

**A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP LEARNING
OUTCOMES FROM STUDY ABROAD AND THE CLIFTON
STRENGTHSFINDER ASSESSMENT**

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

College campuses are challenged with developing leaders. Universities create formal leadership programs for students to develop their leadership prowess. It is critical for universities to be aware of the outcomes of student experiences when implementing programming. The purpose of this study is to describe the leadership learning outcomes of The Maroon & White Leadership Fellows who participated in a study abroad or Clifton StrengthsFinder experience. Qualitative research methods were used to complete this study. Data were provided by, The Maroon & White Leadership program, a student leadership program at Texas A&M University through written or oral guided reflections. A blended framework encompassing Kolb's model of experiential learning and the Leadership Identity Development model was created to evaluate the student learning outcomes.

The first phase of this study evaluated leadership learning outcomes of students who completed study abroad as an education experience within The Maroon & White Leadership program. Emergent themes were cultural awareness, leadership understanding, understanding of the role of a leader, self-awareness, awareness of future benefits of studying abroad, and benefits of diversity. The results suggest that leadership learning outcomes of students who participate in study abroad are tangible, yet different, than learning outcomes of students who participate in study abroad as part of a differing curriculum.

The second phase of this study evaluated leadership learning outcomes of students who completed a Clifton StrengthsFinder workshop as a training experience within The Maroon & White Leadership program. Self-awareness, understanding of the role of a leader, understanding the value of knowing one's strengths, and development of one's personal leadership identity emerged as themes. It can be determined from these results that students gain leadership knowledge from participating in a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience and completing an accompanying guided reflection.

DEDICATION

To little kids who ask too many questions and Chick-Fil-A.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my work with student leadership development, I often teach about virtues. I have narrowed down my top virtues with students numerous times, and the results are always a bit different except for two: acceptance and gratitude. As someone who tries to live up to these virtues, I often find myself mulling over the proper way to show my gratitude to others. Too often I fail at showing my appreciation, and too often words fail. Here is my best attempt at displaying a morsel of the gratitude that is owed.

The past eighteen months would have not been possible without a caring, passionate, and willing group of individuals who have stood by me through this time.

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The data were provided for analysis by Texas A&M University's Division of Student Affairs. All work for the thesis was completed independently by the student.

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INTRODUCTION

Societal challenges, whether it be social, political, or environmental, we will face in the future are unknown. The one certainty is that our nation's response to these challenges will be determined by the quality of leadership that exists (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000). The next generation of societal challenges will take a new generation of leaders. For many young adults, their first exposure to leadership roles and decisions exist on college campuses surrounded by thousands of their peers. Foundationally, leadership is defined as a means to foster change (Astin & Astin, 2000). Rather than the term of "management" which is related to maintenance, "leadership" is geared towards movement and progress. College campuses are charged with developing progressive leaders at a rate like never before.

However, this is not a new concept. Observing leadership development in college students is one of the oldest lines of leadership inquiry (Stogdill, 1948). From looking at traits surrounding college-aged leaders in the early 1900s to analyzing collegiate leadership opportunities, students consistently pursue leadership roles. Students in the 21st century are aware that leadership is a process which must be developed rather than achieved (Dugan & Komives, 2007). With this knowledge, students are more aware and willing to involve themselves in leadership opportunities. The quality and quantity of leadership experiences that exist today vary greatly. College students on campuses today are pursuing leadership opportunities at a growing rate with a push from universities and the rise in the competitiveness of the job market.

When considering involvement on a college campus, students who are drawn to careers in public service, the military, or business may already understand the importance of involvement in leadership development (Astin & Astin, 2000). However, students who are pursuing a career in other areas may question the value and importance of leadership involvement during their time at a university.

College students involved in leadership programming show the largest growth in leadership efficacy and consciousness of self, awareness of values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate people between freshman and senior year (Dugan & Komives, 2007). The same study shows in terms of gender that women student leaders are more likely to grow in socially responsible leadership and men are more likely to grow in leadership efficacy. In short, women show more competence in leadership, yet men show more confidence in their leadership ability (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

As college campuses grow to reflect the increasingly diverse population, a unique set of skills is required to navigate the undergraduate experience and beyond (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998). Universities are rising to the challenge to prepare their students for the changing global climate by making institutional goals relating to student awareness, acceptance, and leadership (University of Florida, 2018; Texas A&M University, 2018). Numerous aspects of life that form a student's identity—age, marital status, financial resources, and first-generation status—allow them to grow in one's leadership capacity without being engaged in leadership experiences on a college campus (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000).

The foundation of self-awareness for students can be developed through leadership activities and programming (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Students have the opportunity to participate in leadership programming through numerous avenues. Student leadership programs are housed at universities within the divisions of Student Affairs, divisions of Academic Affairs, academic departments, and other entities (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000). A study examining 14,000 seniors found that 46% of students had never served in a positional leadership role, 27% served in some positional leadership roles, and 27% had many positional leadership roles (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

According to Dugan and Komives (2007), involvement in leadership-related experiences accounts for a large portion of leadership development throughout a student's college experience. Students involved in activities including campus involvement, positional leadership roles, utilizing a mentor, and participating in service activities show a large growth in leadership capacity over time while in college (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Students who are involved in formal leadership programming, including attending a single leadership workshop, show significantly higher leadership outcomes compared to those without training (Dugan & Komives, 2007). However, the duration of the formalized leadership program does not have a significant difference in outcomes.

Context of the Study

Leadership development is often a focus of higher education institutions (Astin & Astin, 2000). Texas A&M University, as a whole, has a purpose statement with a clear

connection to leadership development, “to develop leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good” (Texas A&M University, 2018, para. 1). Leadership development at TAMU is a further priority as it is one of seven core values its faculty and staff, current and former students are challenged to exemplify.

Students are able to develop leadership skills while at a university through participation in activities like positional leadership roles, campus involvement, and participating in formal leadership programming (Dugan & Komives, 2007). TAMU has a formal leadership program within the division of Student Affairs with learning outcomes of critical thinking, effective communication, personal and social responsibility, social, cultural, and global competence, lifelong learning, and collaborative learning named The Maroon & White Leadership program (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018).

The Maroon & White Leadership program aims to, “guide participants in developing their identity as leaders through engaging in leadership development, education, and training while at Texas A&M University” (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018, para. 1). Students who are participating in The Maroon & White Leadership program process are referred to as The Maroon & White Leadership Fellows. Once they have met all of the requirements to complete the program, the students inducted into The Maroon & White Leadership Society.

To be eligible for The Maroon & White Leadership Program, students must have at least a 2.25 GPA, be in good academic standing with TAMU, and be enrolled in at least six credit hours (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018). Once admitted

students then commence to participate in their leadership experiences. To meet requirements for The Maroon & White Leadership Society, students must complete eight leadership experiences within the development, education, and training designators and complete an oral or written reflection. Written reflections entail students answering a series of questions related to their experience's designator. Oral reflections are discussions facilitated by the coach which are then transcribed and synthesized by the coach. Participants are matched with a leadership coach, faculty or staff from TAMU, who evaluate the student's development throughout their time in the program. The conceptual framework of the program is based on the Leadership Identity Development model. Since The Maroon & White Leadership program began in 2014, 51 students have completed all eight leadership experiences and reflections and have joined The Maroon & White Leadership Society.

As with many aspects of leadership, clear boundaries of experiences are challenging to articulate. The Maroon & White Leadership program divides experiences into leadership training, leadership education, and leadership development (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018; Allen & Shehane, 2016). Leadership learning is the outcome of all experiences. According to Allen and Shehane (2016), leadership learning is defined as, "shifts in knowledge, behavior personal insights or consciousness as a result of educational experiences associated with the activity of leadership" (p. 40). Students are required to participate in at least one program in each of the designators.

Leadership development is solely focused on individual growth. Leadership development is defined as, “new insights and progression, which can include an individual’s motivations, values, identity, emotions, and potential in relation to the activity of leadership” (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 43). Activities that relate to leadership development include, “reflection, small group dialogue, and journaling” (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 43). Programming included in leadership development include elected leadership positions, organizational roles, and involvement in organizations.

Leadership training is defined as, “proficiency in demonstrating specific skills associated with the activity of leadership” (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 43). Even though there is a lack of agreement of which skills should be focused on, skills including time management and conflict management are examples of skills that can be developed through training exercises. Activities that fall under the training designator include conferences, workshops, and online webinars.

Leadership education is defined as, “the process of facilitating learning via planned and naturalistic experiences associated with the activity of leadership” (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 41). Leadership education differs from leadership learning. Leadership learning occurs on an individual basis; whereas, leadership education happens on a group-level. Leadership education encompasses “formal/structured to informal/unstructured interventions” (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 41). Experiences that are considered within the education designator include leadership courses or classes, and study abroad.

While a breadth of student leadership research exists, there is a lack of understanding of the outcomes of particular experiences. To better equip universities with an understanding of student leadership development, research must progress into looking at the effectiveness of popular student experiences. Within The Maroon & White Leadership program, two activities are participated in most frequently. Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experiences are participated in most frequently with 28 out of 51 students participating. Study abroad is selected second most frequently with 16 students participating. Due to the voluntary selection of both of these experiences by students, it is imperative that these two experiences are evaluated for effectiveness when experienced within the context of leadership.

Individual Study Purposes & Methodologies

Qualitative methods were used to carry out the research purpose in this thesis. The purpose of this study, as a whole, was to describe the leadership learning outcomes of The Maroon & White Leadership Fellows who participated in a study abroad or a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience. This study aimed to provide an understanding of the effectiveness of popular student experiences within The Maroon & White Leadership program.

Article One

The purpose of the first article of this study was to evaluate the leadership outcomes of The Maroon & White Leadership program for students who have completed a study abroad experience under the leadership education designator as part of their eight program experiences. A purposive sample of 16 students who completed a study abroad

was selected. The students generated 16 reflections that were used as the data for the study.

This article was completed within the qualitative paradigm. Content analysis was conducted on confidential student reflections. Reflections from the students included written reflections that were drafted by the student or oral reflections that were synthesized by their leadership coach. Open coding was used for analysis of the data. The constant comparative method was then used to allow common themes to emerge.

Article Two

The purpose of the second article was to evaluate the leadership outcomes of The Maroon & White Leadership Society students who have completed a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience under the leadership education designator as part of their eight program experiences. A purposive sample of 28 students who completed a strengths-related workshop was selected for this study. The sample of students generated 33 reflections ($n = 33$) that were used as data for the study.

The second article was completed within the qualitative research paradigm using content analysis. Written or synthesized oral reflections were analyzed through open coding. The constant comparative method was used to allow common themes to develop.

Theoretical Framework

A blended framework encompassing Kolb's model of experiential learning and the leadership identity development model served as the framework for this study. According to Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2006), the LID

model links the process of student development with perspectives of leadership development. The theory behind the model explains the process in which a student develops their personal leadership identity. The theory was developed by interviewing a sample of students who exemplified qualities of relational leadership to uncover the process by which they established their leadership identity (Komives et al., 2006).

The theory generated a LID model that is used to show the progress of students moving from awareness to integration/synthesis (Komives et al., 2006). The LID model is stage-based and linear, yet cyclical allowing students to repeat and revisit stages as learning assimilates. The six stages that have been identified as leadership constructs are: awareness, when the student realizes leadership is happening around them; exploration/engagement, intentional involvement; leader identified, trying on new roles and practicing different leadership approaches or styles; leadership differentiated, commitment to those around them; generativity, active commitment to a personal passion; and integration/synthesis, continued self-development and life-long learning (Komives et al., 2006). In The Maroon & White Leadership program, students are guided with the assistance of a coach as they progress from exploration/engagement towards integration/synthesis. To ensure that the progression is more linear than cyclical, experiences students participate in must range in depth and content.

While the program was developed using the LID model as the forefront for students to progress in personal leadership development, the experiences that students engage in, including the written or oral reflections, follow the framework of Kolb's model of experiential learning.

Experiential learning can be loosely defined as learning from life experience compared to lecture or classroom learning (Kolb, 2015). Kolb's model of experiential learning connects two dimensions of cognitive growth: the active-reflection dimension and the concrete-abstract dimension (Sugarman, 1985). The two dimensions meet in a four-stage, cyclical process of effective learning. The stages are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

According to Kolb (2015), concrete experience occurs when students are able to "involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences" (p. 42). The next stage of reflective observation is when students, "reflect on and observe their experiences from multiple perspectives" (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Abstract conceptualization occurs when students, "create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories" (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Finally, in active experimentation, students "must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems" (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Research has confirmed the validity of Kolb's cyclical model of the learning process (Sugarman, 1985).

Within The Maroon & White Leadership program, students are guided through the first three stages of Kolb's model of experiential learning. Students participate in concrete experience when they participate in a leadership event within the training, education, or development designators. Written and oral reflections allow students to actively reflect on their experience from multiple perspectives with the help of probing questions. This stage and the next stage of the Kolb's model is where students are actively progressing through the stages of the LID model (Figure 1). Students are then

guided to the integration of their experience with leadership theories through questions challenging them to solidify potentially abstract connections. With the three guided stages, students are then given the opportunity to implement their knowledge in the concrete experimentation stage as they continue their college experience and post-college career.

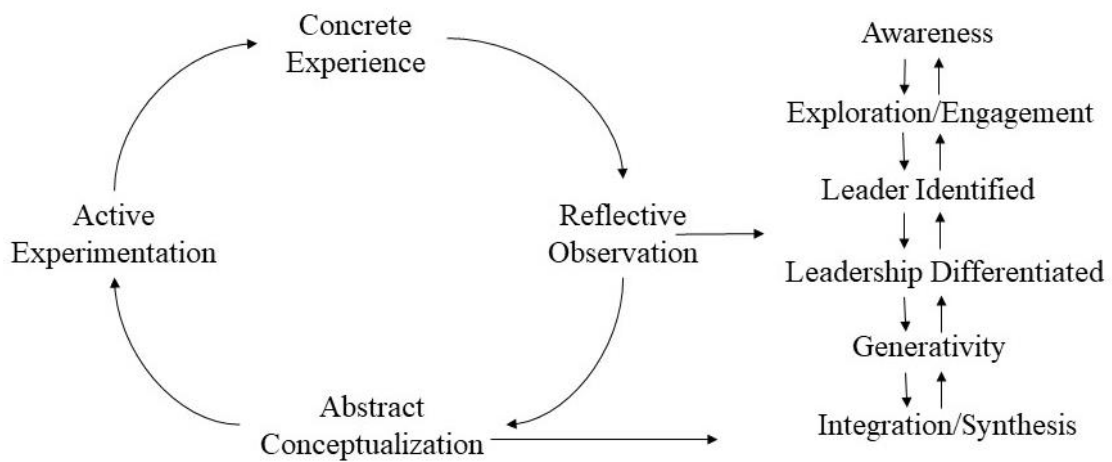


Figure 1. Theoretical framework adapted from Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 2015) and the Leadership Identity Development model (Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006)

**A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF LEADERSHIP LEARNING
OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS IN THE MAROON & WHITE LEADERSHIP
PROGRAM AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY WHO STUDY ABROAD**

Overview

With the pressures of globalization, there is an increased need for globally competent college graduates (NAFSA, 2018). Students are engaged in study abroad to gain international insight. Student affairs programs, like The Maroon & White Leadership program, are capitalizing on study abroad as a means to accomplish leadership development in their students. As of 2018, 10% of U.S. college graduates will have studied abroad (NAFSA, 2018). The increase in popularity among students is reflected in the literature; however, student learning outcomes are not explored at the same rate. This study sought to examine the leadership learning outcomes of students who participate in a study abroad and complete a leadership-oriented reflection on their experience for The Maroon & White Leadership program. The study found that students who complete a study abroad and the subsequent experiences report cultural awareness, leadership understanding, understanding of the role of a leader, self-awareness, awareness of future benefits of studying abroad, and benefits of diversity as leadership learning outcomes.

Background and Literature Review

Observing leadership qualities in college students is one of the oldest lines of leadership inquiry (Stogdill, 1948). However, as the needs of society have changed the

quality and quantity of leadership programming on college campuses has also changed. According to Dugan and Komives (2007), college students involved in leadership programming show the largest growth in leadership efficacy and consciousness of self, awareness of values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate people between freshman and senior year. College students in the 21st century are aware that leadership is developed rather than achieved. This awareness is increasing the rate of student engagement in leadership activities while attending a university. With this increased interest and the abstract nature of leadership, this often leads to leadership faculty and programmers being unable to clarify what constitutes a leadership experience and what leadership qualities students should be learning.

One model that has been developed to guide leadership education is the student leadership competencies. According to Seemiller (2014), leadership competencies outline “what students need to know, believe, be able to do, and engage in to be effective leaders in colleges, in their careers, and in society” (p. xv). For those involved in leadership programming, leadership competencies provide a framework for designing programming that is both useful and intentional. The competencies were developed through analysis and comparison of student leadership theory and models to learning outcomes of graduate academic programs.

Further research has shown that there are several factors that affect student leadership competency development including: “1) individual factors including emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and extroversion, 2) student experiences and involvement including academic involvement, student-faculty

relationship, peer relationship, leadership position in class and in student organization, and 3) college environment” (Mozghan, Parivash, Nadergholi, & Jowkard, 2011, p. 1616). College students involved in leadership programming show the largest growth in leadership efficacy and consciousness of self, awareness of values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate people between freshman and senior year (Dugan & Komives, 2007). The same study shows in terms of gender that women student leaders are more likely to grow in socially responsible leadership and men are more likely to grow in leadership efficacy. In short, women show more competence in leadership, yet men show more confidence in their leadership ability.

The 60 student leadership competency areas fit into eight categories: learning and reasoning, self-awareness and development, interpersonal interaction, group dynamics, civic responsibility, communication, strategic planning, and personal behavior (Seemiller, 2014). The competency category of learning and reasoning refers to leaders being able to distinguish and create useful, legitimate information that is pertinent to the situation. Self-awareness and development refers to a leader understanding, “his or her feelings, beliefs, actions, skills, and personality, how he or she can emphasize strengths and mitigate weaknesses in his or her leadership style and lead with more authenticity” (Seemiller, 2014, p. 23). Interpersonal interaction relates to leaders who create mutually beneficial interactions with fellow leaders and followers. The competency area of group dynamic includes skills that leaders need to anticipate, activate, and create responses that exist within an organization and develop the leadership skills necessary to navigate in that organizational context. Civic responsibility as a student leadership competency

category includes perspectives and skills necessary to lead in times where backgrounds, beliefs, or experiences may vary. The competency area of communication includes the skills leaders need to be able to communicate effectively, both verbally and non-verbally. Strategic planning refers to the ability to align with the values and goals of an individual or organization. The final leadership category area is personal behavior which entails leaders motivating and creating leaders through their individual leadership style (Seemiller, 2014).

Each of the competency areas includes four competencies that reflect each of the following dimensions: knowledge, understanding of the value of the competency; value, knowing the value of the competency; ability, internal motivation to engage in a behavior; behavior, engagement in the behavior.

The student leadership competencies are a “toolbox” (Seemiller, 2014, p. xx). It should not be a goal to have every student develop every competency. The focus of programming should be to have each student “develop the competencies they may need to use more frequently or more effectively than others” (Seemiller, 2014, p. xx). Situations exist where students need certain competencies more than others or multiple competencies at the same time.

Students participate in activities on campus to develop their leadership potential. While formal leadership programming exists within numerous avenues on campus, students have the ability to develop their leadership prowess through experiences that are not directly connected to leadership coursework, events, or activities. Many universities

use high-impact educational practices to develop students' leadership potential outside of the realm of leadership programming or courses.

According to Kuh (2008, p. 7), a high-impact educational practice is a “purposeful pathway” to meet essential learning outcomes of a curricular, co-curricular or pedagogical practice. Many universities, including TAMU, encourage students to engage in high-impact practices. These experiences include first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments or projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, internships, and capstone courses or projects. Study abroad is a high-impact educational practice under the domain of diversity/global learning. Kuh has found that senior students self-reported outcomes from study abroad of deep learning, general and personal gains (2008).

With planning, travel expenses, advisors, and program development, study abroad is an expensive and resource intensive program for universities. However, it is estimated that study abroad participation grows at a rate of four percent each year (NAFSA, 2018).

With 95% of global consumers being located outside of the United States, there is an increasing need for globally competent and globally confident students (NAFSA, 2018). According to the Association of International Educators (2018), 40% of companies' surveyed reported missing international business opportunities due to a lack of internationally competent employees.

In the United States, 10% of college graduates will have participated in a study abroad (NAFSA, 2018). Of the 10% of U.S. university graduates who study abroad, 57.6% of students self-reported as Caucasian, 17.3% of students are Hispanic, and 14.1% of students are African American or Black. The top three most popular regions students travel to as of 2015-2016 are Europe, 54.4%, Latin America, 16.9%, and Asia, 11.1%.

Study abroad has major implications both socially and economically. The length of stay of students who participate in study abroad is typically much longer than tourist travel (Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye, 2011). Research shows that student motivation into studying abroad is affected by two major factors: entertainment at destination and quality of housing in the destination (Anderson, Hubbard, & Lawton, 2015). This intrinsic link of motivation often encourages students to travel to locations based off of interest versus the best location possible for the course content or student learning. Engaging destinations and the increase in students who engage in study abroad are appealing to students and universities alike (Anderson, Hubbard, & Lawton, 2015).

According to Sutton and Rubin (2004), the rate of student participation in study abroad is an indicator of overall institutional quality. Due to the decentralized nature of the U.S. higher education system, participation in study abroad varies greatly among universities (NAFSA, 2018).

Texas A&M University's Study Abroad Program Office's mission statement is to:

Support Texas A&M University's commitment to develop global leaders through transformational opportunities abroad. We engage students, faculty, and staff to participate in high-quality international experiences and prepare the A&M community for a diverse society. (Texas A&M University, 2018)

At TAMU, 5,539 students participated in a study abroad program in the 2016-2017 school year (Texas A&M University, 2018). From this population at TAMU, the most common student characteristics studying abroad are: white, female, undergraduates, not the first in their family to attend college, family makes more than \$80,000 a year, in the College of Liberal Arts (Texas A&M University, 2018). As one in 12 students at TAMU participates in a study abroad, potential leadership learning outcomes may serve as an effective incentive for students to participate.

Study abroad, as with most institutional programs that are heavily invested in, are examined in regards to input measures (SAT scores of students, faculty credentials, resource availability and allocation) and output measures (student retention and graduation rates) (Wellman, 2001). Some universities followed the shift in education to outcome assessment specifically when evaluating study abroad on their campuses (Williams, 2005). This approach "stresses learner outputs in place of teacher inputs" (Fantini, Arias-Galicia, & Guay, 2001, p. 4). Outcome assessment has students connect concepts from their learning into skills and find concrete uses for their skills in life

(Williams, 2005). Regardless of the trend, few studies examine study abroad in the context of general learning outcomes in comparison to studies who examine input and output measures.

The existing research shows that study abroad programs, regardless of length, have resulted in general learning outcomes of their students (Sutton & Rubin, 2004). Students who participate in study abroad graduate with a greater functional knowledge, knowledge of global interdependence, knowledge of cultural relativism, verbal acumen, knowledge of world geography, interpersonal accommodation, and cultural sensitivity in comparison to students who do not complete a study abroad.

Through the lens of global engagement, long-term impacts of students who participate in study abroad include civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and voluntary simplicity (Paige, Fry, Stalman, Josic, & Jon, 2009). This longitudinal study also shows students also reported an impact on future career choice from their study abroad experience.

A study at Michigan State University found that students reported impact on personal growth, intercultural growth, career development, language learning, and academic performance (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). While some of these knowledge points have a generic overlap with leadership competencies, there is a lack of leadership perspective gained by students adequately covered in the literature.

Evidence exists that students develop leadership qualities through collegiate experiences (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Regarding the overlap between study abroad and leadership programming, student leaders often are challenged to leave their comfort

zone. Many student leadership competency areas are challenging to achieve domestically (Seemiller, 2014). This desire to improve in aspects of leadership development can drive students to study abroad and gain differing perspectives.

Overall, there is a lack of understanding of which experiences students engage in that prove to be most effective to improve leadership learning and to develop leadership competencies. Also, there is a lack in depth of knowledge of what leadership-minded students gain from participating in study abroad with a reflection component. Due to this knowledge gap, this study seeks to specifically examine the leadership learning outcomes in college students from involvement in study abroad experiences through reflection.

Theoretical Framework

A blended framework combining Kolb's model of experiential learning and the LID model was used for this study (Figure 1). The LID model, derived from the LID theory, is the framework for The Maroon & White Leadership program. According to Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2006), the LID model links the process of student development with perspectives of leadership development. The theory behind the model explains the process in which a student develops their personal leadership identity. The theory was developed by interviewing a sample of students who exemplified qualities of relational leadership to uncover the process by which they established their leadership identity (Komives et al., 2006).

The theory generated a LID model that is used to show the progress of students moving from awareness to integration/synthesis (Komives et al., 2006). The LID model

is stage-based and linear, yet cyclical allowing students to repeat and revisit stages as learning assimilates. The six stages that have been identified as leadership constructs are: awareness, when the student realizes leadership is happening around them; exploration/engagement, intentional involvement; leader identified, trying on new roles and practicing different leadership approaches or styles; leadership differentiated, commitment to those around them; generativity, active commitment to a personal passion; and integration/synthesis, continued self-development and life-long learning (Komives et al., 2006). In The Maroon & White Leadership program, students are guided with the assistance of a coach as they progress from exploration/engagement towards integration/synthesis. To ensure that the progression is more linear than cyclical, experiences students participate in must range in depth and content. In this study, the reflection questions students' answer in the written form and the conversations students have with their coach are framed around the LID model.

Experiential learning is learning that happens from life (Kolb, 2015). Kolb's model of experiential learning explains the process that guides students to progress through the stages of the LID model. Kolb's model of experiential learning connects two dimensions of cognitive growth: the active-reflection dimension and the concrete-abstract dimension (Sugarman, 1985). The two dimensions meet in a four-stage, cyclical process of effective learning. The stages are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

According to Kolb (2015), concrete experience occurs when students are able to "involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences" (p. 42). The

next stage of reflective observation is when students, “reflect on and observe their experiences from multiple perspectives” (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Abstract conceptualization occurs when students, “create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories” (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Finally, in active experimentation, students “must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems” (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Research has confirmed the validity of Kolb’s cyclical model of the learning process (Sugarman, 1985).

In this study, students participate in a study abroad which is the concrete experience stage. Then, students complete a written reflection allowing them to reflect on their experience from differing perspectives. Students are able to draw connections from their reflection to life opportunities in the third stage of abstract conceptualization. Finally, beyond this study, students have the ability after making connections to implement their knowledge into real life experiences.

Purpose

A breadth of research exists examining student success and institutional quality relating to study abroad (Wellman, 2001). There is a lack of gravity of research into the learning outcomes of students who have completed a study abroad. A gap in the research exists of learning outcomes related to a leadership framework of students who study abroad. Due to this gap, this study seeks to examine what undergraduate students gain from participating in a study abroad within the topic of leadership outcomes.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the leadership outcomes of The Maroon & White Leadership program for students who have completed a study abroad

experience under the leadership education designator as part of their eight program experiences.

The research question addressed was the following:

RQ1 – What leadership competencies do students gain by participating in a study abroad experience through The Maroon & White Leadership program?

Methodology

Study Context

Leadership development is often a focus of higher education institutions (Astin & Astin, 2000). Texas A&M University, as a whole, has a purpose statement with a clear connection to leadership development, “to develop leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good” (Texas A&M University, 2018, para. 1). Leadership development at TAMU is a further priority as it is one of seven core values its faculty and staff, current and former students are challenged to exemplify.

TAMU has a formal leadership program within the division of Student Affairs with learning outcomes of critical thinking, effective communication, personal and social responsibility, social, cultural, and global competence, lifelong learning, and collaborative learning named The Maroon & White Leadership program (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018).

The Maroon & White Leadership program aims to, “guide participants in developing their identity as leaders through engaging in leadership development, education, and training while at Texas A&M University” (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018). Students who are participating in The Maroon & White

Leadership program process are referred to as The Maroon & White Leadership Fellows. Once they have met all of the requirements to complete the program, the students are referred to as The Maroon & White Leadership Society.

To be eligible for The Maroon & White Leadership program, students must have at least a 2.25 GPA, be in good academic standing with TAMU, and be enrolled in at least six credit hours (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018). Once admitted to meet requirements for The Maroon & White Leadership Society, students participate in eight leadership experiences within the development, education, and training designators. These are captured in an oral or written reflection.

Written reflections entail students answering a series of questions related to their experience's designator. Oral reflections are discussions facilitated by the coach which are then transcribed and synthesized by the coach. Participants are matched with a leadership coach, faculty or staff from TAMU, who evaluate the student's development throughout their time in the program. The conceptual framework of the program is based on the Leadership Identity Development model. To be inducted into The Maroon & White Leadership society, students must have completed eight leadership experiences with varying complexity and topic and a written or oral reflection. Since The Maroon & White Leadership program's inception in 2014, 51 students have been inducted into The Maroon & White Leadership society.

As with many aspects of leadership, clear boundaries of experiences are challenging to articulate. The Maroon & White Leadership program divides experiences into leadership training, leadership education, and leadership development (The Maroon

& White Leadership program, 2018; Allen & Shehane, 2016). Leadership learning is the outcome of all experiences. According to Allen & Shehane (2016), leadership learning is defined as, “shifts in knowledge, behavior personal insights or consciousness as a result of educational experiences associated with the activity of leadership” (p. 40). Students are required to participate in at least one program in each of the designators.

Leadership education is defined as, “the process of facilitating learning via planned and naturalistic experiences associated with the activity of leadership” (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 41). Leadership education differs from leader education. Leadership learning occurs on an individual basis; whereas, leadership education happens on a group-level. Leadership education encompasses “formal/structured to informal/unstructured interventions” (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 41). Experiences that are considered within the education designator include leadership courses or classes, and study abroad.

Within The Maroon & White Leadership program out of the recommended experiences, 16 students participated in a study abroad experience as a part of their programming out of a population of 51 students who have successfully completed all aspects of the program (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018). Since The Maroon & White Leadership program began, study abroad has been the second most popular experience students’ reported. Students participate in study abroad through any department at TAMU. As study abroad is one of the approved experiences, it counts as one of the eight program experiences.

Research Approach and Analysis

This study was conducted using content analysis within the qualitative paradigm. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), qualitative research is “the study of things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Within this paradigm, qualitative content analysis “focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Two forms of reflections were analyzed for this study: student’s written reflections and the transcription and synthesis of student’s oral reflections by coaches. According to Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), reflection is, “intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences to lead to new understanding and appreciation” (p. 19).

After approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board, the Division of Student Affairs provided confidential student reflections to the researcher for open coding to begin (Strauss, 1987). Common themes were established using the constant comparative method. According to Glaser (1965), the constant comparative method has “four stages: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory” (p. 439). Six common themes emerged after analysis.

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) concepts of dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability were used to establish and maintain trustworthiness. Dependability and confirmability show how consistent results are with data and can be achieved

simultaneously (Merriam, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish both, I employed an external audit by a credible peer who is in the first year of her Ph.D. program. She is interested in and familiar with the content of my study and has taken a qualitative research course (Creswell, 2003). Peer-debriefing memos were also created and shared with peers to establish dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability and credibility, an audit trail of initial data analysis and respondent codes was maintained throughout data analysis. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 125), the best way to ensure the possibility of transferability is to create “a thick description of the sending context so that someone in a potential receiving context may assess the similarity between them and the study.” In regards to transferability, rich, thick description was used through the detailed description of the study context and findings through quotes from student reflections.

“The function of the qualitative research during data gathering is clearly to maintain vigorous interpretation” (Stake, 1995, p. 9). In regards to researcher reflexivity, it should be known that I, as the researcher, have a background in leadership education with a Bachelor’s degree in leadership and am completing this research as a part of my pursuit of a Master’s degree with an emphasis in leadership. I participated in student leadership development, both personally and professionally, for over 10 years. I have a positive bias towards formal leadership programming and a prior belief that leadership can be learned. To mitigate this impact, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research project to identify inevitable biases that may have influenced my interpretation of the data.

A sample (Merriam, 2009) of 16 students who studied abroad from The Maroon & White Leadership Society was selected. Most students were female (87.5%; 14 students) and a few were male (12.5%; 2 students). The race of students is as follows: white, 62.5%, 10 students; multi-racial excluding black, 12.5%, 2 students; Hispanic or Latino of any race, 12.5%, 2 students; international, 6.2%, 1 student; and Asian, 6.2%, 1 student. These students were selected from the 51 students who have qualified for the The Maroon & White Leadership Society. The 16 students generated 16 reflections (n = 16) that were used as data for this study.

Study abroad was purposively selected from The Maroon & White Leadership program experience list as the second most popular selection, only following Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experiences, and due to its increasing popularity and emphasis on college campuses.

Each student was given a pseudonym by The Maroon & White Leadership program staff (Table 1). This pseudonym indicates gender of each student. Also, each student's experience number was identified. The experience number gives insight into how far along each student was in The Maroon & White Leadership program out of the eight required experiences to be inducted into The Maroon & White Leadership Society.

Table 1. Pseudonyms of students who completed a study abroad

Pseudonym	Experience number out of 8	Pseudonym	Experience number out of 8
Kayla	6	Susan	7
Chesney	7	Mary	3
Lauren	5	Selena	8
Lindsay	4	Claire	4
Josh	5	Kyle	9
Kendall	5	Angelica	1
Michelle	7	Heather	8
Meghan	8	Andrea	2

The study abroad written reflection had students describe the following points: the experience, the leadership model or theory that relates to the experience, the relevance of the experience in a leadership context, future implications of the experience, and personal change that came from the experience.

For the oral reflections, students prepare their thoughts regarding their experience and discuss it with their coach, a faculty or staff member at TAMU, from The Maroon & White Leadership program. Coaches guide the conversation and synthesize the conversation into notes under six categories. Regardless of the topic, the evaluation categories for the oral reflections are: (a) description, (b) reflection on growth, (c) reflection on leadership, (d) expression of thought, (e) complete overall rating.

Results and Findings

Six themes emerged as learning outcomes by the students or synthesized by their coach in an oral reflection: cultural awareness, leadership understanding, the role of a leader, self-awareness, future benefits, and benefits of diversity.

Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness as a theme included the sub-themes of students' perspective on countries, cultural nuances, and American culture. This theme was reported as a tie for most common with nine students (Lindsay, Chesney, Kayla, Kyle, Josh, Angelica, Kendall, Michelle, Susan) alluding to its qualities. Josh felt comfortable forming a differing opinion about the country they traveled to. Josh said, "Before leaving for China, I would have thought that Asian styles of leadership would be more direct and could appear offensive."

Students gained an understanding of cultural nuances during their time abroad. According to Angelica "The notion of time isn't as highly respected as here in the U.S. Similarly, the way of communicating information in this culture [of Qatar] is not as direct as the U.S."

Michelle went on to add, "Through my various interactions I learned the morals and values of the Ghanaian people which is [*sic*] not all that different than the cultural norms of the U.S."

Numerous students had realizations about the United States during their time abroad. These realizations ranged from gaining an outside perspective on American culture to reevaluating the freedoms found in America.

Chesney said:

Not everyone is a fan of loud American tourists wandering around, and the looks our group received from the locals were not always very

inviting. I completely understood this as I would feel the same way if my community was often invaded by tourists.

Michelle added, “I also recognized the small privileges I have back home in Texas that I take advantage of like bug spray to keep mosquitos at bay or instant hot water.”

Leadership Understanding

Students had realizations that took leadership from an abstract concept to a tangible experience under the theme of leadership understanding. This theme includes the sub-themes of understanding the abstract concept of leadership, the leader and follower dichotomy, and the role of diversity in leadership. Leadership understanding also had nine students (Lindsay, Chesney, Josh, Angelica, Kendall, Michelle, Andrea, Susan, Selena) report its characteristics.

Lindsay came to terms with the abstract nature of leadership:

However, by reflecting on opportunities such as my study abroad, I realized that leadership is ongoing and continuous. It is a concept and so much more than *just* a role. Leadership can be present even in an experience that does not necessarily have leadership positions.

Another concept that was concreted for students was the importance of followership. Chesney learned, “Although Texas A&M teaches the core value of leadership, not many realize that sometimes you can be a good leader by being a good follower.”

While abroad, a piece of global learning that was achieved was the role that diversity can play in leadership. Angelica said, “Because no matter how many ‘leadership qualities’ we develop if we are not inclusive of different cultures, backgrounds, and religions, we fail.”

Role of a Leader

The role of a leader theme includes sub-themes of the importance of having a leadership style and culture’s role in being a leader. Students engaged in leadership education experiences often take assessments to understand their leadership styles. Seven students (Lindsay, Claire, Josh, Kendall, Michelle, Chesney, Susan) included their perspective on the role of leaders. Students engaged in a study abroad gained a different perspective on varying leadership styles. Josh said, “If a leader did not understand how culture and history can affect an individual’s leadership style there will be a disconnect.”

Michelle continued on this topic, “I am more critical in deciding which leadership style will work for each situation and [knowing that] not one leadership style will work for each situation.”

Culture’s role in leadership was mentioned by Kendall, “As nations and people grow closer, it is essential that leaders are capable of not only working on a basic level with all cultures but also fully grasping the power of multiculturalism.” Susan said, “There are multiple ways to reach the goal/end result and it is important that the cross-cultural leader have cultural awareness for their own values and leadership style in addition to other cultures.”

Self-awareness

Students reported increased self-awareness through experiencing a study abroad. This theme includes the sub-themes of identifying growth areas, global perspective, and values. Self-awareness, by definition, is an accurate knowledge of one's self including emotions, beliefs, and attitudes and how this knowledge has implications for personal and workplace interactions (Showry & Manasa, 2014). Six students (Lindsay, Claire, Kendall, Michelle, Susan, Selena) grew in self-awareness.

Reflection allowed students to critique themselves in a more critical manner while abroad. Chesney gained insight into places for personal improvement, "Prior to the trip I saw myself as an open-minded person, but while traveling to these four countries I learned that there is always room to grow."

Michelle also reported an aspect of growth in their life they have already implemented between the study abroad experience and completing the reflection, "My leadership style since has evolved to be more respectful of those who are older than me. I started to actually listen to people from previous generations rather than just ignoring them as outdated."

Kendall gained perspective on the world around them, "This experience impressed upon me the beauty of all people that we are all members of humanity, and that we all have much to offer each other."

Leadership curriculum often discusses the critical nature of knowing one's values. The importance of the range of values was further clarified by Susan, "I can also

use these skills in my current leadership positions by understanding that the leadership team has different values but we all have the same goal.”

Future Benefits

Students reported a common theme of realizing future implications, in a professional context, of their time spent abroad within the theme of future benefits. Six students (Lindsay, Claire, Kyle, Josh, Michelle, Susan) mentioned future benefits in their reflections. This theme has an overlap with students who complete a study abroad outside of a leadership context.

Kyle’s coach synthesized, “Kyle understands how to develop strong personal relationships with a diverse population. In his desired career of personal wealth management, this is critical in developing a strong client base.”

In the context of working on teams professionally, Josh said, “Knowing how the expectations of my coworkers and their preferred form of leadership will help me to be a good team member.”

Students had a first-hand encounter with globalization through their study abroad experience. Susan said, “With the ever-increasing globalized marketplace, it is important for a global leader to have cross-cultural leadership skills.”

Benefits of Diversity

Students gained a breadth of understanding of diversity through exposure to new cultures in their study abroad. These benefits pertain to appreciating diversity from a leadership perspective. This outcome was the least frequently reported outcome with three students (Lindsay, Chesney, Kendall) alluding to its characteristics.

Lindsay gained a better and more accurate understanding of diversity, “Diversity is so much more than ‘race’ it includes culture as well.”

Further than an understanding of diversity, students delved into the concept of diversity of thought. In the context of leadership, Chesney said, “A leader must also surround themselves by those who think differently and offer a diverse perspective. This diversity allows leaders to capitalize on the talents of their followers and achieve goals more effectively, resulting in a healthy organizational culture.”

Students understood the critical importance of diversity. Kendall added, “I now value diversity at a much higher level than ever before, which only continues to increase with time; I look for a varied team to collaborate with and will lead with a respect for all people.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Students reflecting on study abroad through the lens of leadership reported tangible leadership learning outcomes. Cultural awareness and leadership understanding were the leadership learning outcomes reported most commonly. Other leadership learning outcomes reported include the role of a leader, self-awareness, future benefits, and benefits of diversity.

This study examined a population of undergraduates who studied abroad. However, students in this study completed a guided reflection on their study abroad experience within a leadership context. Studies on undergraduates who study abroad without a reflection component report outcomes that relate to general learning and knowledge gain including a greater functional knowledge, knowledge of world

geography, philanthropy, and career development (Wellman, 2001; Paige et. al, 2009; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). Analysis of the leadership-minded student reflections from The Maroon & White Leadership program found outcomes of cultural awareness, leadership understanding, understanding of the role of a leader, self-awareness, awareness of the future benefits of studying abroad, and benefits of diversity. This study indicated learning outcomes exist for students who study abroad with a reflection component.

The only outcome that had an overlap with a previous study was awareness of the future benefits of studying abroad in a professional context which was also found by Ingraham and Peterson (2004).

This study does show the value of study abroad integrated into a leadership curriculum. The leadership learning outcomes from this study have an overlap with Seemiller's student leadership competencies (2014). The theme of cultural awareness relates to the following student leadership competencies: organizational behavior, understanding how groups behave towards each other; others' circumstances, believing it is important to understand the conditions of others; and others' perspectives, being motivated to consider others' perspectives by learning about others. The leadership competency of group development, assisting groups in developing a shared purpose, relates to the theme of understanding of the role of a leader.

Self-awareness directly relates to the student leadership competency category of self-awareness. In this study, self-awareness relates more closely to self-understanding, being aware of one's own personality, beliefs, capacities, and interests. The theme of

awareness of future benefits relates directly to reflection and application, belief that there is something to learn from each experience that can be used to help shape one's future actions. Benefits of diversity as a theme has a connection to the student leadership competencies of diversity, knowing one's and others' exposure to people from a variety of backgrounds to improve future group environments, and others' circumstances, "integrating an understanding of the conditions or situations of other individuals into one's behavior" (Seemiller, 2014, p. 76). The theme of leadership understanding does not relate directly to a student leadership competency. However, it does relate to the overall understanding of leadership in a more abstract manner. Due to the overlap in outcomes and leadership curriculum, offering leadership courses abroad should be considered in curriculum development. Further research should investigate if certain leadership competencies should be focused on by students who study abroad both with and without a leadership lens.

Overall, students felt they experienced growth in their knowledge and personal development within leadership. Each student used positive language when discussing their experience even when times were uncomfortable.

The theoretical framework was effective for this research. Students showed progression through the stages of the LID model through reflective observation, the foundation of The Maroon & White Leadership program. Through analysis, students were categorized into primarily the first and second stages of the LID model, awareness, where students recognize leadership is happening around them, and exploration/engagement, where students intentionally involve themselves in leadership

activities. Through written and oral reflection, students progressed to the third, fourth, and fifth stages of the LID model: leader identified, trying on new roles and practicing different leadership approaches or styles; leadership differentiated, commitment to those around them; and generativity, commitment to a personal passion. Students progressed through the Kolb's model from reflective observation to abstract conceptualization, where students integrate their ideas into theories, and active experimentation, where students implement their theoretical discoveries into their actions.

It would be remiss to overlook the aspect of reflection in this study. The leadership learning outcomes reported by the students are augmented due to reflection. Without forced reflection within the program, it is unlikely that students would report similar learning outcomes specifically within leadership.

Future research should look into the outcomes of students who participate in a study abroad for a leadership course. This would give insight into leadership outcomes that may be more defined versus the overarching learning outcomes found in this study. Future research should consider to offering two reflections—one immediately after the student returns from a study abroad and the same reflection after a year. This would allow students to complete the Kolb's model of experiential learning and integrate their experiences into their lives more fully (Kolb, 2015). Students could also progress further into the integration/synthesis level where students continue self-development and life-long learning. To increase transferability, this study could be repeated on students who are asked to complete a written or oral reflection without the leadership based prompts

or any guiding questions. Leadership outcomes should also be evaluated of students who complete a study abroad without any type of reflection.

Generalized research into study abroad should continue to look at student learning and knowledge outcomes versus student inputs and outputs. If the objective of study abroad is to have students learn, it is a major gap in the research to overlook the student's learning versus the success of the student at the university through statistical means.

**A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF LEADERSHIP LEARNING
OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS IN THE MAROON & WHITE LEADERSHIP
PROGRAM AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY WHO COMPLETE THE
CLIFTON STRENGTHSFINDER ASSESSMENT**

Overview

Students in the 21st century are aware that leadership is a process rather than an achievement (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Due to this understanding, students are engaging in leadership programming on college campuses. Texas A&M University is home to a student leadership program entitled The Maroon & White Leadership program. Through The Maroon & White Leadership program, students complete a Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment workshop and reflect on the experience. This study aimed to identify the leadership learning outcomes students' gain from participating in these Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experiences to develop an understanding of what students gain from this experience. This study found that self-awareness, leadership learning, the value of knowing one's strengths, and a clearer understanding of one's personal leadership identity were leadership learning outcomes students' gained from participating in a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience in The Maroon & White Leadership program.

Background and Literature Review

As college campuses grow to reflect the increasingly diverse population, a unique set of skills is required to navigate the undergraduate experience and beyond (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998). Universities are rising to the challenge to prepare their students for the changing global climate by making institutional goals relating to student awareness, acceptance, and leadership (University of Florida, 2018; Texas A&M University, 2018).

Universities develop students' leadership abilities through formal programming, coursework, and other activities. According to Dugan and Komives (2007), involvement in leadership-related experiences accounts for a large portion of leadership development throughout a student's college experience. Students involved in activities including campus involvement, positional leadership roles, utilizing a mentor, and participating in service activities show a large growth in leadership capacity over time while in college (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

Students who are involved in formal leadership programming, including attending a single leadership workshop, show significantly higher leadership outcomes compared to those without training (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Regardless of commitment or time, students are able to develop their leadership prowess through formal programming on college campuses. It is challenging to measure student leadership outcomes without a set of guidelines. To aid in benchmarking what students have achieved in regard to leadership competencies, Seemiller (2014) has created a set

of sixty leadership competency areas that could be used in assessing outcomes of student leadership programming.

According to Seemiller (2014), leadership competencies outline “what students need to know, believe, be able to do, and engage in to be effective leaders in colleges, in their careers, and in society.” (p. xv) For those involved in leadership programming, leadership competencies provide a framework for designing programming that is both useful and intentional. The competencies were developed through analysis and comparison of student leadership theory and models to learning outcomes of graduate academic programs.

The 60 student leadership competency areas fit into eight categories: learning and reasoning, self-awareness and development, interpersonal interaction, group dynamics, civic responsibility, communication, strategic planning, and personal behavior (Seemiller, 2014). The competency category of learning and reasoning refers to leaders being able to distinguish and create useful, legitimate information that is pertinent to the situation. Self-awareness and development refers to a leader understanding, “his or her feelings, beliefs, actions, skills, and personality, how he or she can emphasize strengths and mitigate weaknesses in his or her leadership style and lead with more authenticity” (Seemiller, 2014, p. 23). Interpersonal interaction relates to leaders who create mutually beneficial interactions with fellow leaders and followers. The competency area of group dynamic includes skills that leaders need to anticipate, activate, and create responses that exist within an organization and develop the leadership skills necessary to navigate in that organizational context. Civic responsibility as a student leadership competency

category includes perspectives and skills necessary to lead in times where backgrounds, beliefs, or experiences may vary. The competency area of communication includes the skills leaders need to be able to communicate effectively, both verbally and non-verbally. Strategic planning refers to the ability to align with the values and goals of an individual or organization. The final leadership category area is personal behavior which entails leaders motivating and creating leaders through their individual leadership style (Seemiller, 2014).

Each of the competency areas includes four specific competencies that reflect each of the following dimensions: knowledge, understanding of the value of the competency; value, knowing the value of the competency; ability, internal motivation to engage in a behavior; behavior, engagement in the behavior.

The student leadership competencies are a “toolbox” (Seemiller, 2014, p. xx). It should not be a goal to have every student develop every competency. The focus of programming should be to have each student “develop the competencies they may need to use more frequently or more effectively than others” (Seemiller, 2014, p. xx). Situations exist where students need certain competencies more than others or multiple competencies at the same time.

Further research has shown that there are several factors that affect student leadership competency development including: “1) individual factors including emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and extroversion, 2) student experiences and involvement including academic involvement, student-faculty relationship, peer relationship, leadership position in class and in student organization,

and 3) college environment” (Mozghan, Parivash, Nadergholi, & Jowkard, 2011, p. 1616). This outcome aligns with studies looking into leadership growth outside of student leadership competencies. College students involved in leadership programming show the largest growth in leadership efficacy and consciousness of self, awareness of values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate people between freshman and senior year (Dugan & Komives, 2007). The same study shows in terms of gender that women student leaders are more likely to grow in socially responsible leadership and men are more likely to grow in leadership efficacy. In short, women show more competence in leadership, yet men show more confidence in their leadership ability.

Students participate in activities on campus to develop their leadership potential. While formal leadership programming exists within numerous avenues on campus, students have the ability to develop their leadership prowess through experiences that are not directly connected to leadership coursework, events, or activities. Over 600 universities use Clifton StrengthsFinder as a means to develop self-awareness and leadership abilities of their students (Gallup, Inc., 2018).

The foundation of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment is rooted in positive psychology. Positive psychology is “the science of understanding human strengths and the practice of promoting these strengths to help people psychologically and physically (Dunn, 2017, p. 1). It explores factors that make life worth living and the skills and strengths that make individuals able to take on challenges and have meaningful daily encounters. At a personal level, there are five elements that can allow individuals to achieve a positive state: positive relationships, accomplishment, meaning, engagement,

and positive emotion (Dunn, 2017). Positive psychology shifts the mindset from focusing on individual gaps to putting energy on productively growing individuals' natural strengths.

This shift from an individuals' weaknesses to strengths is embodied and evaluated through the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. Interviews designed by Donald Clifton, which led to the creation of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, began by asking the question, "What would happen if we studied what was right with people?" (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 6). The interview results guided the philosophy of using talents as the base for achieving excellence known as strengths.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment provides insight into recurring patterns of thoughts, behaviors, and feelings that can be developed for optimal performance (Tomkovick & Swanson, 2014). The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment is an online assessment with 177 pairs of fixed choice options. The taker must indicate which fits them most accurately. The assessment produces a report of the top five talents the taker possesses which indicate areas that one has the most potential to develop success (Tomkovick & Swanson, 2014).

These five talents are ranked out of a pool of 34 personal themes which are then developed with knowledge to produce a strength. Talents are manifested in life through four characterizations: satisfaction, timelessness, rapid learning, and yearning (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007). While the 34 themes refer to talents areas, the word "strength" is often used by individuals to describe them. This confusion can be attributed

to a lack of understanding that talents transform into strengths with personal investment and the title of the assessment, StrengthsFinder.

To adequately participate in the assessment, the test taker must be reading at the level of eighth to tenth grade (Hodges & Harter, 2005). Successful tests of the StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment have been documented by high school-aged students and older. According to Asplund et al. (2004), the item-to-theme correlation found that the psychometric structure of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment was stable across countries, languages, age, and gender. Across the 34 themes, 23 themes had coefficient alpha levels above the accepted standard of .70 (Hodges & Harter, 2005). Only three themes had an alpha level below .65. Among college students, a sample of 106 students showed the average correlation of theme ranking of $r = .71$ (maximum test-retest reliability being $r = 1.0$) with two months between initial and follow-up evaluation (Hodges & Harter, 2005).

Nearly 18 million individuals have taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder StrengthsFinder assessment. (Gallup, Inc., 2018). Numerous public and private universities have collaborated with Clifton StrengthsFinder to include the assessment for their students. Many universities integrate strengths-related assessments into their respective curricula (Gallup, Inc., 2018).

There is limited research into the outcomes of individuals who take the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. The research is even more restricted when limiting to a college student population. In college students, studies have shown that students who have completed the StrengthsFinder assessment report making better choices in life,

increased productivity, and increased self-confidence as a result of focusing on their personal strengths (Hodges & Harter, 2005). When completed in part with a mentoring program, students and mentors who completed the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment reported better relationship-building due to a higher awareness of each other's strengths (Hodges & Harter, 2005). Results gathered via a pre-post survey of participants who took the assessment at the beginning of the semester at a major university indicate that increased levels of confidence are reported by those individuals who have completed the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment (Crabtree, 2002).

Evidence exists that students develop leadership qualities through collegiate experiences (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Regarding the overlap between Clifton StrengthsFinder and leadership programming, faculty who want their students to achieve a stronger sense of self-awareness often use the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment in their courses (Gallup, Inc., 2018). The student leadership competency of self-awareness has a strong tie to self-understanding and awareness of personal capabilities and weaknesses (Seemiller, 2014). This desire to grow students intentionally leads to an increased rate of Clifton StrengthsFinder into collegiate curriculum, specifically courses with a leadership component. However, there is a gap in the research of the outcomes students report when the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment is taken in the context of leadership with or without a reflection component. Leadership development is often a focus of higher education institutions (Astin & Astin, 2000). Texas A&M University, as a whole, has a purpose statement with a clear connection to leadership development, "to develop leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good (Texas A&M

University, 2018). Leadership development at TAMU is a further priority as it is one of seven core values its faculty and staff, current and former students are challenged to exemplify.

Students are able to develop leadership skills while at a university through participation in activities like positional leadership roles, campus involvement, and participating in formal leadership programming (Dugan & Komives, 2007). TAMU has a formal leadership program within the division of Student Affairs with learning outcomes of critical thinking, effective communication, personal and social responsibility, social, cultural, and global competence, lifelong learning, and collaborative learning named The Maroon & White Leadership program (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

For this study, the theoretical framework combines the Kolb's model of experiential learning and the leadership identity development model. The Kolb's model of experiential learning explains the connections between learning from life experience (Kolb, 2015). Kolb's model of experiential learning connects two dimensions of cognitive growth: the active-reflection dimension and the concrete-abstract dimension (Sugarman, 1985). The two dimensions meet in a four-stage, cyclical process of effective learning. The stages are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

According to Kolb (2015), concrete experience occurs when students are able to “involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences” (p. 42). The

next stage of reflective observation is when students, “reflect on and observe their experiences from multiple perspectives” (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Abstract conceptualization occurs when students, “create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories” (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Finally, in active experimentation, students “must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems” (Kolb, 2015, p. 42). Research has confirmed the validity of Kolb’s cyclical model of the learning process (Sugarman, 1985).

When completing a Clifton StrengthsFinder workshop, students participate in the first step of the model, concrete experience. Reflective observation happens when the student completes the oral or written reflection with questions guiding them to consider the experience from multiple perspectives. The third stage of abstract conceptualization occurs when students indicate that they have connected their gained knowledge from the experience to their personal leadership style or leadership experiences. The final stage of the model happens after the reflection is completed and students apply their knowledge to their personal and professional life.

With the knowledge that the leadership identity development model was created with the college student demographic in mind, this model allows students to engage in learning opportunities to build one’s capacity for leadership (Komives et al., 2006). The LID model links the process of student development with perspectives of leadership development. The theory behind the model explains the process in which a student develops their personal leadership identity. The theory was developed by interviewing a

sample of students who exemplified qualities of relational leadership to uncover the process by which they established their leadership identity (Komives et al., 2006).

The theory generated a LID model that is used to show the progress of students moving from awareness to integration/synthesis (Komives et al., 2006). The LID model is stage-based and linear, yet cyclical allowing students to repeat and revisit stages as learning assimilates. The six stages that have been identified as leadership constructs are: awareness, when the student realizes leadership is happening around them; exploration/engagement, intentional involvement; leader identified, trying on new roles and practicing different leadership approaches or styles; leadership differentiated, commitment to those around them; generativity, active commitment to a personal passion; and integration/synthesis, continued self-development and life-long learning (Komives et al., 2006). In The Maroon & White Leadership program, students are guided with the assistance of a coach as they progress from exploration/engagement towards integration/synthesis. To ensure that the progression is more linear than cyclical, experiences students participate in must range in depth and content.

In this study, the questions of the reflections and design of the oral reflections were designed to help students progress through the six stages of the LID model (Figure 1). Students begin their leadership journey at the first stage of awareness with hopes of progressing to the sixth stage of integration/synthesis.

Purpose

Evidence exists that students develop leadership qualities through collegiate experiences (Dugan & Komives, 2007). However, there is a lack of understanding of

which experiences students engage in that prove to be most effective. Also, there is a lack in depth of knowledge of what leadership-minded students gain from participating in the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. Due to this knowledge gap, this study seeks to specifically examine the leadership learning outcomes in college students from taking and reflecting on the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the leadership outcomes of The Maroon & White Leadership Society students who have completed a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience under the leadership education designator as part of their eight program experiences.

The research question addressed was the following:

RQ1 – What leadership competencies do students gain by participating in a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience through The Maroon & White Leadership program?

Methodology

Study Context

The context of this study was The Maroon & White Leadership program that aims to, “guide participants in developing their identity as leaders through engaging in leadership development, education, and training while at Texas A&M University” (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018). Students who are selected to participate in The Maroon & White Leadership program process are referred to as The Maroon & White Leadership Fellows while they are completing their eight leadership experiences. Once they have met all of the requirements to complete the program, which includes

completing the eight leadership experiences and accompanying reflections, the students are inducted into The Maroon & White Leadership Society.

To be eligible for The Maroon & White Leadership program, students must have at least a 2.25 GPA, be in good academic standing with TAMU, and be enrolled in at least six credit hours (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018). Once admitted to meet requirements for The Maroon & White Leadership Society, students participate in eight leadership experiences within the development, education, and training designators. These are captured in an oral or written reflection. Written reflections entail students answering a series of questions related to their experience's designator. Oral reflections are discussions facilitated by the coach which are then transcribed and synthesized by the coach. Participants are matched with a leadership coach, faculty or staff from TAMU, who evaluate the student's development throughout their time in the program. The conceptual framework of the program is based on the Leadership Identity Development model.

As with many aspects of leadership, clear boundaries of experiences are challenging to articulate. The Maroon & White Leadership program divides experiences into leadership training, leadership education, and leadership development (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018; Allen & Shehane, 2016). Leadership learning is the outcome of all experiences. According to Allen & Shehane (2016), leadership learning is defined as, "shifts in knowledge, behavior personal insights or consciousness as a result of educational experiences associated with the activity of leadership" (p.

40). Students are required to participate in at least one program in each of the designators.

Leadership training is defined as, “proficiency in demonstrating specific skills associated with the activity of leadership” (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 43). Even though there is a lack of agreement of which skills should be focused on, skills including time management and conflict management are examples of skills that can be developed through training exercises. Activities that fall under the training designator include conferences, workshops, and online webinars. As it is taken in part with a workshop component, the StrengthsFinder assessment falls under the training designator within The Maroon & White Leadership program experiences.

Students who participate in The Maroon & White Leadership program at TAMU are given a range of experiences they may choose to participate in. From the approximately 75 recommended experiences, the experiences with the highest rate of participation are Clifton Strengths-related experiences (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018). Within The Maroon & White Leadership program, 29 students took a strengths-related assessment as a part of their programming out of a population of 51 students who have completed all requirements to be inducted into The Maroon & White Leadership Society.

There is a workshop component beyond the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. Students take the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment independently. The students then bring their top five talent list to one of three workshops The Maroon & White Leadership program facilitates (The Maroon & White Leadership program, 2018). At the

introductory strengths workshop, students are engaged in finding the potential positive and negative aspects of each of their talent themes and process how and if those aspects are present in their life. Students who participate in the strengths and careers or the strengths and leadership secondary workshops evaluate their talent themes in the context of future careers or their leadership potential. Students then complete a reflection of the knowledge they have gained from taking the assessment and attending the workshop.

Research Approach and Analysis

This study was conducted using content analysis within the qualitative paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) define qualitative research as, “the study of things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Qualitative content analysis “focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Student’s written reflections and the transcription and synthesis of student’s oral reflections by coaches were analyzed. According to Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), reflection is, “intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences to lead to new understanding and appreciation” (p. 19).

Confidential student reflections were provided to the researcher for open coding to begin (Strauss, 1987). The constant comparative method was utilized to allow for common themes to develop. According to Glaser (1965), the constant comparative method has “four stages: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2)

integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory” (p. 439).

Dependability and confirmability show how consistent results are with data and can be achieved simultaneously (Merriam, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer-debriefing memos were created and shared with peers to establish dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, an external audit was employed by a credible peer who is familiar with the content of the study and has engaged in qualitative research and courses (Creswell, 2003). An audit trail of initial data analysis and respondent codes was maintained throughout data analysis to ensure dependability and confirmability.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 125), the best way to ensure the possibility of transferability is to create “a thick description of the sending context so that someone in a potential receiving context may assess the similarity between them and the study.” In regards to transferability, rich, thick description was used through the detailed description of the study context and findings through quotes from student reflections.

According to Stake (1995), “the function of the qualitative research during data gathering is clearly to maintain vigorous interpretation” (p. 9). In regards to researcher reflexivity, it should be known that I, as the researcher, have a background in leadership education with a Bachelor’s degree in leadership and am completing this research as a part of my pursuit of a Master’s degree with an emphasis in leadership theory, education, and practice. I participated in student leadership development, both personally and professionally, beginning in middle school and continuing to present times. I have a

positive bias towards formal leadership programming and a prior belief that leadership can be learned. To mitigate this impact, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research project to identify inevitable biases that may have had an influence on my interpretation of the data.

A purposive sample of 28 undergraduate students who participated in any of the three workshops offered by The Maroon & White Leadership program focused on the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment was selected for this study. The students were primarily female (89.3%; 25 females) with a few males (10.7%; 3 students). The race of the students is as follows: white, 67.9%, 19 students; Hispanic or Latino of any race, 14.3%, 4 students; multi-racial excluding black, 7.1%, 2 students; international, 3.6%, 1 student; Asian, 3.6%, 1 student; and Black or multi-racial with Black, 3.6%, 1 student. The population for the study is the 51 students who have each completed eight leadership experiences qualifying them to be inducted into The Maroon & White Leadership Society. These 28 students generated 33 student reflections ($n = 33$) that were used as the data for this study.

As all of the reflections are answering the same questions with the same format and this study aims to analyze the outcomes of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment versus the effectiveness of each workshop, all reflections regarding Clifton StrengthsFinder were analyzed. Clifton StrengthsFinder was purposively selected from a suggested list of approximately 75 experiences due to its popularity as one of the most highly participated experiences and its prevalence within other universities.

Each student was coded with a pseudonym by The Maroon & White Leadership program staff (Table 2). This pseudonym indicates the gender of each student. Also, each student’s experience number was identified. The experience number gives insight into how far along each student was in The Maroon & White Leadership program out of the eight required experiences to be inducted into The Maroon & White Leadership Society. Also, it was identified which Clifton StrengthsFinder-related workshop the student attended. As they are different workshops, students can attend multiple to gain further insight into their strengths.

Table 2. Pseudonyms of students who completed a Clifton StrengthsFinder workshop

Pseudonym	Experience Number out of 8	Experience	Pseudonym	Experience Number out of 8	Experience
Meghan	8	Intro to Strengths	Lauren	7	Intro to Strengths
Samantha	6	Intro to Strengths	Christine	2	Intro to Strengths
Samantha	7	Strengths and Leadership	Christine	8	Strengths in Careers
Meredith	8	Intro to Strengths	Lindsay	1	Intro to Strengths
Lesley	5	Intro to Strengths	Jacy	Not Recorded	Intro to Strengths
Sarah	8	Intro to Strengths	Angelica	3	Intro to Strengths
Will	6	Intro to Strengths	Audrey	5	Intro to Strengths
Kisha	7	Intro to Strengths	Katie	4	Intro to Strengths
Claire	8	Intro to Strengths	Michelle	4	Intro to Strengths
Eliza	3	Intro to Strengths	Theresa	3	Intro to Strengths

Table 2. (continued)

Pseudonym	Experience Number out of 8	Experience	Pseudonym	Experience Number out of 8	Experience
Payton	3	Intro to Strengths	Viviana	1	Intro to Strengths
Haley	5	Intro to Strengths	Andrea	2	Intro to Strengths
Haley	7	Strengths in Leadership	Jackie	5	Intro to Strengths
Josh	3	Intro to Strengths	Susan	5	Intro to Strengths
Mary	8	Intro to Strengths	Susan	1	Strengths in Leadership
Becca	1	Intro to Strengths	Keith	2	Intro to Strengths

The leadership training designator, which includes the Clifton StrengthsFinder reflection, has students summarize the following points: experience description, skills gained from the experience, the importance of the skill set in leadership, future implications of the experience, and personal growth as a leader from the experience.

For the oral reflections, students prepare their thoughts regarding their experience and discuss it with their coach from The Maroon & White Leadership program. Coaches guide the conversation and synthesize the conversation into notes under six categories. Regardless of the topic, the evaluation categories for the oral reflections are: (a) description, (b) reflection on growth, (c) reflection on leadership, (d) expression of thought, (e) complete overall rating.

Results and Findings

Four themes were consistently reported as learning outcomes by the students or synthesized by their coach in an oral reflection: self-awareness, leadership learning, the value of knowing one's strengths, and a clearer understanding of one's personal leadership identity.

Self-Awareness

Students who alluded to self-awareness as a theme understand how their strengths play a role in their lives, comprehend the dichotomy between strengths and weaknesses, and show a further knowledge of their personality through the frame of their strengths. Self-awareness, as a whole, was the most commonly reported theme with 15 students (Lindsay, Claire, Meghan, Samantha, Meredith, Lesley, Will, Michelle, Theresa, Andrea, Jackie, Susan, Christine, Mary, Becca) alluding to its characteristics.

By definition, self-awareness is an accurate knowledge of one's self including emotions, beliefs, and attitudes and how this knowledge has implications for personal and workplace interactions (Showry & Manasa, 2014).

Becca realized, "A leader without self-awareness is not likely to be humble, own up to their mistakes or be open to the idea that their employees may have a better idea than them or seek feedback from others." She went on to explain, "It's okay that I'm not talented in every area; I can contribute to a team with my diverse array of strengths."

Students who understand how strengths play a role in their lives report an understanding of both the positives attributes and negative connotations of each of the talent themes they have. For example, students who have the talent theme of competition

are easily motivated; however, they may be perceived as intense in competitive environments. Michelle's coach noted, "She was able to identify that not having any relationship-oriented strengths equals needing to make room for hearing others and working with their skills." Susan went on to mention, "With this new skill of considering my strength and the shadow side to it, I hope to be able to be more aware of both in my leadership."

The dichotomy between using their strengths and foregoing their weaknesses was clearly understood. Becca said, "One thing I learned is that I don't have to be good at everything, but if I am aware of my strengths and weaknesses, I can surround myself with people who complement my strengths and compensates for my weaknesses."

Students felt more in tune with aspects of their personality through this experience. Meghan stated, "So the ultimate take away was not only an organizational or professional skill but a personal understanding that my strengths played into me becoming [a] more loving and peaceful person with myself and others."

Leadership Learning

Leadership learning included students understanding of leadership characteristics, a more thorough knowledge of leadership versus followership, and the roles leaders play. Leadership learning is defined as, "shifts in knowledge, behavior, personal insights, or consciousness as a result of educational experiences associated with the activity of leadership" (Allen & Shehane, 2016, p. 40).

Leadership learning was addressed by 14 students (Lindsay, Payton, Samantha – Intro to Strengths, Samantha – Strengths and Leadership, Meredith, Haley – Intro to

Strengths, Haley – Strengths in Careers, Angelica, Katie, Theresa, Andrea, Susan, Christine, Mary, Becca). Students had a more complete understanding of the ways leadership can present itself, and how strengths can play into leadership.

Payton said:

Prior to the experience, I used to believe that everyone was the same and this leadership thing had a single definition that everyone needed to follow. I now see that no two leaders are the same and everyone's strengths can be different. There is no perfect definition of leadership and each leader is different so if you try to imitate another leader you run the risk of not being successful but if you embody your own strengths you can easily lead out in the community.

Meredith described:

I have always thought that leadership developed solely from the personality of the individual, not that it doesn't play a huge part, but I feel that the true form of leadership comes from the strengths the individual uses to lead with.

The concept of followership in the context of leadership was presented as well. Andrea's coach copied down a quote that Andrea said, "Leadership is a give and take experience – to be a leader sometimes you need to understand how to follow."

A sub-theme also discussed was the role of a leader. Theresa said, “Leadership isn’t all about yourself, but putting yourself in the best position to help others succeed. It is all about finding ways to make a difference to others and the world around us.”

The Value of Knowing One’s Strengths

The value of knowing one’s strengths, including a further understanding of strengths, one’s strengths and the value of understanding the strengths of individuals on a team, was another common theme. This theme was mentioned in twelve (Jacy, Meghan, Samantha, Sarah, Audrey, Michelle, Theresa, Jackie, Lauren, Susan, Mary, Becca) student reflections. Meredith explained having an understanding of strengths and talent themes as:

I truly believe that everyone is capable of being a leader in their own way, but because I have a little understanding of the value and process of strengths, I feel like I know why they will make some of the decisions they might make and why our opinions might differ.

Audrey went on to further explain, “This resonated with me because it made me realize that I should focus more on maximizing my strengths rather than working to bring my weaknesses to the level of my strengths, an impossible task.”

Students gained a further knowledge of their individual strengths. Mary said, “With knowing your strengths, you will be able to recognize what your strength is, what it enables you to do, how you use it, and how this strength can be viewed by others.”

Students also saw the value in the knowledge of strengths in the team building process. Sarah’s coach synthesized, “Sarah could see how this typology could help

putting teams together, understanding what people are good at, why strengths have value, and how to assign tasks for the most chance of success.”

Personal Leadership Identity

Students came to the realization of their personal growth and development and aspirations of their desired leadership style under the theme of personal leadership identity. Twelve students (Lindsay, Jacy, Claire, Meghan, Payton, Samantha, Meredith, Lesley, Theresa, Kisha, Becca) grew in their knowledge of their personal leadership identity. Students were able to measurably understand how strengths benefitted them. Meghan claimed, “When I started using my strengths to their full potential, I found a new aspect of myself and unlocked a part of my character that realized who I can and am meant to be.”

Theresa continued:

The higher in leadership I was, the less likely I was worried about making everyone happy, but making sure that the outcome was what was desired. It was all about making the collective successful and putting everyone in the best position to succeed.

Participating in this experience allowed students to realize their leadership potential and consider themselves a leader, some for the first time.

Becca realized:

...I’d never really considered myself a leader. I think this is because in my head I picture a leader as the embodiment of charisma and assertiveness. However, I know now that I can still stay true to my

introverted personality and make an impact by harnessing my unique strengths.

Students were also able to select a leadership style they aspire to implement. Lindsay said, “Now that I know more about my strengths, I know what kind of leader I could be: a team-oriented one.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to evaluate the leadership learning outcomes of students who participate in a Clifton StrengthsFinder workshop and complete a reflection.

While research exists of what college students gain from the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, this study looked at a specific experience paired with a reflection of students within a college population. Research into college students as a whole show that students make lifestyle changes after completing the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment (Dugan & Komives, 2007). The analysis shows that students in The Maroon & White Leadership program developed self-awareness, a greater understanding of the role of a leader, understanding of the value of the StrengthsFinder assessment, and development of their personal leadership identity.

The learning outcomes reported by the students have an overlap to leadership curriculum. The emergent themes in the study relate to the student leadership competencies of self-understanding, group development, confidence, self-understanding, others’ contributions, personal contributions, and personal values (Seemiller, 2014). Self-awareness directly relates to the student leadership competency category of self-awareness. In this study, self-awareness overlaps with the student leadership competency

of self-understanding, “being motivated to enhance one’s understanding of one’s personality” (Seemiller, 2014, p. 24). The leadership competency of group development, assisting groups in developing a shared purpose, relates to the theme of understanding of the role of a leader. The theme of understanding the value of one’s strengths relates to the following student leadership competency areas: confidence, the ability to be certain of one’s strengths; self-understanding, enhancing one’s understanding of one’s personality; others’ contributions, believing that others’ strengths are beneficial; and personal contributions, being willing to contribute ones’ strengths to meet a group need. The final theme of personal leadership identity relates to the student leadership competency of personal values, “being motivated to act in alignment with one’s values contributes to one’s authenticity and ability to inspire others” (Seemiller, 2014, p. 26).

The theoretical framework worked well for this research and analysis as it proves students progressed through the leadership identity development model through reflective observation and abstract experimentation, cornerstones of The Maroon & White Leadership program. Students self-identified with the first and second stages of awareness and exploration/engagement. Through reflection, students showed signs of the third and fourth stages of the LID model: leader identified and leadership differentiated.

A recommendation for practice is to further implement the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessments in courses across campuses regardless of major or course topic, both at TAMU and beyond. Implications from this research and former research suggest that positive outcomes are reported from participating in the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment regardless of students’ interest in leadership.

This research shows the value of using the Clifton StrengthsFinder in leadership education. Due to students becoming more self-aware, gaining a further understanding of leadership, understanding the value of strengths, and finding their personal leadership identity, the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment should be utilized in courses relating to personal leadership, team leadership, or introductory leadership curriculum.

Due to the self-awareness students gained through this experience and the reflection, a recommendation for The Maroon & White Leadership program is to require the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment as an onboarding experience to give students a foundational knowledge of their talents and themselves as a leader.

A limitation of this study is the forced reflection aspect of The Maroon & White Leadership program. Due to this requirement, students reported leadership outcomes that may not be indicative of an undergraduate student who simply takes the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. Reflection augmented the learning outcomes of the students towards leadership learning and leadership competencies. It would be challenging to determine outcomes outside of the reflection component of the experience.

A recommendation for further research on this topic is to repeat the study on a sample of students who complete a reflection without guiding questions. This would increase transferability and allow other universities to see potential benefits. Further research into the value of Clifton StrengthsFinder as an assessment on college campuses would be beneficial. Potentially, a researcher could give the same sample of students the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and the same reflection questions at the beginning and end of their college experience. While it has been proven that the results of the

Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment do not vary greatly over time, comparative analysis of reflections could provide insight into how students are utilizing their strengths over time.

CONCLUSION

Summary and Conclusions

The overall purpose of this study was to describe the leadership learning outcomes of The Maroon & White Leadership Fellows who participated in a study abroad or Clifton StrengthsFinder experience. This was accomplished through research in the qualitative paradigm resulting in two articles.

The first article used the constant comparative method to analyze leadership learning outcomes of students who participated in a study abroad experience and completed a reflection through The Maroon & White Leadership program. The findings led to the conclusion that tangible learning outcomes were gained by students who completed a study abroad through this program with a leadership lens. Leadership learning outcomes included cultural awareness, leadership understanding, understanding of the role of a leader, self-awareness, awareness of the future benefits of studying abroad, and benefits of diversity. Student leadership learning competencies gained by students include organizational behavior, others' circumstances, others' perspectives, group development, self-understanding, reflection and application, and diversity (Seemiller, 2014). It was further concluded that overall students felt they had experienced knowledge gains and personal growth through this experience. Each of the findings had an overlap with the student leadership competencies. Beyond these findings, this study provided evidence of the value of study abroad programs integration into leadership curriculum on college campuses.

The second article also used methodology to examine leadership learning outcomes of students who took part in a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience through The Maroon & White Leadership program. It was concluded that students who reflect on the Clifton StrengthsFinder and its related experiences within the context of leadership report leadership learning outcomes. Student learning outcomes included self-awareness, understanding of the role of a leader, understanding the value of knowing one's strengths, and the development of one's personal leadership identity. Students developed themselves within the student leadership competencies of self-understanding, group development, confidence, self-understanding, others' contribution, personal contributions, and personal values (Seemiller, 2014).

It is further concluded that students had a desire to take the assessment earlier in their collegiate experience to give them leverage for future leadership and team opportunities. It was also concluded that there is value of integrating Clifton StrengthsFinder into leadership curriculum as there were many overlaps between these leadership learning outcomes and student leadership competency areas. Students were able to solidify abstract leadership concepts through the Clifton StrengthsFinder and the accompanying reflection. Overall, students reported a gain of leadership knowledge and personal awareness through reflecting on their Clifton StrengthsFinder experience.

These experiences are on the complete opposite ends of the spectrum of student commitment. Students who participated in study abroad do so with prior planning, financial commitment, and an intrinsic motivation to have a unique experience outside of the classroom. However, those who complete a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related

experience have very little, if any, financial commitment and take Clifton StrengthsFinder in a classroom environment or with personal curiosity. Regardless of the differences between experiences, students are gaining tangible leadership outcomes. Findings that overlapped between the two experiences are self-awareness and understanding of the role of a leader. This suggests that leadership learning can be developed regardless of investment or time spent in the experience.

The theoretical framework for this study was effective. Due to the nature of the data, students very clearly followed the Kolb's model of experiential learning. The students had a concrete experience, either study abroad or Clifton StrengthsFinder. Then the students completed the reflection with pre-determined questions completing the reflective observation stage. Students then made sense of their experience in the abstract conceptualization stage and related their new knowledge to their personal and future leadership experiences. Finally, student reflections that were written or spoken not immediately following the experience allowed students to enter the active experimentation stage where they were able to share how they implemented their knowledge. The Maroon & White Leadership program is designed to progress students through the stage of the LID model. This was evident through student reflections. Students progressed from primarily the first and second stages of the LID model, awareness and exploration/engagement, to the third, fourth, and fifth stages in some cases, leader identified, leadership differentiated, and generativity.

All student reflections spoke favorably about their experiences regardless of common hesitations including ambiguity and forced self-evaluation. Some students

enjoyed the opportunity to question their experience outside of the realm or subject they were used to.

Implications and Recommendations

Observing this study as a whole, it can be inferred that students achieve leadership learning outcomes by participating in a study abroad or completing a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience with a leadership mindset.

In comparison with students who complete a Clifton StrengthsFinder-related experience or study abroad outside of a leadership setting without a reflection component, students are gaining a larger breadth of personal growth. Students gained skills that are more conceptual in nature. Rather than learning time management or a foreign language, the leadership context shifted student outcomes to personal mental gains.

Through reflection, students made connections to classroom instruction as well as life experience. Students used this information to inform their future choices in leadership experiences following the Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015). Further research should examine what leadership learning outcomes students gain without being guided through Kolb's model of experiential learning, specifically skipping the step of reflection. A shift to a quantitative analysis of leadership outcomes through a pre- and post-test would be a useful analysis.

The use of guided reflections is an effective practice when analyzing outcomes of student experiences. Students often concluded that they drew connections they were unaware of previously through the written and oral reflection process. It is recommended

to implement reflections with pre-determined questions in cases where learning outcomes can be abstract in nature, such as leadership.

Leadership faculty and those who instruct classes with a personal focus need to continue to use the combination of high impact experiences with reflection. Students are obtaining meaningful knowledge gains from the partnership. Rather than implementing immediate reflection as some curriculum is designed, it is beneficial to allow students time to personally reflect before formally collecting their thoughts. The third step of Kolb's model of experiential learning, abstract conceptualization, is capitalized on when students have time to informally come to terms with their experience (Kolb, 2015).

Overall, research needs to continue to be completed into the leadership learning outcomes of students who participate in any on-campus activity. The demand for creating leadership qualities in college students is not wavering. Expanding the mindset of what constitutes a leadership activity would not only benefit universities but also students.

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