB students in how and where they choose to invest their energy. When asked if there were other spaces or organizations on campus that respondents are interested in leading in, the majority of respondents replied with “no” or did not respond to the final question. Those that said “yes,” cited various limitations

like not knowing how to get in contact with the organization or not having enough free time to dedicate to another commitment.

### **Implications and Further Research**

This research study has implications concerning IUB undergraduate student leadership, particularly for student affairs practitioners on IUB's campus who wish to better understand and support undergraduate student leaders. Our study's findings give student affairs practitioners preliminary insight into the demographic makeup and characteristics of who becomes IUB undergraduate student leaders in what leadership areas. Our results raise an interesting question about person-environment congruence: How do we ensure diverse undergraduate students feel supported in pursuing and maintaining leadership roles? We recommend that student practitioners and researchers conduct deeper, and more targeted analyses of IUB's undergraduate student leaders' subgroups based on identity and/or shared characteristics to better understand which undergraduate student leaders experience the most person-environment congruence (Strange & Banning, 2015) and what factors cause the congruence within that leadership positions.

Additionally, we recommend student affairs practitioners use our results to help identify factors that contribute to undergraduate students' motivation to pursue leadership at IUB and potential barriers to IUB undergraduate student leadership experiences. For example, only a small portion of our sample size (about 9%) cited financial need/assistance as a motivating factor for seeking undergraduate student leadership positions, while most of the sample cited a resume boost, passion for a position, and the desire to instill change for their reasoning for pursuing undergraduate student leadership at IUB. In terms of how undergraduate students become connected to their current undergraduate student leadership position, it should also be mentioned that many students cited learning about their position via word of mouth from friends/acquaintances in and outside campus organizations. These findings suggest that IUB student affairs practitioners who wish to promote undergraduate student leadership opportunities to the majority of IUB undergraduate students should advertise the position widely through many formal and informal communication facets on campus so that students will be more likely to connect acquaintances/friends to the leadership positions advertised. Lastly, we recommend that IUB student affairs practitioners design and advertise these opportunities as resume-building experiences that not only pertain to student passions and interests but also allow students to become change agents within campus organizational structures to increase student involvement in undergraduate leadership. Overall, student affairs practitioners who wish to learn about IUB student leaders and/or design and implement future undergraduate leadership opportunities should utilize our research results as a starting point to further evaluate undergraduate student leadership opportunities on IUB's campus.

### **Limitations**

While our study yielded significant information about the demographics of IUB undergraduate student leaders as well as the factors that cause undergraduate students to pursue student leadership positions, there are ways our study could be improved. These improvements involve adjusting our data-gathering methodology and approaches to analyzing our data. For our data-gathering methods, our research team relied on convenient sampling in the first wave of distributing our questionnaire to offices and student groups we had direct connections to through our own campus employment/graduate assistantships. In our second distribution wave, the research team made a concentrated effort to distribute the survey to other groups of undergraduate student leaders on campus as well.

Still, because our research faced a time constraint, we were unable to distribute the questionnaire to certain groups of undergraduate student leaders on campus to widen and diversify our sample size even more. More time would have allowed our research team to cultivate stronger relationships and trust with such supervisors of undergraduate student leaders and other



undergraduate student leader gatekeepers. This established trust could have helped our team further distribute our questionnaire instrument more widely to even more types of student leaders on IUB's campus. Overall, casting a wider net for sampling through relationships with IUB's student affairs practitioners could have resulted in a more accurate sample of undergraduate student leadership on campus in addition to the 140 responses we analyzed.

Another potential limitation of the study is that the data gathered through our questionnaire instrument was self-reported. We acknowledge that self-reported answers allow for the possibility of exaggerated answers or missing details about the IUB leadership experience through social desirability bias or, where the respondents may feel the need to present themselves and their leadership practices favorably (Baldwin, 2000; Kopcha & Sullivan, 2007). The possibility of social desirability bias is compounded by our first distribution wave of convenience sampling. For instance, student leaders who completed our survey, such as Resident Assistants and Academic Peer Coaches, knew the researchers personally and potentially had more incentive to fill out the survey in a positive way. However, we believe there was no better group of individuals to report on the undergraduate student leadership experience than IUB undergraduate student leaders themselves. Overall, the possibility of bias is almost always present in research, and the research team's design and distribution of the questionnaire as well as data analysis was formulated to best mitigate any potential bias present in our study.

### Conclusion

Our study of Indiana University Bloomington undergraduate student leaders examined *who* student leaders are and *how* they are engaging with leadership as a relational process and personal identity. Findings suggest that the student leader demographics in our sample generally represent the demographics of IUB as a whole and that opportunities for a variety of identity groups are present. Students are motivated to pursue leadership opportunities because of a desire to gain meaningful experiences and personal growth, explore passion for the organization and subject area, and identity as a lifelong leader and desire to make meaningful change.

Based on the results of this study, we recommend student affairs practitioners consider *who* they are encouraging to become student leaders and the method by which they are reaching these students. Practitioners should understand the power their mentorship and encouragement has for undergraduates considering student leadership positions and should be conscious of the impact they have on undergraduates with whom they interact. Areas for further research include deeper consideration into the ways racially minoritized students do and do not pursue leadership roles, barriers to leadership roles on campuses, and additional motivating factors for students pursuing leadership roles.

Student affairs practitioners should continue to understand the importance of undergraduate student leadership roles on participating students and the campuses they lead on. Their impact on campus culture, the human aggregate environment, and individual student development highlights ways scholar-practitioners should think about the student leaders with whom they interact and the ways they encourage students to pursue leadership on their campus. As is often the case with student affairs, the way to best serve students is to *follow their lead*.

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