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THE IMPACT ON CAREER WOMEN OF MENTORING, ROLE MODELS,  
AND DEFINING MOMENTS DURING COLLEGE STUDENT  
LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Lisa A. Barber

May 2013

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Lisa Anne Barber

entitled

The Impact on Career Women of Mentoring, Role Models and Defining Moments  
During College Student Leadership Experiences

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
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### Abstract

Female leadership development is an important and relevant topic. In an effort to connect female college leadership experiences to career women 12-18 years post-graduation, this study looked at the impact on career women of mentors, role models, and defining moments during college leadership experiences. Mentoring is an important element for the formation of women in leadership, both in college and in the workplace. Because of limited available mentors, role models and defining moments were also investigated for their impact on female leadership development. Results from this study suggest that there are significant ways women are shaped by their college leadership opportunities: development of leadership style, confidence development, and resilience emerged as the strongest themes. Mentoring, role models, and defining moments had significant impacts on the participants' leadership development, particularly in the areas of encouragement of leadership skills and confidence development. Peer influence was an unexpected theme that emerged; each participant mentioned the impact that peers had on their leadership development. Encouragement emerged as a strong theme in this study and serves as an implication for practitioners of student development and faculty. Encouragement to female students, especially as it relates to leadership, is important because the women in this study often did not view themselves as leaders until given encouragement.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

College is a time when students develop leadership skills which assist them in preparation for their future careers. While leadership development is a part of the college experience for both female and male students, it is uniquely important for female students to have leadership experiences because they have cultural and personal struggles to overcome with respect to their leadership and confidence (Sax, 2008). These cultural and personal struggles not only affect women in college leadership, but are similarly seen in the workplace (Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Fletcher, 1999). Because of these cultural and personal struggles for women, it is important to consider the factors that benefit women in their journey of leadership development.

One important factor in female leadership development is mentoring. Mentoring, which focuses on one-on-one relationship between people in different stages of their development (Parks, 2000), is an important factor in impacting female college students but it is not the only way. Female college students are also impacted by the examples of role models (Astin & Leland, 1991) and by the singular experiences of defining moments (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). This study investigated the impact of mentors, role models, and defining moments on college leadership opportunities for women in their careers.

As women navigate what Eagly and Carli (2007a) call the “labyrinth of leadership,” a phrase highlighting the non-linear leadership path of women, it is

important to consider what leadership development women need in order to succeed in the competitive workplace. One important factor in the leadership development of women is having a mentor (Cullen & Luna, 1993; Putsche, Storrs, Lewis, & Haylett, 2008). Female-to-female mentoring is not always possible for female leaders because there are few women in higher education to serve as female mentors (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Gerdes, 2003). However, role models and defining moments also make an impact in the lives of college women as they develop in leadership.

Major strides have been made in the last 30 years to encourage and include women in leadership, yet there remains certain barriers that impede or discourage women in leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Gerdes, 2003). For example, women struggle to balance work and family (Slaughter, 2012) and to be appreciated for their relational leadership traits (Fletcher, 1999). It is important to consider the impact of mentoring, role models, and defining moments on female leadership development in order to welcome and understand its uniqueness, thereby offering a fuller expression of the human experience (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Gilligan, 1982).

Women are currently the majority gender enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States and have been for several decades, with the percentage of females growing each year (The Higher Education Research Institute, 2012). As of 2010, women represented 47% of the work force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). However, women are not equally represented in the faculty and administration of most institutions of higher education (Gresham, 2009), which significantly impacts the number of women available for mentoring relationships. Unequal representation of women in college administration and faculty is also seen with even more disparity between genders at faith-

based institutions belonging to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) (Longman & LaFreniere, 2012). Significant research shows that while female students have a strong presence on college campuses, there is still not gender equality (Sax, 2008). In the workplace, women are similarly represented disproportionately in upper level management when compared to men despite a strong female presence in the workforce (Rosin, 2010).

There are notable differences between how women and men are impacted by their college experiences (Baenninger, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Kolowich, 2011; Miller & Kraus, 2004). These gender differences are often referred to as a gender gap (Sax, 2007; Sax, 2008). Research done by Sax in 2008 showed that negative traits of leadership, like stress and taking on too much responsibility, was being learned by women in college (Sax, 2008). Other voices in higher education, such as college administrator Mary Ann Baenninger (2011), contend that there are different messages given to women and men in college. Baenninger (2011) argued that women are told they have to try hard and work hard in order to succeed, while men are told they do not have to try and will still succeed. Culturally, women struggle to be taken seriously as leaders because leadership is often defined by traits more often found in men, such as being assertive, visionary, and ambitious (Fels, 2004; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2009).

While female college students have access to leadership opportunities, many of which were fought hard for just a generation ago (Zeilinger, 2012), women still feel pressure to succeed, often with the added pressure to be perfect (Women's Study: Duke University, 2003; Pabst, 2010). Many women in college report high levels of stress and low self-confidence (Sax, 2008). It is important for a discussion about female leadership

to consider the impact that the pressure to succeed has on female leaders (Ringrose, 2007). Although women have come a long way in obtaining rights and privileges equal to men, there remain opportunities for work in the areas of female self-confidence and stress levels, as well as female participation in higher level leadership positions, both in college and in the workplace. Mentoring relationships serve as a beneficial way to help women through the struggles they may face on their paths to leadership in dealing with unfair gender roles (Cullen & Luna, 1993).

The concept that women are unable to rise into executive positions in their careers because of their gender is referred to as the “glass ceiling,” which has been defined as “...those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational biases that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organizations into managerial-level positions” (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991, p. 1). The glass ceiling concept is also experienced by women in faith-based higher education institutions, many of which are a part of the CCCU, where gender roles tend to be more clearly prescribed and can limit women’s roles and leadership opportunities (Bryant, 2009). In Christian institutions, this has been referred to as the “stained glass ceiling” (Mock, 2005), referring to messages involving a theological stance that approve or disapprove of women in leadership (Bryant, 2006; Bryant, 2009). Because of the specific culture experienced by women at faith-based institutions, it is important to consider the impact faith-based gender roles have in their leadership development.

The workplace may not be an easy place for women to succeed, therefore it is important to prepare women and sharpen the skills necessary to enter the workforce with confidence (Fletcher, 1999). In addition, the workplace presents specific challenges to

women, but research shows that the workplace is changing, becoming an environment that values different ways of leading (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007b; Kezar, 2000). Considering the changing workplace environment, it is particularly important for women to develop competencies and skills in college to help prepare them to lead in the workforce. Mentoring female college students in leadership positions is an important way to prepare women for their careers (Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005; Putsche et al., 2008).

In her commencement address at the all-female Mount Holyoke College, Anna Quindlen (1999) encouraged the graduating class of women to “give up perfect and begin the real process of becoming yourself.” This view of female development is important because it recognizes the complex journey of females in their identity formation. Specifically, this study investigated how mentors, role models, and defining moments shape female college student leadership and impacts career women 12-18 years after college.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to hear stories from career women of how mentors, role models, and defining moments during their college leadership development impacted their current experiences in the workplace. Currently, research describing the impact of female college student leadership experiences on leadership in the workplace is limited. This study sought to understand the impact of student leadership experiences on current women in the workplace 12-18 years after college.

**Implications of the Study**

Currently, little research looks at the connection of female leadership development experiences in college to the future leadership positions of women in the workplace. It is from this gap in the literature that the present study emerged. Using stories of females who were developed as leaders in college, the narrative voice of this research provided stories from women who have been impacted by their student leadership experiences. This study looked through the lens of narrative qualitative research at the impact collegiate leadership had on the current careers of eight women 12 to 18 years after graduation.

**Research Question**

How are career women shaped through the impact of mentors, role models, and defining moments during experiences of college student leadership at a small, Midwestern, faith-based institution 12-18 years after graduation?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Women's roles in the workplace and in higher education have changed dramatically since the 1970s. While women have grown in both presence and in equality, barriers and limitations to female leadership remain that have not been resolved by these areas of growth. Specifically, this study will look at the influence on career women of mentors, role models, and defining moments during experiences of college student leadership.

In order to understand the importance of mentors, role models, and defining moments in the lives of women, it is important to understand the current reality of female leadership. The labyrinth serves as a helpful metaphor describing the journey of leadership that many women experience:

As a contemporary symbol, it conveys the idea of a complex journey toward a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead. (Eagly & Carli, 2007a, p. 64).

This indirect path is the reality that many women face in their journeys of leadership. Because of the labyrinth, opportunities that include mentors, role models, and defining moments act as a guide to help women leaders when the path is not clear.



## **Definitions of Leadership**

What is unique about female leadership? Researchers have tried to answer this question for decades, offering answers through a breadth of research and knowledge about female leadership, often with complex and sometimes conflicting answers. Many of the foundational definitions of leadership were made with the assumption that leadership and its attributes were universal including both genders and all cultures (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). This assumption led to leadership research that primarily used men as subjects, resulting in definitions of leadership that used characteristics most often found in men (Rosener, 1990): for example, decisiveness, independence (Langland & Gove, 1981), ambition (Fels, 2004), assertiveness, and competitiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). The consequences of these male-focused definitions of leadership still exist today as women's common leadership characteristics—relationally-focused and group-oriented—are often not taken seriously or disregarded in the workplace (Fletcher, 1999). Mentoring is one of the most consistently helpful elements in the journey of female leadership (Casto et al., 2005; Chandler, 1996; Cullen & Luna, 1993; Putsche et al., 2008). Mentoring allows women whose leadership is unappreciated to find support and learn from those who may have experienced similar leadership struggles.

Gender roles, like gendered leadership definitions, are prevalent in culture today (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Gender roles are assumptions made about specific traits and actions that women and men portray as a result of their gender (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). Assumed gender roles can cause difficulty for either gender to act outside of their gender's roles (2007). Specifically, women encounter difficulty in leadership when gender roles are assumed in their environment (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). This difficulty

is true in both higher education and in the workplace. While gender stereotypes about leadership can be hurtful and limiting, it is not necessary to disregard them completely but, instead, to value the differences in how women and men may lead and to appreciate those differences for what they add to the definition of leadership.

### **Women in the Workplace**

Over the last several decades, women have seen significant growth in their presence in the workplace. In the 1980 census, women represented just 26% of the workforce (Rosin, 2010). In 2010, the percentage of women in the workforce grew to 47% and became the majority gender of managerial and professional positions in the workforce at 52% (Rosin, 2010; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Yet when looking specifically at women in executive positions, only 12 of the 500 CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are women (CNN, 2011). While these statistics are encouraging for women who now share a similar workplace representation with men, there are still disparities in the representation of women in executive leadership. This disparity sends a strong message of remaining barriers to the success of women in leadership in the workplace.

### **Barriers to Female Leadership**

Society is full of gendered associations that affect how women and men are stereotyped as leaders (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Women in leadership may find themselves in a “double-bind” (Eagly & Carli, 2007a) where they are criticized for both acting too strongly according to their own gender’s stereotype or for acting too strongly according to stereotypical male qualities. The double-bind is a singularly female problem. Men are given more freedom than women when behaving within or outside of their

gender's stereotypes (2007). One example of a double-bind is in the area of female ambition. Ambition is a word women rarely attribute to themselves and one with which many people associate negative attributes when displayed by women (Fels, 2004). As a result, women rarely take credit for their own successes, and they exhibit less competitiveness when directly competing with men (2004).

For many women in leadership positions, their paths to leadership are not easy. Women encounter cultural and structural barriers that limit or impede their leadership (Ballenger & Austin, 2010; Gracia, 2009). For example, some women encounter the presence of a "good ole' boys club" (Ballenger & Austin, 2010), and some women are in environments where the acceptance of stereotypical gender roles is "normal" (Gracia, 2009). In the workplace, there are gendered assumptions that undervalue and devalue female leadership (Fletcher, 1999). For example, Fletcher (1999) found that relational leadership was undervalued by men in the workplace because it was considered too feminine.

Women often do not identify themselves as leaders. Many female leaders, when asked to reflect upon their leadership paths, did not expect to rise into leadership positions, but attribute their leadership to "luck" or with reluctance (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Fels, 2004). Women struggle with having confidence to lead, fearing leadership and doubting their own abilities (Lundeberg, 1988). Women tend to downplay their career aspirations and abilities in the workplace by accommodating their career aspirations to a traditionally female role because they have never thought of themselves in a role outside of their gendered view (Baker, 2010). An example of this would be a

woman picturing herself working in the medical field as a nurse, but never as a doctor (2010).

These barriers to female leadership in the workplace show the struggles of women in leadership who have to “work harder, do more, or be better to succeed” (Gerdes, 2003, p. 261). These struggles do not just begin when a woman’s career begins; they begin with early experiences of leadership.

### **Women in College**

College women experience similar patterns of leadership barriers to what women face in the workplace. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the number of women enrolled in higher education institutions from 1980 to 2001 increased by 41 percent, or in real numbers from 5.5 million in 1980 to 7.7 million in 2001. The number of men also increased during this 30-year period, but less dramatically; male college enrollment increased by 20 percent or from 5 million to 6 million. There has been a substantial increase in the percentage of women in the workplace with college degrees since the 1970s (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). In the 2010 census, 36% of working women aged 25-64 held college degrees, compared to 11% in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

Women and men have strong presences on campus, but this does not mean that women and men are similarly affected by college. There are still gaps, or differences, in the ways that women and men are affected by and engage in the college experience (Baenninger, 2011; Sax, 2007; Sax, 2008). College women tend to self-report lower levels of self-confidence than men, even when they have equal or higher GPAs and standardized test scores than men (Sax, 2008).

There are further complications when considering female leadership development at faith-based institutions. The discussion of gender and leadership at faith-based institutions is unique because there are multiple theological views of gender and leadership present on these campuses. In the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) there are 118 member institutions. Among the member characteristics of CCCU institutions is the expectation that member institutions are “committed to Christ-centered education” and employ Christian faculty and administrators (CCCU). This significant group of faith-based institutions often subscribe to traditional gender roles (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010).

Colaner and Warner (2005) found that a college woman’s beliefs about gender roles influence how she views her career. Women’s egalitarian beliefs positively influence career aspirations (2005). Egalitarians express a willingness to adapt their lifestyle decisions with their career goals, while complementarians are not usually aspiring in their careers, when working (2005). Complementarians are more likely to limit their leadership aspirations and therefore their experiences. Those with an egalitarian view of gender are more likely to value their career as important and factor it into their lifestyle.

As a response to the phrase “glass ceiling,” which is used to describe barriers for women that impede their rise to leadership (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991), the phrase “stained glass ceiling” (Mock, 2005) is used for women facing similar barriers in faith-based settings and specifically in higher education institutions (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). Not only does a woman’s view of gender roles affect her leadership, but the

gender role beliefs present at a faith-based institution can influence a female in her leadership and career aspirations.

### **Women and the Pressure to Succeed**

Through the feminist movement, women have won many victories of equality throughout the last several decades that have specifically impacted equality in education and in the workplace for women (Zeilinger, 2012). However, there is growing evidence that many women feel pressure to succeed and to be perfect. In her book, *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*, Martin (2007) observed, “We are a generation of young women who were told we could do anything and instead heard that we had to be everything.”

The victories won for women in leadership opened many opportunities. However, in recent years, many college women interpret these victories not as freedom to succeed, but the pressure to be perfect (Pabst, 2010). A study at Duke University in 2003 found that “many undergraduate women here feel relentless pressure to conform to an ideal...by the expectation that a woman would be ‘smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful, and popular, and that all this would happen without visible effort.’” (Women’s Initiative: Duke University, 2003).

The pressure to be perfect affects many young women with “no concept of enough” (Pabst, 2010, p. 10). Many young women are looking to succeed and achieve in big ways that have not been possible in previous generations (2010). “These discourses of feminine success are contradictory, however—both wildly celebratory and deeply anxiety ridden” (Ringrose, 2007, p. 482). For many women, limitless choices increase doubt, indecision, and confusion about their educational and future choices (Baker, 2010).

There is a sense among young women that their efforts toward perfection will lead to a perfect career and family, which will eventually lead to fulfillment (Landphair, 2007). This unrealistic picture of delayed fulfillment and perfection was recently addressed in an Atlantic magazine article, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All” (Slaughter, 2012). This controversial article challenged the idealism of the freedom that feminism has won for women by examining the stress and sacrifices necessary for women looking to balance work and family (2012).

### **Leadership Development in College Women**

College significantly impacts vocation and personal formation for both female and male students. In addition to the previous discussion of gender gaps for female college students, there is growing attention to the success female college students are finding in comparison to their male counterparts (Lewin, 2006). There are female student leadership programs whose goals are to educate and develop women in leadership as well as to help them reimagine leadership (Trigg, 2006). There are many leadership development skills that can be learned during leadership experiences (Lundeberg, 1988). A study done of college female student leaders recommended that programming efforts be made toward female leadership, specifically toward emerging leaders programs and leadership within campus organizations (Hamilton & Ferguson, 1998).

College leadership experiences lead to the development of leadership skills, personal skills, and self-awareness (Astin & Leland, 1991). Students who experienced leadership development training showed dramatic increase in their leadership behaviors during the course of their college career (Posner, 2009). The present study explored how

leadership development occurred through mentoring relationships, role models, and defining moments.

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring has long been present in culture, going back to Homer's *The Odyssey* and found in many familiar stories (Parks, 2000). "Mentoring, in its classic sense, is an intentional, mutually demanding, and meaningful relationship between two individuals, a young adult and an older, wiser figure who assists the younger person in learning the ways of life" (p. 127). Mentoring aids in the formation of women as leaders and also in their personal formation: "At its best, higher education is distinctive in its capacity to serve as a mentoring environment in the formation of critical adult faith" (p. 159).

Parks (2000) in her book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* gives four attributes important to mentoring relationships. First of all, recognition is an important aspect of mentoring (Parks, 2000). This is especially important for women in leadership who often feel they are in the minority or have less confidence about their leadership abilities. Secondly, supportive mentors (2000) give guidance through the labyrinth of leadership through instilling confidence, connecting with resources, and being an advocate and champion for the mentee's potential. Third, mentors are called to challenge and push the mentee into new experiences or challenges (2000). Finally, mentors are called to inspire (2000). This inspiration comes in many forms, specifically in developing the mentee's positive view of the future and commitment to learning (2000). For women this is especially important because leadership, especially in the workplace, is often a gendered place where women struggle to feel included (Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Fletcher, 1999).



Among many of the positive influences described by women in their journey of leadership, mentoring emerged as a significantly positive factor in their vocational journeys (Astin & Leland, 1991; Dahlgvig & Longman, 2010; Gerdes, 2003; Lord & Preston, 2009; Madsen, 2008). Mentoring has been shown to significantly enhance career success of students who have a high level of interaction with faculty (Chandler, 1996). Mentoring can also serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with gender disadvantages (Gerdes, 2003) as well as provide an increased awareness of leadership potential (Dahlgvig & Longman, 2010).

Mentoring is a powerful way to impact college women. In a study done on the effects of a mentoring program in college, three types of female students were mentioned who specifically benefit from mentoring 1) students in need, 2) students with focus for their futures, and 3) women specializing in male-dominated fields (Putsche et al., 2008). Another aspect of mentoring is what Fels (2004) calls, “spheres of recognition” where a female leader is supported by others who provide honest, critical, and earned recognition (2004). Without this affirmation, women in leadership may feel demoralized (2004).

Unfortunately, female-to-female mentoring relationships are not a common experience for women in college or in the workplace (Ballenger & Austin, 2010). One reason for this is the low number of available female mentors as a result of women being disproportionately represented in leadership positions (Cullen & Luna, 1993; Dahlgvig & Longman, 2010). “Common problems for women include, again, the scarcity of potential mentors, the lack of frequent faculty-protégé interaction, and the tension that stems from traditional gender-role expectations.” (Chandler, 1996, p. 94).

In a survey of Fortune 500 CEOs and female executives, lack of mentoring, lack of role models, and stereotypes about women's roles and abilities were identified as being barriers to women's advancement in the workplace (Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003). In institutions of higher education, there are too few women in upper administration to fulfill the demand for mentors (Cullen & Luna, 1993). Mentoring provides a lasting impact on women as they sort through their own identity, gender, and leadership experiences: "Mentoring emerges as a powerful concept which can meet the needs of both women and institutions. As women increase their numbers in higher education they furnish the opportunity to mentor other women faculty and students." (Cullen & Luna, 1993, p. 2).

### **Role Models**

Due to the limited number of mentors in higher education and often in the workplace, role models can have an important impact on female leadership. Different than mentors, role models are not committed to time and relationship. Instead, a role model is someone whose life and leadership give a good example to those who observe (Wolf-Wendel, 2000). For women, role models can be a powerful example of female leadership. In a study done of female leaders reflecting on their paths to leadership, they said that role models "gave us permission to aspire and to act" (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 47). College teachers, along with high school teachers and parents served as important role models (1991). Networking is an important way for women to connect with peer role models (Eagly & Carli, 2007a), because it allows groups of women to connect with each other and find support and encouragement for their journeys of leadership.

Many women in the study by Astin and Leland (1991) identified that they had role models, but did not have mentors, primarily because of the few available women working in positions of influence. While there are increasingly more women who work in higher education administration and faculty, there continues to be a lack of enough mentors for college women. Role models provide beneficial ways to influence female college women in their leadership.

### **Defining Moments**

In light of the reality that there are a limited number of female mentors available in institutions of higher education, the concept of “defining moments” in women’s leadership development is helpful (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). Defining moments are “moments that significantly shape the direction of an individual’s life” (2010). Dahlvig and Longman (2010) describe three defining moment themes that emerged in their research: 1) someone speaking potential into their lives, 2) someone helping reframe their understanding of leadership, and 3) seeing injustice and standing up for a strong belief. The first two themes directly relate to this study and to the impact that leadership experiences can have on college women.

Defining moments represent building blocks for leadership confidence (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). It is important for those in senior leadership to encourage others in the next generation of female leaders (2010). Looking at the low number of potential female mentors on college campuses and the time it takes to mentor someone, the concept of defining moments as significant in a woman’s leadership development is encouraging. In research done by Dahlvig and Longman (2010), women reported that a

single sentence or a reframed thought said to them encouraged them toward leadership and achieving more than they thought they could on their own.

Women have made significant strides in both the workplace and in higher education, increasing their presence and leadership, and yet barriers to women remain in leadership. The present study explores stories of career women's experiences of being shaped by mentors, role models, and defining moments during their college experiences of college leadership.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This study used a narrative qualitative methodology to analyze the impact on career women of mentors, role models, and defining moments during their collegiate leadership experiences. Interviews were conducted with eight female college graduates from a small, Midwestern, faith-based institution who graduated between the years 1995-2000. Participants held at least one significant leadership position while in college and had a significant number of leadership opportunities in their careers.

Qualitative narrative research connects well with this subject of female leadership. A significant portion of the literature on female senior administrators in higher education uses qualitative and often narrative research as a vehicle to gather information (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Gerdes, 2003; Lord & Preston, 2009; Madsen, 2008). Qualitative methodology is also important for the topic of female leadership because of the complicated nature of this topic. As has been shown in the previous two chapters, much information exists about the current state of female leadership, some of which is contradictory and thus mirrors the complicated nature of female leadership. The qualitative interviews in this study provide personal stories to bring understanding to this important topic.

## **Design**

This research used narrative research design to look at the effects of leadership positions on women 12-18 years after graduating from college. Narrative research is descriptive research that tells the experiences of individuals through the vehicle of story (Cresswell, 2008). Narrative research focuses on individual stories that describe the topic being studied.

The stories collected through semi-structured interviews provide information that is personally and socially relevant to the topic of female leadership (Cresswell, 2008). The interviews were transcribed, coded, and are retold according to emerging themes in the following chapters. The retelling of the stories focuses on the key elements of the stories (Cresswell, 2008). Specifically, the focus is on the themes of each participant's stories.

Much of the literature that looks into female senior administrators in higher education uses qualitative and often narrative research as a vehicle to gather information (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Gerdes, 2003; Lord & Preston, 2009; Madsen, 2008). This method communicates that female leadership, especially amidst hardship, is best understood through story and that the data collected does not fit well into quantitative analysis. Story sharing in studying women is especially effective when considering Gilligan's (1982) theory of female development which posits that "men's social orientation is positional while women's is personal" (p. 16).

## **Participants**

The participants in this study are women who graduated from college during the years 1995-2000 and who served in a significant leadership position at a small,

Midwestern, faith-based institution. Examples of significant leadership positions included a variety of positions such as resident assistant, member of student government, or student leader of a service-learning program.

This research used two types of samplings to guide the selection of the participants in this study. The first type of sampling is theory or concept sampling which is defined by using a sample that allows the researcher to generate a theory or idea about a sub-group (Creswell, 2008). The concept that links these participants to this study is the career impact of mentoring, role models, and defining moments during experiences of female college student leadership. The second type of sampling used in this research is homogeneous sampling. In this sampling the participants are chosen because of their similarity as defined by the research topic (2008). The sub-group in this research will be female student leaders who graduated from a small, Midwestern, faith-based institution during the years 1995-2000.

Potential participants were initially contacted via email (reproduced in Appendix C) requesting a phone interview of 45-60 minutes. Included in the first communication was a description of the study and consent form. Willing participants received the questionnaire one week prior to their interview in order to allow them time to prepare their stories.

The following table represents the college leadership experiences and current careers of the participants in this study.

Table 1

*Participants' College Leadership Roles and Current Careers*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>College Leadership Roles</b>	<b>Current Career</b>
Jane	Student Government Resident Assistant	Church ministry
Mary	Resident Assistant Student Government	Student Development Professional
Leah	Faith-based service organization Student Government Orientation Leader	Higher Education Professional
Amelia	Student Programs	Business
Madison	Resident Assistant Assistant Resident Director	Teacher
Claire	Resident Assistant Faith-based service organization	Church ministry
Sara	Student Government Resident Assistant	Business

**Procedure**

The research was collected by personal, semi-structured interviews. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a general idea of what questions will be asked; however, the interviewer allows for the interviewee to take the interview in different directions than anticipated. It is important for the topic to be explored openly and in the words of the interviewee (Esterberg, 2002). Narrative research method is particularly useful for interviews with marginalized groups: for example, women in leadership who have not always had the freedom to tell their own stories (2002).

In order to prepare for the interviews, an initial pilot interview was conducted with someone whose experiences align with the participants of the study. The pilot interview participant gave consent to be and is included in the results of the study. The pilot interview helped the researcher determine the quality of the questions in order to gain the most accurate information as well as to optimize the participant's time.



**Interview Protocol**

The questions used (see Appendix A) were refined by the pilot interview. The questions were sent prior to the interview via e-mail to the participants so that they could prepare if they chose. However, the questions were not a static list of questions so as not to restrict the views of the participants (Cresswell, 2008) and to allow alternative or clarifying questions to be asked in the interview. The interviews were conducted via telephone because the participant pool consists of post-college women living in diverse places. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a transcriptionist.

**Measure**

Each interview lasted 40-80 minutes, followed by transcription. Once transcribed, the interviews were coded to identify specific themes and narrative threads that emerged from the interviews. Participants offered to give any clarification needed post-interview. However, no follow-up was needed by the researcher.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

When considering the labyrinth that women often encounter in their journey of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007a; 2007b), the interviews for this study pursued stories that described the participants' experiences during their college leadership opportunities. The image of the labyrinth is helpful considering the unique journey of each participant in this study.

The women interviewed for this research were involved in college leadership positions at a small, Midwestern, faith-based institution. Each of the participants was involved in multiple leadership positions throughout college. Of the eight participants, six were involved in residence life leadership. Three participants were involved in student government, and three participants were involved in faith-based service organizations within the university. The following themes emerged from the research and are discussed in order from the most frequently occurring theme to the least frequently occurring theme.

Five major themes emerged from these interviews that describe the ways in which the participants were impacted by their college student leadership positions. First of all, the impact of leadership positions and its six sub-themes will be discussed, followed by the roles of mentoring in the leadership development of women and then the influence of

role models and impact of defining moments, along with its three sub-themes. Finally, the result of the impact of peer influence will be discussed.

### **Impact of Leadership Positions**

In every interview, each of the eight participants mentioned ways she were impacted by the leadership positions she held while in college. Specifically, the participants developed their leadership style, grew in confidence, developed resilience, learned to work with differences, and created community. The sub-themes are listed in order from most commonly occurring sub-theme to least commonly occurring sub-theme.

**Development of leadership style.** As the participants discussed their college leadership experiences, Claire shared that she learned when “you are leading it is about serving.” Sara noted the uniqueness of leadership style when she mentioned that it is “really important in leadership...to utilize and find everybody’s strengths.” Many participants referenced specific stories or memories that helped them develop their leadership styles. Mary referenced how she developed her relationship-style leadership through the example given her during her experience in residence life leadership: “You earn the respect...of those you are trying to lead and the best, most efficient way to do that is probably through relationships.”

Jane told the story of an influential administrator who knew her well and shared with her the ways that he saw potential in her leadership. This story influenced the way she thought about her leadership style:

His words have really stuck with me, intact, of I don’t have to walk into a room and be seen as the one who is in charge. I don’t actually even – I actually think it serves my influence better if I don’t. Cause then I can collaborate with people

and have conversations behind the scenes and, you know, I would rather start from behind the scenes and then have people move me into roles of influence, rather than walk in to take them.

**Confidence development.** Confidence development emerged as a significant characteristic for these women through their college leadership experiences. Support, encouragement, and confidence in skills and talents were mentioned by all of the eight participants. Amelia described a time in college when “I decided that we should have this big pig roast and that was sponsored by [our place of residence] and like they were yeah go ahead.” Amelia concluded this story with the lesson, “if I have an idea and I want to execute it, then I can.”

Jane shared a story of confidence development that came during the need to make a difficult decision:

For me, it was learning the courage to say it is never too late to shape a vision or to declare something. You should always be learning, even in the midst of building something. And if you feel like something is not right, you have to have the confidence as a leader to make that call.

**Resilience.** Resilience emerged as a theme in four of the eight interviews.

Resilience was not explicitly mentioned by the participants, but the stories told revealed that the women learned from failures and showed perseverance in the midst of trials.

Leah shared her disappointment in not being hired for a residence life position:

There just seemed to be this kind of stair step path – like first you are an [orientation] leader and then you do this and, oh, and then you are a [resident assistant]. And I felt like if I didn’t get that then somehow I had missed the next

stepping stone of my experience...– as soon as I let that go – other things just opened up that I just hadn't seen as great opportunities before.

Another aspect of resilience that emerged in the interviews is persevering through difficulty and lack of positive results. Claire reflected on her volunteer work with teens: “It is not, like, as soon as you experience discouragement that you should move on – all the time – I think [that] is a pretty big lesson.” For these women, their resilience to persevere through the difficulties and disappointment of leadership grew during their college leadership experiences.

**Working with differences.** Three women described working with differences through their stories of working with difficult personalities, managing conflict, and differences, and seeing value between two styles of leadership. One question posed by Claire while working in residence life was, “how to build unity within this group of people who had such different backgrounds and such different personalities.”

Mary said, “my RA position, it helped me to be ok with conflict and having difficult conversations one-on-one with people, um, even when I'm getting difficult news,” which demonstrated both learning to confront and to be confronted as an impact of leadership.

Finally, Madison talked about understanding differences in leadership approaches when her supervisor changed from one year to the next: “So it wasn't like one was good or bad – they were just different. For me that was great to have two really strong leaders model leadership in a different way.”

**Create community.** Of the eight participants in this study, five women mentioned ways that they were contributed to creating community and ways that they

were affected by the communities they led. Jane mentioned that she felt more like an owner than a participant through her leadership role in residence life. The residence life staff Lucy worked with was influential in “figuring out how to support each other.” Creating community was most often associated with residence life leadership roles. However, Jane told a story of creating community amidst difficult personalities on her student government team. After seeking counsel, she came to the following conclusion:

Nobody wants to be part of a team that has a negative dynamic to it and that conflict forced me to fight for a positive, loving, team environment and I still have to do that to this day. So having to navigate that kind of conflict was really good for me.

For these participants, creating community involved feeling ownership and responsibility toward the group. The strong sense of responsibility led to supportive environments for which, at times, they had to fight.

**Practical skills.** A variety of practical skills learned during college leadership emerged from seven of the participants. Madison mentioned the training received by residence life leaders that “they really worked at trying to, like, hand us useful tools to be leaders, how to handle conflict, how to deal with confrontation.” Jane mentioned that she learned “a lot about the complexity of how an organization is run” through her role in student government which allowed her to be present at board meetings. Mary mentioned that her role in residence life taught her to seek to earn respect through relationships. She reflected, “I think it has made me a more patient leader.”

## **Impact of Mentors**

Mentors played a significant role in the leadership development during college for all eight of the women in this study. Several mentioned that their mentors welcomed them into their lives by inviting them into their homes and spending time with their families. Time with mentors was also a significant theme that emerged from the interviews in this study. Two significant sub-themes that emerged included the impact of mentors who gave value and who showed belief in the participants.

**Gave value.** One of the effects of the mentors in the participants' lives, mentioned by five participants, was the common thread that the mentor gave value to that person. Lucy said, "There was this really, really safe, hopeful, encouraging place on [the Resident Director's] couch" who cared about her personal life, not only her job as a leader. Madison spoke of a faculty mentor who had "such a listening ear. And made you feel like an equal and a peer when you were in this conversation with this super intelligent like mentor figure." These examples of mentoring show the significance of mentors giving value through impactful relationships.

**Showed belief.** The second sub-theme of mentors showing belief impacted the participants in this study. Jane said, "I felt complete support in what I was doing but I also felt a lot of freedom." Leah said, "I needed someone to just kind of tap me on the shoulder a little bit and say – would you consider something?" After being hired as a sophomore resident assistant, Madison reflected, "if someone in an administrative position believes in me and sees that leadership, I want to rise to that expectation."

Leah shared a story of a difficult student teaching experience and the belief she was shown by a mentor:

I had a horrific first student teaching experience.... [a professor] sat me down and said two things – one, this is what we have prepared you for. You should be able to walk in a classroom right now and do it. And so the fact that they are leaving you alone to do your job is what we have been preparing you for. Do that. And two, every day you come here afterwards....he didn't just step in to change things....No like good, this is an opportunity for you to show what you have learned and to do something and make a difference where you are.

### **Impact of Role Models**

Each participant recalled stories of role models during their college experiences that had an impact on them, both personally and related to leadership. These role models ranged from guest speakers on campus, to passionate faculty members, to relational administrators and student development professionals.

Three women mentioned memorable female guest speakers who gave inspirational and courageous examples of female leadership in international Christian service positions. Professors were mentioned as role models for sharing their passion for their discipline with students. The most frequently mentioned group of role models was administrators. They were mentioned by six women in this study for the examples given of seeing potential in students, modeling relational leadership, and showing care for students. One specific story told by Lucy involved a student development administrator who:

Calls me in his office and says let's just pray over your summer with these students. Like, that blew my mind in a couple levels – one, he knew who I was, two, he cared about what was happening at that level. And three, he sat me down,



he prayed specifically for me and that was who he was.... That was definitely a model to me of seizing the moment that no person or work or role or even the time period for which you were doing it is too small for him to be aware of.

Role models took the form of guest speakers, faculty and administration, and student development professionals, providing a unique opportunity to take advantage of opportunities to speak into the lives of students and ways that have a lasting impact.

### **Impact of Defining Moments**

According to research conducted by Dahlvig and Longman (2010), defining moments are categorized into three areas: 1) reframing definitions, 2) someone speaking potential, and 3) standing up for a belief. The participants in this study shared stories of defining moments that represented all three of these categories. These defining moments occurred with mentors, role models, and peers.

**Reframing definitions.** Five women mentioned defining moment experiences when someone helped reframe their definition of leadership. Mary shared a defining moment she had with a peer who challenged her to recognize her own gifts. Her friend said, “don’t you see, you love people well and that is – not everyone does – it is not like this is a common gift everybody has.” This statement helped Mary reframe her definition and say, “I think that was empowering to me. And affirming of the relationship building, and the way I was leading, and the way that it interacted with people- that it does matter.”

**Someone speaking potential.** Six women identified defining moments where someone spoke potential into their lives. Amelia mentioned a faculty member who said to her, “you can accomplish whatever you want to do, you just really need to just decide

what are priorities for yourself and where do you see God leading you.” This defining moment helped Amelia be confident to seek goals and set priorities in her life.

Madison recalled the story of a student tragedy when she was the only residence life leader in her building. After calling a staff member for help, she was told:

We trust you and we trust that you are going to be there for your girls and walk them through that. So they didn’t leave me out to – hang me out to dry, but at the same time, it was that – crossroad of like, you can do this. Like, nobody is prepared to handle this and you’re not alone and your hall director is coming and we are all here for you. But like, you can do this; you know....being a leader doesn’t always mean having the right answers. It just means stepping up and leading.

**Stood up for belief.** Three women spoke of defining moments where they stood up for injustices that they saw while serving in college leadership positions. Lucy recalled a story of confronting someone who was emotionally hurting the women on her floor in the residence hall: “The defender of injustice came out of me.” Jane talked about the internal struggle of deciding between taking on responsibility through a leadership position or choosing more freedom and fun her senior year. “I had to wrestle with that....And, um, the bigger cause ended up winning and pulling me in and feeling like I could help bring about change and help create a great environment and, um, help contribute to the culture.”

### **Impact of Peers**

Peer influence emerged as a significant theme in the interviews conducted for this research. Every participant in this research told stories of peers influencing their

leadership and personal development while in college. Amelia said, “I have learned probably more from my friends and peers than I did from anybody else when I was there.” Lucy stated, “those relationships that developed with other [RAs] and other places and buildings – that was huge.” The peer influence sub-themes that emerged were encouragement, supporting each other, and formational conversations.

**Encouragement.** Four women mentioned ways that peers encouraged them in their leadership positions. Many of the stories involved friends who encouraged the participants to pursue a specific leadership position. Lucy and Mary mentioned the encouragement from others on their floors that influenced them to apply for residence life positions. Jane mentioned the peer support she received when her friends encouraged her to run for a position in student government. Madison received support from her peers when she decided to take a position that kept her living in the residence hall while her friends lived away from campus. She said of her friends:

I really respect and admire them for having the wisdom to like push me to take these roles. Cause, like, they knew that I wasn't going to be as available as a friend if I was an assistant hall director. Like, it was heartbreaking for me to stay in the dorms when they were all getting a house off campus together... They were just, like, – hey, you are going to be great at that and we are still going to come hang out. So they didn't ever make me feel like I was choosing to be a leader over them. And that is maturity.

**Supporting each other.** Another significant theme of peer influence was learning from each other. Sara talked about the ways she learned from her friends who are different than her: “I think about each of those friends and peers that I have, I was

able to learn a lot just based on the things that make them unique.” Jane said of her residence life position, “It was teaching you how to have a peer environment where you are leading peers together.”

**Formational conversations.** The final sub-theme of the impact of peer influence is formational conversations. Four women mentioned significant conversations that impacted them as leaders. In the midst of a residence life position, Lucy said that the level of conversation with the other residence life student leaders “brought out a different type of trust and confidence.” Madison mentioned a formational conversation with her friends that showed their support. She said, “They understood, like, the demands of those responsibilities....I’m so grateful that they weren’t, like, come on – be 20 – why do you have to go do that?...They knew how to have fun and do college well.”

Leah told a story of a challenging formational conversation while applying for a hired position in student government. Leah was applying for a position and the Student Body President (SBP) at the time was her friend. He gave her application back to her and said, “I won’t accept this unless it is type written.” Leah responded, “Are you kidding me – It is, like, half a semester this job.” The SBP replied, “No, please – this is professional experience.” This conversation helped Leah see the importance of taking her work seriously.

### **Impact on Career**

The following section describes the impact college leadership had on the participants’ careers, which seven women discussed. Melissa was influenced by her college leadership experiences in how she handles conflicts. Sara said that her college leadership experience in residence life shaped her managing style of focusing on the

whole person. Claire mentioned that she is currently invested in leading small groups of women, stating, “So I love leading women’s small groups and I think...that has come from [college] and probably from being a [resident assistant].”

Jane talked about her experience in student government preparing her to work well with older men in her career. She explained her college experience as, “So much of what I do is engaging in circles that are mostly men. And a lot of environments where I’m not only the only female, I’m the youngest person in the room.” Now she experiences a similar work environment, “So it is very interesting, cause to this day I - the majority of settings I’m in, I’m working with men at least three decades older than me. And that experience has, well, really served me.”

Amelia talked about her willingness to work hard and be a servant leader. She identified these skills in others and practiced them in college and is currently using them in her career:

I know it is frustrating – being a servant leader – it is amazing how [mumble] that in itself, I think, has just encouraged my staff and promotion at times. It is being willing to get your hands dirty and do the things that need to get done, [mumble] at different levels and you know I think but then also you know being confident in those leadership skills.”

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The present study explored how women, 12-18 years after college, were shaped through the impact of mentors, role models, and defining moments in their experiences of student leadership during college. Current books that discuss female leadership such as *Thriving in leadership* (Longman, 2012) and *Lean in* (Sandberg, 2013), along with articles like “Why Women Can’t Have It All” (Slaughter, 2012) show that the formation of female leaders is a topic worthy of consideration. Along with current literature, the results of this research provide a picture of how college can be an important time for women to develop leadership skills that shape them for their future work. The following discussion uses the themes described in the results and relevant literature to discuss implications for practice.

#### **Impact of Leadership**

Six sub-themes emerged as types of impact that leadership positions had on the women in this study: 1) development of leadership style, 2) confidence, 3) resilience, 4) working with differences, 5) creating community, and 6) practical skills. Many of these themes are consistent with those found in the literature on female leadership; however, few of these topics were explicitly discussed in the literature as part of female leadership development. The following discussion will address the consistencies and inconsistencies between the findings of this study and the current literature.

Eagly and Carli (2007a; 2007b) use the labyrinth image to describe the non-linear path of leadership development through which many women journey. The women in this study affirmed college as a time when they began to question, practice, and be encouraged in their leadership ability and experience.

According to the Duke Women's Study conducted in 2003, undergraduate women feel "pressure to conform to an ideal" and often feel indecision and confusion about their future possibilities (Women's Initiative: Duke University, 2003). The themes in this study provide a positive vision for the ways that women can be shaped through their leadership experiences in college. Astin and Leland (1991) found that leadership skills, personal skills, and self-awareness can be developed in college through leadership opportunities.

The workplace, where women often face difficulty in rising to executive leadership, is also a changing environment that is becoming more welcoming to the skills that women are more likely to bring to leadership (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007b; Kezar, 2000). The skills mentioned by the participants in this study reflect what they learned through leadership in college and what they bring into the workplace. These themes aid women in navigating the labyrinth of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007b).

**Development of leadership style.** A strong theme in the interviews revealed that many women felt they experienced growth in the development of their leadership styles during their various leadership positions in college. Sara mentioned that she learned how she reacts in stressful situations:

I remember a lot of those moments. Challenging. And like I said I think my reaction was to go into “alright I’ll just work hard, I’ll do it – I’ll get it all done. I’ll do it all by myself” mode. I think it was during that time that I learned that is how I kind of react.

Three women mentioned the impact of learning to lead as a servant leader, while learning to be a relational leader was mentioned by three women. While the theme of leadership style development was strong, this same theme did not emerge in the literature. However, the following sub-themes do have connections to the literature in this field.

**Confidence development.** The literature suggests that women are often reluctant leaders (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Fels, 2004) and struggle with confidence (Lundeberg, 1988). Confidence emerged as a sub-theme in many aspects of this research, specifically in the overall impact of college leadership positions, of mentors, defining moments, and peer influence.

The women in this study relayed experiences when they felt support to pursue an idea, confidence to make difficult decisions, and reassurance to pursue leadership positions with confidence because of encouragement from others. Jane reflected that working in a student government leadership position “was a lot about gaining confidence.” Jane also mentioned that “senior year was much more about having the confidence to use my voice....So much more about influence that year.”

For the women in this study, confidence was developed through experiences of leadership positions and, more specifically, when a leadership position affirmed strengths. Mary told this story about confidence development:



I also felt prepared to meet that challenge and then when I did, and would receive feedback about it was, like, ok you did it really well. And not that I did it perfectly but, um, for me that was huge confidence building - what seemed insurmountable or outside of my wheel house, my strengths, or whatever you want to say. It was like, oh, I could do that and that was ok.

**Resilience.** Resilience emerged as a theme in the interviews with stories about persevering through disappointments and difficulties surrounding leadership. Resilience was not specifically mentioned in the literature, but is consistent with the literature on women encountering difficulty in their paths to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007a; Gerdes, 2003).

Claire shared this reflection about the resilience and perseverance she learned through her challenging leadership experiences:

I just had a lot of crisis of faith, crisis of identity, crisis question over “am I doing this wrong, am I not the right fit, why is this not being fruitful?” . . . just learning how to lead when things are hard. So I think the crisis would be for me – just wondering if God really wants me to lead something - what do I do when it is not going well?

**Working with differences.** Working with differences emerged as a theme in the interviews of this study, though it was not directly addressed in the literature. However, since women face unique challenges in leadership, it is important for women to develop the skills of working with differences so that they are prepared to enter the workforce.

Mary mentioned that her residence life experience gave her the “opportunity to not just learn [work with differences] in theory but then to also practice it and practice it

– with people you are literally living with.” Claire asked the question of her residence life experience, “how do you draw out the ones that are so quiet and how do you maybe help the ones that maybe want to take over the situation?” The stories told by the participants of working with differences showed that the women interacted with those different from themselves and worked to find commonality with a variety of people.

**Creating community.** Creating community emerged as an impact of leadership positions for the women in the study and is not consistent with the literature. Community is valued at this institution and, therefore, it makes sense that creating community was an outcome of this study.

Jane said that working on a residence life team was “teaching you to build a support network around you.” She continued:

From the standpoint of the [RA], I would say, um, that was all about, you know, leading peers and rallying peers together to create community. And, you know, I really think that, you know, even in work environment now, the ability to help create a fun, vibrant community where people feel like they are known and believed in is essential.

**Practical skills.** Several practical skills emerged as the final impact of college leadership positions for women. Specifically, confrontation and how an organization is run are skills important for women to understand as they enter the workforce. The overarching skill involved learning how to take on responsibility. One participant said of her leadership position, “there was assumed responsibility and assumed authority. You have a position, which means you are therefore responsible and we just trust you to do that.”

## **Mentors**

The role of mentors emerged as a significant theme in the literature by playing important and positive roles in the vocational journey of women (Astin & Leland, 1991; Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Gerdes, 2003; Lord & Preston, 2009; Madsen, 2008). Two key mentoring themes that emerged in this research were when a mentor 1) gave them value, which was described as being welcoming and willing to listen, and 2) believed in them, meaning that they felt supported and that they could rise to the challenges asked of them. In this study mentor was defined loosely, allowing each participant to name those who served as leadership supervisors and personal mentors for them. The participants told stories of mentors who were supervisors, administrators, and small group leaders.

In *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Parks (2000) outlines four attributes of mentoring relationships: 1) recognition, 2) guidance, 3) challenge and push, and 4) inspiration. These stories told by the participants in this study aligned with Parks' attributes of mentors. The majority of the stories the participants told about mentors revolved around encouragement and relationship building, similar to the recognition and inspiration characteristics outlined by Parks. The qualities of mentoring relating to challenge and push from Parks' model were less evident in this study.

Amelia received recognition from a mentor who affirmed in her those things in which she already excelled. Claire felt inspired by a mentor who displayed grace in his interactions with others. Lucy talked about being pushed by a mentor to pursue a graduate program. Leah told a story of a mentor who guided her through a difficult experience, helping her cope with difficulty and persevering with excellence. In each of

these experiences, mentors played an important role in helping these women in their leadership development.

None of the women in this study said that they felt discouraged as female leaders while in college. This was inconsistent with the literature which talked about mentors serving as a coping mechanism for gender disadvantages (Gerdes, 2003). Mary said, "I had been told I was a leader, I had been a part of experiences, and then I think probably during my time at Taylor I started to believe it." She continued, "There was nothing . . . that made me feel as though, um, there was dissonance in being a female leader." It is unclear from this study why the participants' experiences did not match the literature on the subject of the difficult journey of leadership that women often experience.

However, the participants consistently mentioned the encouragement that they felt in their leadership in college, which sustained them through vocational experiences post-college that were difficult to navigate. Madison said:

I was working full time at a church while doing my Master's...that I was like, oh, I'm now finally realizing there are things I'm not supposed to do and not allowed to do. But I would say because [the university] never put that ceiling, or that idea, in my mind, I think it really provided a certain strength.

Results did not emerge indicating that female-to-female mentoring was more significant to the leadership development than male-to-female mentoring for the women in this study. The mentors mentioned by the participants were both female and male. This may be a result of the environment, which aligns with the literature stating that there are not sufficient numbers of available female mentors (Chandler, 1996; Dahlvig & Longman, 2010) for many women (Ballenger & Austin, 2010).

There was no substantial difference in the impact male and female mentors had on the women in this study. According to the literature, mentoring can serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with gender disadvantages (Gerdes, 2003). However, in this study, both women and men shown as agents of support in developing women as leaders by giving value and showing belief in the women with whom they work.

### **Role Models**

The women in this study told stories of impactful role models that were consistent with the literature on role models in female leadership development. The women in this study each mentioned several persons who impacted them through their example or brief interaction.

Several examples of role models were mentioned in this study. Two women told stories of female guest speakers on campus who were inspiring and gave a memorable vision for women in leadership working in international Christian service positions. Three women named professors who served as role models when they shared with students a passion for their discipline. Astin and Leland (1991) affirmed the effects of such role models when they describe that role models “gave permission to aspire and to act” (p. 47).

Another theme that emerged relating to role models indicated that they provided a good example for others to observe. In addition to the professors already mentioned who shared passion for their discipline with students, administrators were often mentioned for their leadership that was relational, student-focused, and good examples of leadership.

## **Defining Moments**

Defining moments, according to the research by Dahlvig and Longman (2010), fall into three categories. The first is when someone speaks potential into another's life. Secondly, a defining moment is when someone reframes another's understanding and definition of leadership. Finally, defining moments happen when someone stands up for strong belief or against an injustice.

In this research, the participants had experiences of defining moments that met the description of all three categories. The most common defining moments mentioned by seven of the women in this study were someone speaking potential into their lives and redefining leadership for them. There were fewer examples given of times when women stood up for a strong belief or against an injustice. This is consistent with the themes of this study that emphasize the importance of encouragement, a common aspect of the themes of mentoring, role models, and peer influence.

## **Peer Influence**

Peer influence emerged as a strong theme in this research. This finding was unexpected and emerged through one of the first interviews. The question of peer influence was asked in the subsequent interviews. The answers to this question revealed that the influence of peers had a positive impact on the leadership development of the women in this study.

Three themes of peer influence shaped the responses: encouragement, supporting each other, and formational conversations. Encouragement emerged again as a theme in this research. Supportive peer friendships were mentioned several times by women in this study. Women commented that they wanted to learn from their friends and that they felt

supported in their leadership by their friends. These formational conversations instilled trust and confidence and were challenging. The importance of peer influence on leadership development was mentioned by all of the women in this study.

### **Research Limitations**

One limitation of this research is that the women interviewed were alumni from one institution. The population sample was limited in this way not allowing for diverse campus experiences. Another limitation may arise from the broad definition used for the term mentoring in this study. During the interviews, mentoring was loosely defined to allow each participant to determine who served as a mentor for her. Because of this loose definition, the results of the impact of mentoring may be less reliable as each participant could self-select who she determined to be a mentor. Additionally, each of the participants self-selected into leadership positions, creating a self-selection bias in the research because many of these women showed initiative into leadership. It is unclear if the impacts of leadership on the women in this study are a direct result of their leadership experience and mentoring relationships.

Another limitation relates to the participants themselves. This study was conducted with women who were 12-18 years post-graduation who were asked to recall memories and stories of leadership from college. Memories can be less potent and possibly glossed over because of the significant time and space between the time of this study and their undergraduate experiences. Finally, the questions were written after the literature was reviewed, creating potential bias because the questions may lead the results in specific directions.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study addresses the impact of mentors, role models, and defining moments during college leadership experiences on career women, 12-18 years after college. There are implications for future research topics that would continue the discussion of this topic of female leadership development. This topic could be enhanced by future research conducted with women not involved in college student leadership looking for whether or not they felt their college experiences, without formal leadership, impact their current career.

Future research could also focus on the impact of college leadership on working mothers post-graduation. There were several participants who referenced unique challenges to working mothers that were not explored in this study. Because this study focused on graduates from a faith-based institution, there would be benefit to conduct a similar study at a non-faith-based institution. In addition, this study could be similarly conducted with male participants. It would be helpful to compare and contrast the findings from each study focused relating to gender differences. Finally, this study could be conducted with women at varied intervals: for example, women who graduated from an institution 1 year, 5 years, or 20 years ago.

### **Implications for Practice**

The women in this study mentioned numerous ways their college leadership experiences prepared them for their careers. Fletcher (1999) writes about the importance of women developing and sharpening the skills needed in the workplace. In order to deliberately develop female leaders in their leadership ability, this study found that



offering encouragement, providing significant responsibility, and assisting peers to teach and support each other are important elements to developing female leaders.

Encouragement emerged as a significant theme in this study, both in pursuing leadership roles and while in leadership positions. For those working with female student leaders, it is important to verbally encourage them in their ability to lead. It is also important for those who work with female leaders to communicate value and to show belief in the women leaders under their supervision. These types of encouragements from mentors had a lasting impact on the women in this study.

Six participants mentioned that they were given significant responsibility, and several participants mentioned that they were able to do more than they thought they could in their leadership. Because many women attribute “luck” to their rise to leadership (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Fels, 2004), high expectations are important for women to practice their leadership as they develop their leadership style and develop leadership confidence. It is also important that high expectations be balanced with encouragement. The women in this study persevered during difficulties showing resilience in leadership. Mentors should encourage women to persevere during difficult times and also to challenge to do more than they thought they could. The balance of challenge and support (Evans, Forney & DiBrito, 1998) emerged in this study as beneficial for female leaders.

Peer influence emerged as a strong theme in this research. Every participant in this study mentioned the impact of peer influence on their development, indicating the importance of college students teaching and learning from each other. Peer influence represents an avenue for college students to support and challenge each other and represents opportunities for relationships that may continue after graduation, as it is more

common for friends to stay in communication with each other than for mentors or role models to stay in contact with their students.

Programmatically, the themes in this research could be addressed through a series of discussions on campus designed for undergraduate female students addressing topics of female leadership development. These discussions would allow female leaders to share with developing female leaders their experiences of walking through the labyrinth of leadership. Programs designed to help women through the labyrinth of leadership are also helpful for women working in the field of higher education. Programs addressing leadership skill development would be helpful to instill confidence and to help women persevere during challenging situations. It would be particularly helpful to incorporate mentoring relationships in these programs to walk alongside women as they develop as leaders.

It is evident from the discussion of this study, that there are lasting impacts for women when they have experiences of mentoring, role models, and defining moments in their college leadership experiences. These are key elements to developing women as leaders, allowing them to grow in confidence, leadership abilities, and resilience.

## **Conclusion**

Significant impacts on career women who have experienced mentoring, role models, and defining moments during college leadership experiences emerged in this study. For females, developing as a leader has unique challenges and college is an important time for this development. Because of this, encouragement from mentors, role models, experiences of defining moments, and peer influence are important factors in the formation of female leadership.

Among the impacts of leadership experiences in college for women, resilience emerged as important because the ability to persevere during difficulties or failures provided the participants with confidence to lead even when discouraged. It was striking during the interviews in this study that encouragement in leadership emerged as such a strong theme. The call to supervisors, administrators, and college students is to act upon opportunities to encourage women in leadership so that they are better prepared to enter the workforce as leaders.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

1. What leadership position(s) did you hold in college?
2. How did those experiences impact you? As a leader? As a woman?
3. What key elements in your experience developed you as a leader? Supervisor, crisis, level of responsibility?
4. Did you experience discouragement in your leadership position? Did you perceive tension theologically towards you as a female leader? In college? Post college?
5. Did you feel pressure to succeed? Fear of failure?
6. Were you mentored in your college leadership position?
7. Have you experienced a mentor in your career?
8. Tell me about the role models that you had in college.
9. What defining moments stick out to you from your college experience?
10. What was the influence of peers on your leadership development in college?

**Appendix B**  
**Informed Consent**

**TAYLOR UNIVERSITY**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

The Impact on Career Women of Mentoring, Role Models and Defining Moments  
During College Student Leadership Experiences

You are invited to participate in a research study of the impact on career women of mentors, role models and defining moments during college leadership development shaped their current experiences in the workplace. You were selected as a possible subject because you were involved in college leadership. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Lisa Barber at Taylor University with association with the completion of Master's thesis Master of Arts in Higher Education Program. If you agree to participate, you will be one of eight subjects who will be participating in this research. If you agree to be in the study, you will participate in a 45-60 minute-long interview over the phone or in person discussing your experiences of mentors, roles models and defining moments in college and the impact they had on you.

When taking part in the study, the risks are being uncomfortable answering the questions or remembering difficult experiences and completing the interview may include possible loss of confidentiality. While completing the survey, you can tell the researcher that you feel uncomfortable or do not care to answer a particular question. There is no alternative way to participate in this study if a phone interview or in person interview is not possible. You will not receive payment for taking part in this study. The benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are to add to the research on the impact of female student leadership which help shape future leaders.

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. I cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results are stored. The recordings of the interviews will be accessed by the researcher and the transcriber, Rachael Morley. The interviews will be destroyed after the research is completed.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Connie Lightfoot, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records. If you have questions related to the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or the Chair of the IRB, R. Edwin Welch at 756-998-4315 or [edwelch@taylor.edu](mailto:edwelch@taylor.edu)

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which

you are entitled. For questions about the study, contact the researcher Lisa Barber at 630-450-4411.

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C**

### **Initial Email to Potential Participants**

Dear {Insert name},

My name is Lisa Barber. I am a Master's student in the Higher Education program at Taylor University. I am conducting research and looking for participants willing to be interviewed. My research is on the impact of mentors, role models, and defining moments on college leadership opportunities for women in their careers.

I am looking for participants who graduated from Taylor between the years 1993-1999, were involved in student leadership (specifically, TSO, TWO, Discipleship or Residence Life) and are currently working in some capacity.

If you are willing to be a part of my research, I would be very appreciative. You can reply to my at this email and we can set up an hour-long interview. The interview will include questions of your college experience, focusing on your experiences of mentoring, with role models and defining moments that contributed to your development.

If you are willing to be a part of my research, I would be so grateful. Please respond to this email and I will work with you to set up an interview.

Thank you so much for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Lisa Barber

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