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An Exploratory and Descriptive Study of Destructive Leadership in U.S. Higher Education

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In recent years, the popular media has seen a host of scandals related to poor leadership in higher education. Penn State University, the University of Michigan, Winthrop University, Northern Illinois University, and Edinburgh College are just a few postsecondary institutions that experienced what many would call destructive leadership, ultimately leading to leader turnover at the highest levels of the organization. But just how common is destructive leadership in U.S. higher education? This study sought to answer that question and others through descriptive, quantitative research using a modified version of the Destructive Leadership Questionnaire. Participants from a variety of sectors in higher education indicated destructive leadership is not as common as one might think; however, several components of the study highlighted areas for future research.

Keywords: destructive leadership; higher education; leadership behavior

Introduction

Scholars have described a wide variety of personality characteristics and behaviors needed for effective leadership in higher education. Black (2015) noted that because of the unique challenges in the field of higher education, leaders should employ both leadership and management competencies, rather than separate them. Leadership should emphasize the direction of the larger purpose of the organization, while management should bring attention to the day-to-day operations of the organization (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016). Leaders in academia are also expected to nurture self-confidence and self-worth in their subordinates, as well as create a work environment of self-expression and safeguarded academic freedom (Pawlowska, Braun, Peus, & Frey, 2010).

There is an abundance of studies detailing the desired behaviors of leaders in higher education (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Black, 2015; Bryman, 2007; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Smith & Wolverton, 2010; Spendlove, 2007); however, there

is little scholarly research about the antithesis of desired leadership behavior—destructive leadership behaviors—in the higher education context. This study was shaped to fill the gap between the behaviors exhibited by good leaders in the field and the behaviors displayed by those considered destructive, and analyze it within the context of higher education.

Higher education institutions are often considered unique concerning leadership needs (Pawlowska, Braun, Feus, & Frey, 2010). Pawlowska, Braun, Peus, and Frey (2010) posit that leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) are predisposed to destructive leadership behaviors due to the “unique nature of leading academic followers...and the lack of preparation for the role of a leader” (p. 482). Higher education leaders, therefore, face the paradox of higher education leadership—maintaining control, while allowing autonomy. To this end, higher education institutions may be susceptible to destructive leadership more than other sectors, but it remains to be seen the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior in postsecondary education.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to empirically describe the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors among leaders in a position of authority in higher education, as perceived by their direct subordinates. More specifically, it seeks to describe the prevalence of 29 destructive leadership behaviors, as identified by Shaw, Erickson, and Harvey (2011), in the context of higher education in the United States. Those behaviors are grouped into five broad categories: generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, political behaviors, personal behaviors, and bullying. Furthermore, the study will describe the prevalence of such behaviors among a variety of employee demographics, including positional levels of

authority, divisions of an institution's organizational structure, and gender of the leader, among others.

Literature Review

Defining Destructive Leadership

The study of leadership has a long history, and has gone through many phases. In the early years of the discipline, scholars focused on personal traits and characteristics of the leader (Northouse, 2016). In the late 1930s, however, scholars began to recognize personal traits were not a reliable predictor of good leadership, and shifted focus to leader behaviors or styles (Crawford, Brungardt, & Maughn, 2005). In 1978, James MacGregor Burns' *Leadership*, now considered a seminal work in the field of leadership studies, defined transactional and transformational leadership. Burns' definition of leadership intentionally excluded any person who fails "to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers," from being considered a leader (Burns, 1978, p. 18). Subsequently, a majority of leadership educators, scholars, consultants, and coaches believe that "to develop leaders is to develop a valuable human resource," and, therefore, view leadership with a positive bias (Kellerman, 2004, p. 3). As a result, literature on leadership has continued to evolve, examining situational contexts and contingent variables, authenticity, and the adaptive work leaders engage in (Crawford, Brungardt, & Maughn, 2005; Northouse, 2016); a vast majority of which still focuses on some of the basic leader characteristics and behaviors considered desirable for organizations (Pawlowska, Braun, Peus, & Frey, 2010).

Kellerman (2004) has argued that to equate *leadership* with only *good leadership* is misguided and misleading. Bass noted, "[T]here are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the

concept” (1981, p. 7). Many of these definitions are “value-free,” meaning there is no mention of intent, whether it be positive or negative, to determine whether leadership is good or bad (Kellerman, 2004). Consequently, the early and mid-2000s brought an abundance of leadership definitions associated with poor, ineffective, or bad leadership behavior.

Tepper (2000) defined “abusive” supervision; Kellerman (2004) developed a framework of “bad” leadership; and Lipman-Blumen (2005) examined “toxic” leaders, leading to the creation of the Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008). Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) also introduced the Toxic Triangle, while at the same time, Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad (2007) defined and modeled destructive leadership, which later led to the development of the Destructive Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ; Shaw, Erickson, & Harvey, 2011), which serves as the foundation for this study.

As discussed above, destructive leadership has taken on many names, definitions, and models; however, for the purpose of this study, destructive leadership is defined as “the systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness, and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates” (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007, p. 208). Destructive leadership behavior can be physical or verbal, as well as active or passive. Furthermore, destructive leadership behavior, based on this definition, does not require there be an intent to harm; therefore, it is possible a leader can act destructively without being consciously aware of it (2007).

At the same time, Erickson, Shaw, & Agabe (2007) conducted an empirical study to identify specific behaviors associated with bad leadership. Using an open-ended survey to collect qualitative data from subordinates, the researchers used a

thematic analysis to identify 11 behaviors bad leaders exhibited: autocratic, poor at communication, unable to deal effectively with subordinates, poor ethics/integrity, the inability to use technology, inconsistent/erratic behavior, poor interpersonal behavior, micromanagement, poor personal behavior, and lack of strategic skills. The most frequent behaviors of those were the inability to deal effectively with subordinates, poor ethics/integrity, and poor personal behavior (2007). The results of the 2007 study eventually led to the development of the Destructive Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ), which further identified 22 prototypical attributes of destructive leaders, and were divided into five broad categories: 1) generic management incompetence, 2) managing subordinate performance, 3) political behaviors, 4) personal behaviors, and 5) bullying (Erickson, Shaw, Murray, & Branch, 2015; Shaw, Erickson, & Harvey, 2011). Table 1 lists the behaviors associated with each category. This particular framework was used as a foundation for this study.

Table 1. Categories and Corresponding Behaviors of Destructive Leadership

Category	Corresponding Destructive Leader Behaviors
Generic Management Incompetence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make significant decisions without information Ineffective at negotiation Unable to deal with new technology and change Ineffective at coordinating and managing Fail to seek appropriate information Act in an insular manner Communicate ineffectively Exhibit a lack of skills to do their job Unable to prioritize and delegate Unable to understand a long term view Unable to make an appropriate decision
Managing Subordinate Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Micro-manage and over-control Unclear about expectations Unable to develop and motivate subordinates
Political Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Play favorites
Personal Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell people only what they wanted to hear Lie or engage in other unethical behaviors Act inappropriately in interpersonal situations Engage in behaviors that reduce their credibility Exhibit inconsistent and erratic behavior Unwilling to change their mind
Bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act in a brutal or bullying manner

While the aforementioned traits and behaviors of leaders are those often found in situations of destructive leadership, it is important to note that several scholars believe destructive leadership is never an isolated incident (Fors Brandebo, Nilsson, & Larsson, 2016). Scholars who have written definitions and models of destructive leadership agree that leaders exhibit destructive behaviors systematically and repeatedly over long periods, as an otherwise good leader is capable of making poor decisions or having a “bad day” at work on occasion (Einarson, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Fors Brandebo, Nilsson, Larsson, 2016; Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

The Context of Higher Education

Over the past few decades, the context in which higher education institutions operate has shifted (Black, 2015). Higher education institutions (HEIs) have experienced significant cutbacks in public funding; changes in public opinion; and have entered a more competitive and globalized market in which to recruit students (Black, 2015; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017). Furthermore, the organizational structures of HEIs are complex because of the diverse missions the organizations wish to achieve (Oshagbemi, 1997). Consequently, it is important to understand the uniqueness of a postsecondary organization’s structure in order to understand the leadership paradigms through which it operates.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are complex organizations juggling both distributed leadership and decentralized governance (James, 1990; Lawrence & Ott, 2013; Lowry, 2007; March & Simon, 1994). Eckel and King (2007) discussed the organizational structure of postsecondary institutions identifying multiple commonalities. There are traditionally multiple vertical structures, or divisions, of operation within a HEI—business and accounting, development or advancement,

technology, academic affairs, marketing, student affairs, and institutional effectiveness (2007). Moreover, each division is most likely comprised of multiple departments (based on field or study, or services provided), which create additional levels in the organizational hierarchy. Depending on the HEI, however, the number of vertical structures may vary; nevertheless, all aforementioned focus areas are essential to the operation of a postsecondary institution (Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007). Consequently, the vertical organization under each division often results in HEIs working in “silos” (Kuh, 1996), usually led by a vice president or dean.

As a result of these “silos,” each division of a HEI has a tendency to focus on achieving their own goals rather than the broader institutional mission, which can often lead to horizontal competition for scarce resources among divisions, or even smaller departments within those divisions (Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007). Subsequently, some scholars characterize HEIs as “professional bureaucracies,” noting political tactics are utilized in horizontal decision-making processes when collective decisions, affecting the broader institution purpose, need to be made (Lawrence & Ott, 2013). This creates a unique environment in which to lead, and those leading HEIs may employ a variety of leadership behaviors to achieve their goals.

Higher education institutions operate under several leadership paradigms, such as the hierarchical model, the individualistic model, the collegial model, the collaborative model, and the transformative model (Black, 2015). As evidenced above by HEI organizational structures, more often than not, one will find a HEI operating via a hierarchical model, which establishes positional authority at various levels of the organization. Typically, those with more administrative authority and responsibility are located toward the top of the hierarchy; however, HEIs also contain a fairly large number of “middle-managers” such as department chairs, directors of support services,

or college deans (Branson, Franken, & Penny, 2016; Sypawka, 2008; Thrash, 2012).

These midlevel administrators may encounter more challenges than most in a postsecondary institution, as they must serve at the pleasure of their supervisors while advocating for their subordinates (2016; 2008; 2012).

Bryman (2007), for example, conducted a review of literature to determine behaviors related to effective leadership, and suggested 13 common aspects of effective leader behavior at the department level, including: have a clear sense of direction, treating staff fairly and with integrity, being trustworthy, and advancing the department's cause. Moreover, Smith and Wolverton (2010) identified five categories of leadership competencies considered necessary for effective leadership in higher education, which include skills associated with being analytical, good communication, student affairs, behavioral, and external relations competencies. Many of the behaviors discussed in Smith and Wolverton's study are congruent with other scholars' findings. Unfortunately, though, leaders throughout HEIs do not always employ good leadership behaviors, and studies have demonstrated the existence of destructive leadership behaviors occurring in higher education in some capacity (Green, 2014; Harris & Ellis, 2018; Hollis, 2015; Kendig, 2013; McKay, Arnold, Fratzl, & Thomas, 2008; Mourssi-Alfash, 2014; Pelletier, Kottke, & Sirotnik, 2019; Powers, Judge, & Makela, 2016; Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013; Trachtenberg, Kauvar, & Bogue, 2013).

Destructive Leadership in Higher Education

Lipman-Blumen (2005) suggests toxic leaders exist in a variety of industries including politics, business, athletics, religion, and education, specifically noting academic leaders are no more immune to the characteristics of a toxic leader than those who work in the corporate or political sector. Although there is extensive literature on good and effective leadership in higher education, some scholars posit leaders in academia are predisposed

to destructive behaviors, because of the unique nature of leading academic followers and the lack of preparation for the leader role (Pawlowska, Braun, Peus, & Frey, 2010).

Wooldridge (2011) observes that employees of higher education institutions often adopt a point of view in which higher education institutions have a culture unique to the sector. Although scholars like Wooldridge (2011) and Ruben & Gigliotti (2017) may question the perceived uniqueness of higher education institutions, those employed in postsecondary institutions believe the uniqueness to be true. This may be a result of the autonomy held by academic faculty, or because of the organizational structure adopted by most institutions (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). Pawlowska and colleagues (2010) suggest that leading academics is like the “management of autonomy” (p. 483), as employees are considered the “experts” in their own areas of study. Furthermore, majorities of leaders in higher education are elevated to levels of authority without adequate training; therefore, a person in this situation may begin to exhibit destructive leadership behavior simply due to a lack of preparation and experience (Pawlowska, Braun, Peus, & Frey, 2010).

As previously mentioned, scholars believe that if destructive leadership occurs at the top of the organization, then it likely occurs throughout the organization (Erickson, Shaw, & Agabe, 2007). Kellerman (2004) posited leaders could not achieve their goals alone and therefore considered followers as part of the bad leadership process. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) also discuss how susceptible followers often follow destructive leaders because of their own ambition, and therefore display destructive behaviors. If this is indeed the case, then destructive leadership may occur at any level of a higher education organization, not just at the highest. There is little to no literature on destructive leadership occurring throughout a higher education institution, though,

which produced basis for this study. Through this exploratory and descriptive study, the author aimed to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What is the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior in U.S. higher education, including specific categories of behavior associated with generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, political behaviors, personal behaviors, and bullying?
- **RQ2:** In what divisions of U.S. higher education is destructive leadership behavior prevalent? Are there significant differences between divisions of U.S. higher education with regard to destructive leadership behavior?
- **RQ3:** At what levels of positional authority in U.S. higher education is destructive leadership behavior prevalent? Are there significant differences between levels of positional authority with regard to destructive leadership behaviors?
- **RQ4:** To what extent do employee demographics correlate to the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior in U.S. higher education?

Methodology

A quantitative research method was used for this study, specifically, a descriptive survey design. The survey instrument used to collect data for this study is a modified version of the Destructive Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ) as designed by Shaw, Erickson, and Harvey (2011). Originally designed as a 127-item survey, the creators of the instrument created a shortened version through factor analysis, which examined 22 behaviors among five categories of destructive leadership—generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, political behaviors, personal behaviors, and bullying. To improve the instrument, the author of this study obtained

permission from the DLQ's creators to remove double-barrelled questions, which allowed for more accurate measurements of the behaviors in the survey, and resulted in a 29-item instrument, as well as demographic questions. The amended survey produced an overall Cronbach's Alpha of .98; the reliability for each of the sub-scales, or categories of destructive behavior, ranged from .724 – .968.

As this was an exploratory study, seeking to provide a previously unknown general description of destructive leadership in higher education, and seeking to identify needs for future study, the population for this study was broad—full- and part-time employees working for higher education institutions in the United States of America. There were no specific criteria for the type of institution or location of institution at which participants should be employed; however, participants needed to be employed at the time they participated in the study. Undergraduate student employees and graduate-level student assistants were excluded from the study as expectations for these types of employees may be different for those who are not students.

Participants were recruited through the use of free email listservs, online forum postings, and online newsletters hosted by a variety of professional organizations in higher education, including, but not limited to: the Society of College and University Planning, chapter presidents for the American Association of University Professors, Educause, and the Professional & Organizational Development Network in higher Education. Based on listserv subscription counts and association membership numbers, it is estimated the request for participation was sent to approximately 10,000 people. Those who chose to complete the study were also welcome to share the study and instrument with colleagues, creating a snowball sampling effect, and increasing the number of potential participants.

At the conclusion of the data collection period, 802 people participated in the study; however, only 397 participants completed 100% of the survey. Only data from the participants who completed the survey in its entirety was analyzed in this study. The resulting sample consisted of 268 female and 127 male participants, answering questions regarding 198 female and 199 male supervisors. The average age of the participants was between 35 and 54 years. Seventy-four percent (n = 292) of participants identified themselves as professional staff, and 26% (n = 105) identified as faculty. While only eight participants reported they worked on a part-time basis, 389 participants, or 98%, reported they worked full-time. Forty-five percent (n = 180) of the participants worked at R1 or R2 doctoral universities, based on Carnegie Classifications, while the majority (n = 217) worked at a combination of doctoral/professional universities (D/PU), master's colleges and universities (M1, M2, & M3), baccalaureate colleges, baccalaureate/associate's colleges, associate's colleges, and special focus two- or four-year institutions. Most participants (62%, n = 245) worked in public institutions, while the remaining (38%, n = 152) worked in private institutions.

Results

RQ1: What is the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior in U.S. higher education, including specific categories of behavior associated with generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, political behaviors, personal behaviors, and bullying?

Participants in the study were asked to rate their supervisor on a scale of 1 – 100, with 100 being the best leader they could imagine working for. This question was included on the DLQ when it was originally designed, and included in this study to glean participants' overall feelings about their supervisors' leadership. The mean score

reported was 69.02, $SD = 25.83$. Fifty-one percent ($n=203$) of participants rated their supervisor with a score of 80 or above (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participants' Overall Leadership Rating of Supervisor

Participant Rating	Percent of Sample (n = 397)
100	4.28 (n = 17)
90-99	23.17 (n = 92)
80-89	23.68 (n = 94)
70-79	10.08 (n = 40)
60-69	9.57 (n = 38)
50-59	8.31 (n = 33)
0-49	20.91 (n = 83)

Participants in the study were also asked to rate their supervisors on specific categories of behaviors, including: generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, political behavior, personal behavior, and bullying. When presented with 29 destructive leadership behaviors, participants were asked to agree or disagree to whether their supervisors demonstrated those behaviors on a scale of 1 – 6 (1 being Strongly Disagree, and 6 being Strongly Agree). A composite mean was created for each category of behavior by averaging items measuring the specific behaviors in that category.

With regard to generic management incompetence, most mean ratings for these behaviors were in the lower half of the rating scale (see Table 3). A composite mean for this category of behaviors was 2.70, indicating, on average, respondents disagreed their supervisor was destructive with regard to generic management incompetence.

When asked to rate their supervisor on destructive leadership behaviors associated with managing subordinate performance, participants indicated their supervisors were mostly non-destructive, as the composite mean for this category of behaviors was 3.03; this indicates respondents, on average, disagreed their supervisor was destructive with regard to managing their performance.

When asked to rate their supervisor on destructive leadership behaviors with regard to political behaviors, respondents once again reported their supervisors were largely non-destructive (see Table 3), and reported a composite mean rating of 2.99. This indicates the participants in the study, on average, disagreed their supervisor exhibited destructive political behaviors.

When asked to rate their supervisor on destructive leadership behaviors associated with personal behaviors, participants reported a composite mean of 2.40, indicating, on average, respondents disagreed their supervisor displayed any destructive behaviors associated with personal behaviors.

When asked to rate their supervisors on bullying behavior, participants rated a mean of 2.07 (see Table 3), indicating, on average, they disagreed that their supervisor demonstrated bullying behavior.

Table 3. Participants' Mean Ratings for Destructive Leadership Behaviors of Supervisors

Behavior Category	Supervisor Behavior	Mean Rating	SD
Generic Management Incompetence (<i>M</i> = 2.70, <i>SD</i> = 1.42)	My supervisor makes significant decisions without information.	2.82	1.78
	My supervisor is ineffective at negotiation.	2.83	1.71
	My supervisor is unable to deal with new technology.	2.25	1.39
	My supervisor is unable to deal with change.	2.36	1.45
	My supervisor is ineffective at coordinating.	3.03	1.79
	My supervisor is ineffective at managing.	3.20	1.85
	My supervisor fails to seek appropriate information.	2.78	1.74
	My supervisor acts in an insular manner.	2.68	1.74
	My supervisor communicates ineffectively.	3.17	1.84
	My supervisor exhibits a lack of skills to do his/her job.	2.54	1.74
	My supervisor is unable to prioritize.	2.68	1.66
	My supervisor is unable to delegate.	2.65	1.67
	My supervisor is unable to understand a long-term view.	2.43	1.71
My supervisor is unable to make an appropriate decision.	2.44	1.55	
Managing Subordinate Performance (<i>M</i> = 3.03, <i>SD</i> = 1.53)	My supervisor micro-manages.	2.56	1.76
	My supervisor over-controls.	2.70	1.83
	My supervisor is unclear about expectations.	3.34	1.73
	My supervisor is unable to develop subordinates.	3.29	1.85
Political Behaviors (<i>M</i> = 2.99, <i>SD</i> = 1.57)	My supervisor plays favorites.	3.31	1.90
	My supervisor tells people only what they want to hear.	2.68	1.65

Personal Behaviors ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.43$)	My supervisor lies.	2.12	1.61
	My supervisor engages in unethical behaviors.	2.06	1.54
	My supervisor acts inappropriately in interpersonal situations.	2.24	1.64
	My supervisor engages in behaviors that reduce his/her credibility.	2.75	1.79
	My supervisor exhibits inconsistent behavior.	2.80	1.83
	My supervisor exhibits erratic behavior.	2.28	1.63
	My supervisor is unwilling to change his/her mind.	2.51	1.53
Bullying	My supervisor acts in a brutal or bullying manner.	2.07	1.63

RQ2: In what divisions of U.S. higher education is destructive leadership behavior prevalent? Are there significant differences between divisions of U.S. higher education with regard to destructive leadership behavior?

In this study, participants were asked to identify the division, or sector, of higher education in which they currently work. Participants reported they worked in Academic Affairs, Administration & Finance, Alumni Association, Athletics, Facilities & Maintenance, Foundation/University Advancement, Technology/Information Services, Student Affairs/Student Life, and Marketing & Communications. Due to low numbers of participants ($n < 15$) in some divisions, however, only four divisions remained for data analysis. Table 4 identifies the composite mean scores for each destructive behavior category examined in this study for each division.

A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the mean difference of each category of destructive behaviors among varying divisions of higher education in which the respondent and their supervisor worked. When accounting for the division, there were no statistically significant differences in the amount of destructive leadership behaviors exhibited between divisions (see Table 4).

Table 4. Mean Comparison of Destructive Leadership Behaviors based on Division of Employment in Higher Education

Behavior Category	Division	n	Composite		ANOVA
			Mean	SD	
Generic	Academic Affairs	170	2.7979	1.50	$F(3, 383) = .738$, $p = .530$
Management	Administration & Finance	19	2.7556	1.18	
Incompetence	Technology/Information Services	148	2.5709	1.37	

	Student Affairs/Student Life	50	2.7871	1.39	
Managing Subordinate Performance	Academic Affairs	170	3.0718	1.58	$F(3, 383) = .498,$ $p = .684$
	Administration & Finance	19	3.1263	1.41	
	Technology/Information Services	148	2.9041	1.50	
	Student Affairs/Student Life	50	3.1520	1.52	
Political Behaviors	Academic Affairs	170	3.0735	1.66	$F(3, 383) = 1.049,$ $p = .371$
	Administration & Finance	19	3.3421	1.59	
	Technology/Information Services	148	2.8243	1.46	
	Student Affairs/Student Life	50	3.0600	1.63	
Personal Behaviors	Academic Affairs	170	2.5202	1.53	$F(3, 383) = 1.365,$ $p = .253$
	Administration & Finance	19	2.3910	1.35	
	Technology/Information Services	148	2.2104	1.30	
	Student Affairs/Student Life	50	2.5057	1.44	
Bullying	Academic Affairs	170	2.2353	1.76	$F(3, 383) = 1.267,$ $p = .285$
	Administration & Finance	19	1.8947	1.45	
	Technology/Information Services	148	1.8919	1.43	
	Student Affairs/Student Life	50	2.1200	1.76	

Note. Significance is set at the 0.05 level.

RQ3: At what levels of positional authority in U.S. higher education is destructive leadership behavior prevalent? Are there significant differences between levels of positional authority with regard to destructive leadership behaviors?

Participants in this study were asked to identify their positional level of authority and the level of authority of their supervisor. Composite mean ratings for each category of destructive leadership behavior demonstrated by the supervisor are shown in Table 5. Only nine supervisor positions are reported due to low participant numbers of other positions ($n < 15$).

Table 5. Composite Mean Ratings of Destructive Leadership Behavior based on Supervisor's Positional Level of Authority

Supervisor's Positional Level of Authority	n	Composite Mean Ratings (SD)				
		Generic Management Incompetence	Managing Subordinate Performance	Political Behaviors	Personal Behaviors	Bullying
Asst/Assoc Dean	28	2.79 (1.45)	2.91 (1.60)	3.00 (1.63)	2.42 (1.51)	2.11 (1.59)
Asst/Assoc Director	20	2.96 (1.23)	3.29 (1.65)	3.03 (1.46)	2.83 (1.35)	2.45 (1.76)
Asst/Assoc VP	41	2.63 (1.45)	3.11 (1.67)	2.94 (1.67)	2.52 (1.52)	2.41 (1.94)
Dean	42	3.00 (1.37)	3.41 (1.40)	3.21 (1.61)	2.44 (1.40)	2.21 (1.79)

Dept Chair	44	2.57 (1.56)	2.76 (1.49)	2.81 (1.46)	2.38 (1.54)	2.11 (1.70)
Director	95	3.02 (1.41)	3.31 (1.50)	3.21 (1.51)	2.57 (1.34)	1.84 (1.34)
President	28	2.06 (1.30)	2.48 (1.49)	2.73 (1.49)	2.04 (1.58)	1.89 (1.59)
Program/Service Manager	15	2.95 (1.45)	3.20 (1.40)	3.00 (1.70)	2.29 (1.37)	1.93 (1.83)
Vice President	54	2.33 (1.26)	2.73 (1.42)	2.83 (1.57)	2.08 (1.20)	1.89 (1.46)

A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the mean difference of each category of destructive leadership behaviors based on positional level of authority of both the respondent and his/her supervisor. The positional level of authority of the respondent was not statistically significant when rating his/her supervisor on destructive leadership behavior. The positional level of authority of the supervisor, however, does have an effect on the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior reported.

Using a one-way between subjects ANOVA, the mean difference of destructive leadership behavior associated with generic management incompetence appears to be significantly affected by the supervisor's positional level of authority, $F(3, 358) = 2.266, p = .023$. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was assessed by Levene's test, $F = .758, p = .640$; this indicated no significant violation of the equal variance assumption.

A post hoc pairwise comparison using Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) indicated there is a statistically significant greater difference of destructive leadership behaviors associated with generic management incompetence reported among supervisors in the positions of assistant/associate directors ($M = 2.96; p = .029$), deans ($M = 3.00; p = .006$), directors ($M = 3.02; p = .002$), and program/service managers ($M = 2.95; p = .047$) than among institution presidents ($M = 2.06$). Further, vice presidents ($M = 2.33$) were rated significantly less destructive than deans ($M = 3.00; p = .020$) and directors ($M = 3.02; p = .004$). No statistically significant differences were found among positional levels of authority when examining

destructive leadership behaviors associated with managing subordinate performance, political behaviors, personal behaviors, or bullying.

RQ4: To what extent do employee demographics correlate to the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior in U.S. higher education?

Pearson r correlation tests were conducted on 11 demographic variables provided by the participants in the study to determine associations between those demographic variables, and the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior reported of their supervisor (see Table 6). The data show no significant correlations between the length of time (in years) the participant has worked in higher education (in any capacity) or the length of time (in years) the participant has worked at his/her institution and the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior they report of their supervisor.

There was, however, a significant, positive association between the length of time (in years) a participant has worked in their current position and the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors reported in all behavior categories: generic management incompetence ($r = .152, p < .01$), managing subordinate performance ($r = .150, p < .01$), political behaviors ($r = .160, p < .01$), personal behaviors ($r = .174, p < .01$), and bullying ($r = .166, p < .01$). This indicates the longer participants have worked in their position, the more likely they are to report their supervisor displays destructive leadership behaviors.

When examining the association between the supervisor's work experience and reported destructive leadership behavior, the data indicated a significant, negative association between the length of time (in years) the supervisor has worked in higher education (in any capacity) and the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior they exhibit associated with generic management incompetence ($r = -.130, p < .01$), managing subordinate performance ($r = -.109, p < .05$), and personal behaviors ($r = -$

.102, $p < .05$). This indicates the longer a person has worked in higher education, the less destructive they become with regard to generic management incompetence, managing subordinate performance, and personal behaviors.

Finally, the data show a significant, negative association between the supervisor's highest level of education completed and the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior they are reported demonstrating associated with managing subordinate performance ($r = -.135, p < .01$) and political behaviors ($r = -.121, p < .05$). This data indicate that as a supervisor's level of education increases, the amount of destructive leadership behavior exhibited in the aforementioned categories decreases.

There were no statistically significant associations identified between destructive leadership behaviors and the demographic variables: participant's highest level of education completed, participant's age, supervisor's length of time (in years) at their current institution, supervisor's length of time (in years) in their current position, supervisor's age, or the length of time (in years) the participant has worked under the supervisor's direction.

Table 6. Pearson r Correlations Measuring Associations between Linear Demographics and Destructive Leadership Behavior

Demographic		Generic Management Incompetence	Managing Subordinate Performance	Political Behaviors	Personal Behaviors	Bullying
Length of time (years) participant worked in higher education (in any capacity)	Pearson r	-.022	-.018	-.008	-.047	-.018
	Correlation Sig.	.664	.721	.875	.346	.722
Length of time (years) participant employed at current institution	Pearson r	.037	.051	.039	.042	.080
	Correlation Sig.	.460	.309	.440	.407	.112
Length of time (years)	Pearson r	.152**	.150**	.160**	.174**	.166**
	Correlation					

participant employed in current position.	Sig.	.002	.003	.001	.001	.001
Participants' Highest level of education completed	Pearson <i>r</i> Correlation	-.012	-.035	-.021	-.016	.013
	Sig.	.807	.484	.673	.757	.797
Participant Age	Pearson <i>r</i> Correlation	.018	.026	.001	.007	.065
	Sig.	.723	.609	.982	.892	.200
Length of time (years) supervisor worked in higher education (in any capacity)	Pearson <i>r</i> Correlation	-.130**	-.109*	-.076	-.102*	-.045
	Sig.	.010	.030	.131	.042	.376
Length of time (years) supervisor employed at current institution	Pearson <i>r</i> Correlation	-.060	-.052	-.033	-.034	-.046
	Sig.	.235	.305	.514	.504	.359
Length of time (years) supervisor employed in current position	Pearson <i>r</i> Correlation	-.045	-.047	-.020	.022	-.043
	Sig.	.369	.347	.694	.669	.391
Supervisors' highest level of education completed	Pearson <i>r</i> Correlation	-.095	-.135**	-.121*	-.095	-.011
	Sig.	.059	.007	.016	.057	.821
Supervisor Age	Pearson <i>r</i> Correlation	.032	.036	.010	.037	.027
	Sig.	.521	.476	.838	.465	.592
Length of time (years) participant has worked under supervisor's direction	Pearson <i>r</i> Correlation	.000	.048	.013	.027	.045
	Sig.	.994	.344	.792	.594	.368

Note. n = 397. * = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** = Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Further, five independent sample t-tests were conducted to examine differences between the non-linear demographic data reported and the mean prevalence of destructive leadership behavior reported of supervisors (see Table 7). No statistically significant

differences existed when examining the participants' employment status (full-time or part-time), the gender of the supervisor, or the level of control at the institution (public or private not-for-profit).

Table 7. Composite Mean Ratings of Destructive Leadership Behavior based on Non-Linear Demographics

Demographic		n	Composite Mean Ratings (SD)				
			Generic Management Incompetence	Managing Subordinate Performance	Political Behaviors	Personal Behaviors	Bullying
Participants' Employment Classification	Professional Staff	292	2.67 (1.36)	3.01 (1.51)	2.96 (1.56)	2.35 (1.37)	1.97 (1.54)
	Faculty	105	2.81 (1.59)	3.07 (1.61)	3.09 (1.60)	2.54 (1.57)	2.34 (1.83)
Participants' Employment Status	Full-Time	389	2.71 (1.42)	3.04 (1.53)	3.01 (1.57)	2.41 (1.43)	2.07 (1.63)
	Part-Time	8	2.34 (1.45)	2.45 (1.65)	2.31 (1.69)	1.77 (1.42)	1.75 (1.75)
Participants' Gender	Female	268	2.78 (1.41)	3.13 (1.52)	3.17 (1.59)	2.54 (1.44)	2.21 (1.67)
	Male	127	2.56 (1.44)	2.81 (1.56)	2.64 (1.49)	2.11 (1.37)	1.79 (1.51)
Supervisors' Gender	Female	198	2.64 (1.45)	3.03 (1.62)	2.89 (1.59)	2.43 (1.49)	2.12 (1.72)
	Male	199	2.76 (1.39)	3.02 (1.44)	3.08 (1.56)	2.37 (1.37)	2.02 (1.53)
Level of Control	Public	245	2.64 (1.38)	2.95 (1.50)	2.91 (1.55)	2.36 (1.41)	2.02 (1.61)
	Private Non-Profit	143	2.77 (1.48)	3.09 (1.58)	3.07 (1.62)	2.42 (1.46)	2.11 (1.64)
	Private, For-Profit	9	3.33 (1.30)	3.96 (1.52)	3.89 (1.52)	3.11 (1.38)	2.67 (2.06)
Carnegie Classification	Doctoral with Research	180	2.65 (1.40)	2.95 (1.50)	2.91 (1.63)	2.36 (1.43)	2.03 (1.59)
	Doctoral / Professional	36	2.73 (1.41)	2.96 (1.50)	3.04 (1.51)	2.41 (1.41)	2.03 (1.63)
	Masters	78	2.88 (1.49)	3.29 (1.66)	3.29 (1.63)	2.63 (1.54)	2.38 (1.87)
	Baccalaureate	48	2.79 (1.63)	3.09 (1.70)	2.80 (1.58)	2.29 (1.50)	1.98 (1.60)
	Associates	41	2.53 (1.16)	2.91 (1.28)	2.95 (1.25)	2.27 (1.17)	1.71 (1.25)

When examining the participants' employment classification (faculty or professional staff), data indicated faculty reported a significantly higher rate of bullying than professional staff. The mean prevalence of bullying differed significantly, $t(395) = -2.025$, $p = .043$. Mean prevalence of bullying reported among professional staff ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.54$) was significantly lower than the mean prevalence of bullying reported by faculty ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.83$). Regardless, when the assumption of homogeneity of

variance was assessed by Levene's test, $F = 9.806, p = .002$; a violation of the equal variance assumption was apparent. Consequently, when examining the equal variances not assumed version of the t-test, $t(159.659) = -1.865, p = .064$, no significant differences between professional staff and faculty existed.

When examining the participants' gender (see Table 8), data indicated females reported significantly more destructive behaviors associated with political behaviors ($p = .002$) and bullying ($p = .019$). The assumption of homogeneity of variance of each composite behavior was assessed by Levene's test. There was no significant violation of the equal variance assumption with regard to behaviors associated with political behaviors ($F = 1.502, p = .221$) or bullying ($F = 5.605, p = .018$). As a result, the equal variances assumed version of the t-test was used.

Table 8. Independent Sample T-Tests Comparing Non-Linear Demographics and Destructive Leadership Behavior

Demographic		Generic Management Incompetence	Managing Subordinate Performance	Political Behaviors	Personal Behaviors	Bullying
Participants' Employment Classification	<i>t</i>	-.866	-.382	-.753	-1.172	-2.025
	df	395	395	395	395	395
	Sig.	.387	.702	.452	.242	.043
Participants' Employment Status	<i>t</i>	.733	1.073	1.232	1.263	.558
	df	395	395	395	395	395
	Sig.	.464	.284	.219	.207	.577
Participants' Gender	<i>t</i>	1.403	1.914	3.122	2.789	2.348
	df	393	393	393	393	393
	Sig.	.161	.056	.002*	.006	.019*
Supervisors' Gender	<i>t</i>	-.858	.040	-1.164	.395	.649
	df	395	395	395	395	395
	Sig.	.391	.968	.245	.693	.517
Level of Control	<i>t</i>	-.903	-.873	-.987	-.404	-.537
	df	386	386	386	386	386
	Sig.	.367	.383	.324	.686	.592

Note. N = 397. * = Significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Finally, a one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the mean

difference of each category of destructive leadership behaviors based on size of the institution at which the employee worked, determined by the institution's Carnegie Classification. Five types of classifications were compared in the ANOVA, Doctoral with Research, Doctoral/Professional, Master's, Baccalaureate, and Associate's, due to a low number of participants belonging to other classification types of institutions. No significant difference existed in the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior when accounting for the classification of the institution.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior in the current context of higher education in the United States, and whether the prevalence of destructive behavior differed among a variety of groups, including the division of higher education, positional level of authority, and multiple demographic variables.

Overall, the results of this study indicate destructive leadership behavior occurs at a low rate in U.S. higher education. Composite mean scores for each category of destructive behavior did not exceed 3.03, which, on a scale of 1 – 6 (1 being Strongly Disagree, and 6 being Strongly Agree), indicates a majority of higher education employees disagree their supervisors' behaviors are destructive. This is congruent with the results of Kendig's (2013) doctoral dissertation study, in which faculty and administrators indicated their workplaces were mostly not hostile. At the same time, these results are somewhat surprising, as Pawlowska, Braun, Peus, & Frey (2010) posited leaders in academia are predisposed to destructive behaviors. Further, multiple studies have demonstrated the existence of some form of destructive leadership behavior in U.S. higher education (Green, 2014; Hollis, 2015; Mourssi-Alfash, 2014); however, most research studies have been presented as case studies, specific to only one

or two institutions at a time (Pelletier, Kottke, & Sirotnik, 2019; Powers, Judge, & Makela, 2016; Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013; Thomas, 2005; Trachtenberg, Kauvar, & Bogue, 2013).

When analyzing the division(s) of higher education in which destructive behavior may be prevalent, the mean rating for each category of destructive behavior was 3.34 or below in each division, and there were no statistically significant differences between divisions. Unfortunately, data collected from athletic departments in this study were too minimal for quality analysis, so the author was unable to confirm whether case studies like those presented by Thoroughgood & Padilla (2013) and Powers, Judge, & Makela (2016) are common among multiple postsecondary athletic departments in the U.S.

When examining the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior based on positional level of authority, the study's results are in contrast to some previous work in the area. This study showed employees in mid-level positions (assistant/associate directors, directors, deans, and program/service managers) exhibited more destructive leadership behavior than institution presidents. This is unlike Harris and Ellis' (2018) work indicating high turnovers of institution presidents as the result of destructive leadership behaviors, as well as multiple case studies on destructive leadership behavior exhibited by institution presidents. Examining the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior at the mid-level of organizational authority certainly requires further research, as multiple scholars have discussed the dual, contradictory roles of mid-level leaders—managing expectations for their own supervisors, while advocating for their subordinates (Branson, Franken, & Penny, 2016; Thrash, 2012).

This study also sought to examine any potential associations between demographic variables of employees and their supervisors to the prevalence of reported

destructive leadership behavior. Though most demographic variables showed no association to reported destructive leadership behavior, there are several that require further attention. For example, when examining years of service to higher education (in any capacity), the results of this study both compliment and contradict previous studies. As discussed previously, the length of time (in years) a supervisor has worked in higher education is significantly and negatively associated with destructive leadership behavior. Essentially, the longer one works in higher education, the less destructive behaviors one exhibits. This is in contrast to Thrash's (2012) and Sypawka's (2008) work on academic deans, which indicated there were no significant associations between leadership style and years of service. Further, the length of time an employee has worked in their current position was shown to be a significant factor when reporting destructive leadership behavior of their supervisor. The results of this study show that the longer an employee serves in their current position, the more destructive their supervisor appears to be. This may be a result of employees seeking more autonomy as they become more experienced in their work, while supervisors do not adjust leadership behaviors. Further research is suggested in this area to determine employees' leadership needs the longer they serve an institution.

Another demographic variable which showed significant correlation to the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior is the supervisor's level of education. According to the results of this study, as the supervisor's level of education increases, the less destructive leadership behavior is demonstrated. This association certainly requires further study to determine whether it is strictly the education level that influences leadership style, or other variables such as professional development or mentoring from colleagues.

This study also showed that faculty do not experience significantly more bullying from their supervisors than professional staff. This contradicts the work of McKay, Arnold, Fratzl, & Thomas' (2008) study, which found nearly half of faculty experience bullying. Finally, the gender of the participant/subordinate is also related to the perceived prevalence of destructive leadership behavior. According to the results of this study, females are significantly more likely to report destructive behavior of their supervisor over males. This is congruent with work done by Mourssi-Alfash (2014), noting females working in higher education reported a greater number of bullying incidents than males. Regardless of the significant associations that are apparent in this study, there are several limitations to this study that garner our attention.

Limitations

As with any research study, there are several limitations we must attend to regarding this particular study. First, for such a large population to study, the number of participants in this study is not generalizable to all higher education institutions; however, because there is limited scholarship quantifying the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior in postsecondary education, this study has established a foundation for further study beyond a case-by-case application of destructive leadership concepts.

It is also important to note how contextual factors play a significant role in how supervisors' leadership behaviors were rated. In particular, participants in this study were asked to evaluate their current, direct supervisor for destructive behaviors. This narrow scope did not allow for participants to report destructive behaviors of past employers, as it is possible the employee departed a previous position to escape destructive behaviors. Nor did the instrument allow participants to report observed destructive behaviors from other employees at the institution, who may not directly supervise their work. In addition, the leadership environment of an institution is often

the result of several situational variables, including but not limited to: recently departed or hired administrators, increased amounts of procedural or personnel change, or budget concerns or successes. All of these variables may influence how an employee evaluates his/her supervisor's leadership behaviors.

Another limitation is the fact that this is the first time the amended Destructive Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ) has been utilized in empirical study. Though the reliability, per Cronbach's Alpha, of the instrument was high, it would be beneficial to utilize the instrument more than once to improve its construct validity; regardless, previous research and scholarship support the face and content validity of the instrument.

Conclusion & Recommendations for Future Study

The purpose of this exploratory study was to describe the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviors in current context of higher education in the United States. Further, it sought to describe the divisions of higher education in which destructive leadership behavior was prevalent, and at which levels of positional authority it occurred. Lastly, the author hoped to describe any associations between destructive leadership behavior and multiple demographic variables to determine if particular groups of people were more predisposed to experiencing or exhibiting destructive leadership behavior. The broad scope of this study gleaned several interesting insights, but there is certainly more research to be done.

It is without question the topic of destructive leadership behavior in U.S. higher education needs further study in several areas. While this study has provided a foundation of empirical inquiry on the topic, the data reveal several areas at which scholars should take another look. First, the author recommends examining how and why higher levels of education lead to less destructive leadership behavior. Second, it is

worth exploring the prevalence of destructive leadership behavior among more specific groups of higher education employees. For example, isolating employees in academic affairs divisions or student affairs divisions into single studies. Finally, the author recommends studying destructive leadership behaviors within single levels of authority in higher education. For example, a study of, specifically, department chairs, college deans, student affairs directors, or service managers may glean more specific results with regard to the prevalence of destructive behaviors based on positional levels of authority.

Moreover, on a practical note, this study provides a unique opportunity for institutions of higher education to examine their own organizational environments for any trace of destructive leadership behavior. The amended version of the Destructive Leadership Behavior (DLQ) used in this study provides institutional administrators with a reliable instrument to measure whether destructive leadership behaviour is occurring throughout their organizations. If resulting data reveal high rates of destructive leadership behaviors, institutions can use the information to implement leadership development programming for those serving in administrative or supervisory capacities, or any employee simply wanting to improve their own leadership skills. Taking this approach would also prepare future organizational leaders in developing the awareness of “what not to do.”

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