

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

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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Date: November 27, 2006
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Student Leaders, Opinion Change, Interactions, Discussion Types

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(ABSTRACT)

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

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

Data from the 2004 College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) (Pace, 1984) were used in the study. The CSEQ asks respondents about their involvement with leadership experiences and the degree to which they have influenced others' opinions and been influenced by others' opinions. Participants also report how often they have become

acquainted with or had discussions with other students who are different from themselves based on several characteristics. These characteristics referred to individuals who had different interests, philosophies of life or personal values, political opinions, religious beliefs, race or ethnic backgrounds, family backgrounds or were from different countries. Data were analyzed via logistic regression and t-tests.

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

Acknowledgements

I thank God for granting me favor to endure the challenges that came with pursuing this degree. I also owe a great amount of gratitude to many people who supported me throughout this venture. Obtaining this goal would not have been possible without the love and support of my family, committee members, colleagues and friends.

I thank my wonderful and loving parents, Franklin and Bettie Bennett, who taught me to persist after anything I wanted to accomplish, despite the challenges. I appreciate you for understanding what had to be done, and for giving me the time, space and support needed to accomplish my goal. Thank you for the sacrifices you made for me!

I thank my sister, Felecia Bennett-Giles and brother-in-law, Terrance Giles, for reminding me that this day would come as they often greeted me as “Dr. Bennett.” Sincere thanks to my brother, Dr. Jabbar R. Bennett, for not only leading the way toward obtaining a terminal degree, but for providing intellectual, emotional and financial support. Familial acknowledgments would not be complete without mentioning my deceased grandmother, Juanita B. Williams, who would be so proud to see another grandchild earn a Ph.D.

Thanks to my dissertation committee members, Drs. Joan B. Hirt, Steven M. Janosik, John A. Muffo and Terrell L. Strayhorn, who each played an important role throughout my time at Virginia Tech. Special thanks to my dissertation chair, Dr. Joan Hirt, for your patience, guidance, and diligence throughout my time in the HESA program, and for teaching me about conducting research, writing for publication and the profession in general. I am truly grateful!

Thank you Dr. Steve Janosik, for not only providing insights about my research

design, but for also teaching me a great deal about higher ed. law, policy and finance.

Special thanks to Dr. John Muffo, who extended many opportunities to me to intern and learn about assessment and the CSEQ data. I greatly appreciate your expertise, consistent support, and willingness to help shape my research and assessment skills!

To Dr. Terrell Strayhorn, my dissertation committee member, mentor, colleague and friend, thank you so much for your tireless efforts to hone my regression skills. Your love for research and ability to teach it made the process more enjoyable. Your devotion overwhelms me and will never be forgotten!

Special thanks to Dr. Don G. Creamer who served as a great advisor prior to his retirement; Steve Schneider, my previous GA supervisor, colleague and friend, who allowed me to create meaningful opportunities to support my professional development and interest in student leadership and assessment; Evelyn Leathers, whose support as a cohort buddy helped make my time at Virginia Tech more enjoyable; Dr. George Kuh and the CSEQ Research Program at Indiana University for use of the CSEQ data.

Sincere thanks to longtime friends, Andrea Jones, LaDawnya Turner, Toni Davis and Keir Dixon, who continuously supported and encouraged me even through my “disappearing act” over the last 4 years. Your love and prayers will not be forgotten.

Last but certainly not least, I must give special thanks to my fiancé, Dr. Forrest E. M. McFeeters. Thank you for your unwavering love and support. You were often the first and sometimes the only person to know about my every challenge, but you always knew how to keep me on track. Thanks for caring so much and for keeping me laughing especially when I really needed it. To All: This accomplishment proves that it pays to always think positive, be persistent and remain faithful!

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