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Fostering Women's Leadership in the Classroom

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Problem

Women in college suffer from what Elizabeth J. Allen and Mary Madden refer to as “the chilly classroom”: a set of subtle behaviors from both faculty and students that silence and marginalize women in the classroom and prohibit them from developing leadership skills (2006). Without realizing it, faculty can unwittingly impede the development of leadership skills in women.

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Hypothesis

College and university faculty must create and offer special opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom to develop leadership skills in college women.

This includes paying special attention to including women in classroom discussions, advocating and nurturing leadership behaviors in women, and encouraging women in leadership positions to serve as coaches and visible role models.



Data and Findings

- Women rarely have the opportunity to lead in the classroom despite doing the bulk of group work (Allen & Madden, 2006).
- The subconscious or unwitting behaviors of faculty can stunt the development of leadership skills in even the most talented women, according to a study of gender disparities at Harvard Law School. (Patel, 2013).
- Women in college face obstacles when faculty interpret their leadership behaviors negatively (Rosch, Olgosky, and Stephens, 2017).
- Americans are more likely to value leadership-associated characteristics like power, strength, and aggression more negatively in women and more positively in men (Walker, Bialik, and van Kessel, 2018), an attitude which may be reflected unconsciously in the classroom.
- Campus curricular groups and activities are often not enough to develop leadership skills in college women (Rosch & Stephens, 2017).

Solutions

Women in the classroom can benefit from:

- Courses that incorporate or are based on leadership or teaching leadership skills
- Significant immersion-based leadership initiatives sponsored by colleges and organizations (Ross, Ogolsky, & Stephens, 2017)
- Faculty mentoring and coaching (Rosch & Stephens 2017)
- The presence of women in faculty and administrative leadership roles
- Encouragement to express ideas and thoughts freely
- Positive interpretation of and response to leadership behaviors

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