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Leadership Characteristics of Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO): An Analysis of Gender, Professional Preparation, and Experiences

Johnny A. Robinson, Ashley Tull, and James C. Stoner

Senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) have been the focus of limited research for almost three decades, most of which occurred during the 1980's with a dearth amount in the 1990s and early 2000s (Rickard, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c; Tull & Freeman, 2008). Much of the SSAO research thus far explores demographic characteristics, roles and responsibilities, and career development (Brooks & Avila, 1974; Crookston, 1974; Kuh et al., 1983; Pugh et al., 2018; Tull & Freeman, 2008; Tull & Miller, 2009), with little specifically focused on their leadership behaviors (Robinson, 2017). No common agreement exists about the pathway to the SSAO position and what is necessary to ascend to the SSAO role with respect to the above outlined characteristics (Tull & Miller, 2009; Twombly, 1990). Additionally, while gender, educational attainment and professional experience have been examined for SSAOs previously, little research examines the degree to which these factors are related to the leadership behaviors of SSAOs.

While the specific responsibilities and duties of SSAOs is well documented (e.g., Barr et al., 2014; Moneta & Jackson, 2011; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA] & American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1998; Pugh et al., 2018; Sandeen, 1991), existing empirical research on SSAO leadership lacks the necessary clarity in distinguishing leaders from non-leaders and, more specifically, effective leaders from ineffective leaders (Bennis & Nanus, 1997). This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by exploring the differences in commonly understood leadership traits (transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire) between SSAOs based on both personal and institutional demographics (gender, institution type, education level, and years of experience).

Leadership Traits

Within the 20th-century, leadership researchers began to focus on the influence exerted by leaders, specifically focusing on the relationships between leaders and followers (Rost, 1991). This new era of leadership, beginning in the late 1970s, ushered in various themes, models, and theories that began to evolve as researchers and practitioners sought to explore the complex phenomenon of leadership. Two such concepts included transformational leadership and transactional leadership.

Burns (1978) first coined the term “transformational leadership” to explain the relationship between the leader and followers in the pursuit of shared goals. Within his theory, he believed leadership was a values-based process, which developed mutually beneficial outcomes for both the followers and the leader. Desired outcomes included advancing to a higher level of morale and motivation that would produce significant change in people and organizations.

Transformational leaders typically demonstrate the capacity to empower their followers to become stronger leaders themselves (Dugan & Komives, 2011) which can result in feelings of admiration, respect, and trust of the leader (Bass, 1985; Katz & Kahn, 1978) leading to increased levels of satisfaction and commitment by followers (Yammarino & Bass, 1990). In addition, transformational leaders are charismatic, intellectually stimulated, and express individualized considerations. Transformational leaders attend to each follower’s needs, sometimes serving as a mentor or coach (Avolio, Waldman, & Einstein, 1988; Bass, 1990) or providing inspirational motivation and idealized influence (Barbuto, 1997; Hunt, 1999).

In comparison to transformational leadership, transactional leadership takes a different approach. A transactional leader does not get involved in the development of followers, instead

focusing on management-by-exception practice with predetermined consequences and rewards for meeting objectives or performing duties (Bass, 1985, 1990; Howell & Avolio, 1993).

Both of these leadership theories helped the postindustrial views of leadership to shift the focus from leader-centric to organizational leadership with an emphasis on the relationship of people working collectively for a common purpose and shared goals (Komives, 2011).

Laissez-faire leadership has been described as “exhibiting frequent absence and lack of involvement during critical junctures” (Eagly et al., 2003, p. 571). Laissez-faire leaders neither engage their followers nor determine consequences through systems or rewards, as occurs through transformational and transactional leaders.

Student Affairs Leadership

The role of the SSAO at colleges and universities is wide, varied, and ever-changing. The leadership traits and skills necessary for success are also broadening as much is expected of those who serve in this role.

The Student Personnel Point of View—both the 1937 and 1949 versions—defines the role of student affairs as the delivery of services enhancing educational experiences of college students and defines the context of student affairs work in terms of institutional and societal values. (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 2)

While the important functions of student affairs remain true since the drafting of this seminal document for student affairs, few would argue that the role of student affairs and the SSAO as leader of the student affairs organization have greater demands placed upon them. The *Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs* (NASPA & ACPA, 1998) outlined several critical functions for student affairs leaders including:

- Engage students in active learning.

- Help students develop coherent values and ethical standards.
- Set and communicate high expectations for student learning.
- Use systematic inquiry to improve student and institutional performance.
- Use resources effectively to achieve institutional missions and goals.
- Forge educational partnerships that advance student learning.
- Build supportive and inclusive communities. (p. 1)

Each of these functions, along with those explicated above by the *Student Personnel Point of View* are important for grounding the work of the SSAO in student affairs and they have remained at the core of their work overtime.

Among the many various important roles they fulfill, SSAOs serve as entrepreneurs, change agents, advisors, liaisons, counselors, assessors, conduct officers, service providers, program coordinators, and institutional preservers (Barr et al., 2014). SSAOs also serve as advocates (Barr et al., 2014; Moneta & Jackson, 2011), mediators and educators (Sandeen, 1991), and more broadly, institutional leaders and crisis managers (Barr et al., 2014; Katie, 2017; Sandeen, 1991). Still additional expectations exist for SSAOs including: “responsibility and accountability; learning from personal and professional experiences; the power of knowledge; listening and communicating; functioning in a large, networked universe; collaborations, partnerships, and relationships; [and] innovation and creativity” (Dungy, 2011, p. 270). More tactile skills required for SSAOs have been identified in the literature that include: working with the institution’s president, students, alumni and other campus and community stakeholders (Sandeen, 1991) and parents (Moneta & Jackson, 2011). Specific skills required of SSAOs include, but are not limited to displaying leadership during difficult times; appropriating human resources; and, navigating financial systems and technology (Moneta & Jackson, 2011). Wesaw

and Sponsler (2014) reported that one-third of SSAO survey respondents ($n = 863$; nearly a third of all United States SSAOs) spent 30% of their time on administrative tasks, as compared to only 13% of their time interacting with students. This notion is best explained by those expectations placed on SSAOs as described in the present study.

In addition to the leadership roles that SSAOs are expected to hold in their organizations, many issues and concerns are present in the form of challenges brought by both the internal and external climate that pervades postsecondary institutions. Some of these include: mental health (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014); declining resources (Barr et al., 2014; Culp, 2011; Sandeen, 1991; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014); shifting student demographics (Barr et al., 2014; Sandeen, 1991; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014); student conduct, equity, institutional governance and structure, accountability and reform, planning and access issues (Barr et al., 2014; Culp, 2011; Sandeen, 1991).

Institutional and organizational type differences also exist for SSAOs in their work (Ardoin, 2019 et al.; Hirt, 2006; Hirt et al., 2008;). While requirements for employment may be similar for SSAOs (Tull & Miller, 2009), some will be more inclined to work at particular types of institutions based on personal or professional characteristics (Hirt, 2006). The multitude of described responsibilities and skills necessary to be successful in the SSAO role underscores the importance of understanding the leadership traits exhibited by SSAOs in fulfilling their duties, which this study aimed to address.

Gender and the SSAO Role

Female SSAOs have been found to advance to their positions within their current institutions, more so than their male SSAO counterparts who tend to secure their current SSAO position from outside of the institution (Moore & Sagaria, 1982; Rickard 1985c; Sagaria, 1988).

Additionally, Reason et al. (2002) found fewer females to have been promoted into their positions proportionately when compared to their male counterparts. This notion was also supported by Earwood-Smith et al. (1990) who, when discussing women's advancement to the SSAO position, stated females "assess the probability of promotion within the institution and move out when there is no possibility of moving up" (p. 301). A more recent study (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014) found 48% of current SSAOs to have ascended to the current positions from a non-SSAO role at their current institutions. The majority (50%) of these were from a Dean or Director-level position. Past research has also found that the gender gap is closing between males and females as the SSAO, particularly as more females are entering the student affairs administration pipeline (Tull & Freeman, 2008; Tull & Miller, 2009). One recent survey of 863 SSAO's (approximately one-third of U. S. SSAOs) found SSAO's were more likely to be male (51%), over the age of 50 and White; although women were right behind at 49%. As a result more research, particularly on women as SSAO's, would be a good addition to the literature in this area.

Educational Attainment and the SSAO Role

College and university leaders have a need to understand where their leaders come from, "and in particular, to understand content diversity as a factor in developing and encouraging leadership" (Tull & Miller, 2009, p. 3). This is no less important for the SSAO on our campuses. With regard to educational attainment, the terminal degree (e.g., Ed.D., Ph.D., or J.D.) has become, in most cases, a requirement for the SSAO role. Biddix (2013) stated, "a doctorate is necessary, but without experience is insufficient" (p. 320) when describing the necessity of a terminal degree for those serving as SSAOs. While institutional characteristics may vary and with this the level of educational attainment required, those who hold only a master's degree will

have more limited opportunities to serve at the SSAO level when compared to their counterparts holding a terminal degree (Daddona et al., 2006; Tull & Miller, 2009). With regard to the connections between educational attainment and SSAO leadership, those with doctoral degrees have reported that they have become better SSAOs, attained credibility among their academic peers, and been equipped with important research skills (Tull & Miller, 2009). A 2014 report found that three of every four SSAOs ($n = 863$, or approximately a third of all U.S. SSAOs) had their doctorates in education or higher education (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). On-going professional development, beyond the terminal degree has also been found to be an important contributor to the success of SSAOs (Adams-Manning et al., 2020; Ardoin et al., 2019; Grabsch et al., 2019; Mason, 2016).

Professional Experience and the SSAO Role

As previously mentioned, the path to the SSAO position is not clearly marked with specific times or experiences within particular student affairs functional areas (Hirt, 2006; Tull & Miller). While dated, previous research has found that SSAOs spent varying amounts of time in positions prior to assuming their SSAO role. Kuh et al. (1983) found “the number of years of prior employment ranged from 7–12 at small schools, 7–25 at medium sized institutions, and 8–20 at larger institutions” (p. 43). The mode for number of positions held in the study above was four. A recent study found longer terms of service prior to researching the SSAO position with 19 years being the shortest; 33 years the longest; and 25.52 years the average for those SSAOs studied (Tull & Miller, 2009). Tull and Miller’s (2009) study was limited by the focus on SSAOs at land grant institutions, which likely explains the longer terms of service to reach the SSAO position at this type of institution. This is a result of these institutions being larger, with more administrative layers within the student affairs organization. A study two years later (on

SSAOs at public four-year institutions) in 2011 found an average of 22.5 years spent in various positions on average on the ascent to the SSAO position, with an average of six stops on the way (Biddix, 2011). Biddix (2013) found that most who reached the SSAO position had been a Director of a functional area or Dean of Students.

While no two student affairs organizations are alike (Hirt, 2006), common functional areas are a part of many lead by SSAOs. Wesaw and Sponslers' (2014) national study of SSAOs found the following functional areas to be housed within 66% of organizations: Campus activities, Student conduct/Case management (behavioral), Counseling services, Orientation, Student affairs assessment, Career services, Student conduct/Academic integrity, Wellness programs, Disability support services, On-campus housing, Recreational sports, [and] Multicultural services. Another 15 functional areas (i. e. Greek life, College unions, Enrollment management, Health clinics) were found to be housed within 40–65% of student affairs organizations.

Methodology

The researchers employed a survey research design for this quantitative study to compare leadership behaviors of SSAOs based on self-reported data related to gender (male, female, prefer not to answer), institution type, years of experience, and/or education. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 2000) was selected as it was an established survey instrument, which the researchers could utilize to investigate the phenomenon. The cross-sectional design was utilized to collect data at one point in time from more than one case on two or more variables to examine patterns of association (Bryman, 2012) which was of interest to explore SSAOs patterns based on gender, institutional type, years of experience and education degree attainment.

The research questions for this study were:

1. Was there a statistically significant difference in SSAO leadership behaviors when comparing gender, education, years of experience, and/or institution type?
2. If a statistically significant difference existed, which leadership behaviors differed and what relationship can be concluded, if any?

Bass and Avolio (2000) designed the MLQ to measure nine constructs of leadership behavior and three leadership outcomes. For this study, the nine leadership behaviors, organized into three leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire), served as dependent variables while gender, institution type, education, and years of experience served as the independent variables. The MLQ asks respondents to self-rate the frequency of their leadership behaviors on a five-point Likert scale (0–4) on 45 standardized items. Ozarrali (2003) claimed that when measuring transformational/transactional leadership it is the best instrument used for validity.

An electronic invitation to participate was sent to 3,361 senior student affairs officers at four-year institutions listed in the *2014 Higher Education Directory*. Each respondent was asked complete a questionnaire that included demographic and eligibility to complete the study. Those who self-identified as SSAOs were asked to complete the 45-item MLQ. Factor scores were created corresponding with the nine constructs of the full range leadership model. Haynes and Lamb (2010) stated that principal components analysis is a method of identifying and classifying variables across common themes, or constructs they represent.

Following data collection, results were uploaded into IBM SPSS v. 25 for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables and Pearson's correlation coefficients were generated to assess relationships between continuous variables.

Results

There were 494 responses to the invitation to participate in this study of SSAOs leadership behaviors. Following a visual inspection of the dataset, 68 surveys with missing data in excess of 20% (Downey & King, 1998) were excluded; which left a total useable sample of 437. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of independent categorical variables. Of the sample, 215 identified as male, 222 as female, with two participants preferring not to answer. A majority (285) of SSAOs reported having earned a doctoral degree while 148 received a master's degree, and only four reported a bachelor's degree. Due to the low number of bachelor's-level SSAOs, they were excluded from further analysis. Four-year Private institution SSAOs represented a majority of the sample with 260 respondents compared to 170 four-year Public SSAOs. Finally, 18 participants reported 5–9 years of professional experience; 115 with 10–20 years of experience; 183 with 21–30 years; and 121 with more than 31 years of professional experience. Due to the unequally low number of SSAOs with 5–9 years of experience, they were excluded from further analysis.

Initial review of the data revealed that the various group data were not distributed normally, thus the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests were employed to analyze group differences. Both tests investigated differences in the rank-order median leadership behavior scores. Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted when the independent variables (gender, institution type, education level) had binary responses (i.e., male/female, private/public, masters-level/doctoral-level, respectively). Kruskal-Wallis H tests were conducted to compare group differences among SSAO experience level due to having more than two response options (10–20 years, 21–30 years, and 31+ years). Results are organized by

leadership style—transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire—within each independent variable.

Table 1

SSAO Demographic Frequency Distribution

Demographic Variable	<i>n</i> (%)
Gender	437 (100)
Male	215 (49.1)
Female	222 (50.7)
Race/Ethnicity	435 (100)
African American	47 (10.8)
Asian	4 (0.9)
Caucasian	355 (81.2)
Hispanic	24 (5.5)
Native American	2 (0.5)
Not listed	3 (0.7)
Institution	430 (100)
Private	260 (60.5)
Public	170 (39.5)
Education Level	437 (100)
Bachelor's	4 (0.9)
Master's	148 (33.9)
Doctoral	285 (65.2)
Years of Experience	437 (100)
5–9	18 (4.1)
10–20	115 (26.3)
21–30	183 (41.9)
31+	121 (27.7)

Note. Total numbers vary due to excluded missing data.

Mann-Whitney U tests were also conducted to determine if there were differences in leadership behaviors within in of the three styles—transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire—between SSAO gender, institution type, and education level. Distribution of the scores were similar between each binary categorical variable in the nine behaviors, as assessed by visual inspection. Table 2 displays all median scores and statistics.

Gender Differences in Leadership Behaviors

The Mann-Whitney U tests on the various transformational leadership behaviors revealed no significant differences in median Idealized Attribute scores ($U = 26,366.0, z = 1.896, p = .058$) and Idealized Behavior scores ($U = 25,122.0, z = .955, p = .340$). However, female SSAOs scored significantly higher than their male counterparts in Inspirational Motivation ($U = 30,056.0, z = 4.714, p < .001$), Intellectual Stimulation ($U = 26,630.5, z = 2.101, p < .05$), and Individual Consideration ($U = 29,277.5, z = 4.116, p < .001$).

Considering transactional leadership behaviors, the results revealed no significant differences in median Management by Exception: Active ($U = 22,282.5, z = -1.199, p = .230$) and Management by Exception: Passive ($U = 21,726.5, z = -1.621, p = .105$). Females, however, scored significantly higher than their male counterparts in Contingent Reward behaviors ($U = 29,229.5, z = 4.067, p < .001$). There were also no significant differences between genders in median Laissez-Faire scores ($U = 23,063.5, z = -.615, p = .538$).

Institution Type Differences in Leadership Behaviors

There were no significant differences in median scores between public and private SSAOs in any of the nine leadership behaviors across all three leadership styles: Idealized Attributes ($U =$

Table 2*Leadership Trait Differences Between SSAO Gender, Institution Type, and Education Level*

Leadership B	Gender				Institution Type				Education Level			
	Male	Female	<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	Private	Public	<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	Masters	Doctoral	<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>
Transformational	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
IA	-0.105	0.183	26,366.00	1.896	-0.167	0.183	24,303	1.75	-0.203	0.085	19,139	-1.571
IB	0.144	0.321	25,122.00	0.955	0.209	0.209	21,898.5	-0.16	0.013	0.321	18,797.5	-1.861
IM	-0.293	0.307	30,056.00***	4.714	-0.030	0.244	22,786	0.547	-0.162	0.264	18,606.5*	-2.021
IS	0.038	0.075	26,630.50*	2.101	0.038	0.075	23,938	1.463	-0.129	0.075	18,415.5*	-2.171
IC	-0.296	0.224	29,277.50***	4.116	0.130	0.130	21,776.5	-0.258	0.130	0.130	20,577.5	-0.417
Transactional	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
CR	-0.164	0.288	29,229.5***	4.067	0.111	-0.020	20,820.5	-1.016	0.098	-0.001	20,777	-0.254
MBEA	-0.089	-0.178	22,282.50	-1.199	-0.099	-0.099	22,147	0.037	0.068	-0.110	23,608.5*	2.039
MBEP	-0.107	-0.174	21,726.50	-1.621	-0.174	-0.107	23,913	1.44	-0.174	-0.174	20,515	-0.466
Laissez-Faire	-0.355	-0.355	23,063.50	-0.615	-0.355	-0.355	23,599	1.205	-0.355	-0.355	22,327	1.015

Note. IA = Idealized Influence: Attributes; IB = Idealized Influence: Behaviors; IM = Idealized Motivation; IS = Intellectual Stimulation; IC = Individualized Consideration; CR = Contingent Reward; MBEA = Management by Exception: Active; MBEP = Management by Exception: Passive.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

24,303.0, $z = 1.750$, $p = .080$), Idealized Behaviors ($U = 21,898.5$, $z = -0.160$, $p = .873$), Inspirational Motivation ($U = 22,786.0$, $z = 0.547$, $p = .584$), Intellectual Stimulation ($U = 23,938.0$, $z = 1.463$, $p = .144$), Individual Consideration ($U = 21,776.5$, $z = -0.258$, $p = .797$), Contingent Reward ($U = 20,820.5$, $z = -1.016$, $p = .310$), Management by Exception: Active ($U = 22,147.0$, $z = .037$, $p = .970$), Management by Exception: Passive ($U = 23,913.0$, $z = 1.440$, $p = .150$), and Laissez-Faire ($U = 23,599.0$, $z = 1.205$, $p = .228$).

Education Level Differences in Leadership Behaviors

Within transformational leadership behaviors, the results revealed no significant difference in median Idealized Attribute scores ($U = 19,139.0$, $z = -1.581$, $p = .114$), Idealized Behavior scores ($U = 18,797.5$, $z = -1.861$, $p = .063$), and Individual Consideration scores ($U = 20,577.5$, $z = -0.417$, $p = .677$). The results, however, revealed that doctoral-level SSAOs scored significantly higher than their masters-level counterparts in Inspirational Motivation ($U = 18,606.5$, $z = -2.021$, $p < .05$) and Intellectual Stimulation ($U = 18,415.5$, $z = -2.171$, $p < .05$).

The only significant difference in transactional leadership behaviors was in Management by Exception: Active ($U = 23608.5$, $z = 2.039$, $p < .05$), with masters-level SSAOs scoring higher than their doctoral-level counterparts. No significant differences were found in the other two transactional leadership behaviors: Contingent Reward ($U = 20,777.0$, $z = -.254$, $p = .800$) and Management by Exception: Passive ($U = 20,515.0$, $z = -.466$, $p = .641$). There were also no significant differences in Laissez-Faire behaviors ($U = 22,327.0$, $z = 1.015$, $p = .310$).

Experience Differences in Leadership Behaviors

Kruskal-Wallis H tests were run to determine if there were differences in leadership behavior scores between three groups of SSAOs with different levels of experience (10–20 years, 21–30 years, and 31+ years). Distributions of the scores were similar between each experience

level group in each of the nine behaviors, as assessed by visual inspection of their respective boxplots. Table 3 displays all median scores and statistics. There were no significant differences in the medians of two transformational leadership categories: Inspirational Motivation, $\chi^2(2) = 5.096, p = .078$; and, Intellectual Stimulation $\chi^2(2) = 4.210, p = .122$. Significant differences emerged among experience level groups in the remaining three transformational leadership categories: Idealized Attributes, $\chi^2(2) = 8.487, p < .05$; Idealized Behaviors, $\chi^2(2) = 6.396, p < .05$; and, Individual Consideration, $\chi^2(2) = 10.124, p < .01$.

Within transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles, only Management by Exception: Active revealed significant differences, $\chi^2(2) = 9.211, p < .05$. The remaining behaviors yielded no significant differences: Contingent Reward, $\chi^2(2) = 2.353, p = .308$; Management by Exception: Passive, $\chi^2(2) = 1.742, p = .419$; and, Laissez-Faire, $\chi^2(2) = 4.041, p = .133$.

Pairwise comparisons were performed using Dunn's (1964) procedure with a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Adjusted *p*-values are presented. This post hoc analysis on Idealized Attribute scores revealed that SSAOs with 31+ years of experience had significantly higher Idealized Attribute scores (*Mdn* = 0.18) than both 10–20 years of experience (*Mdn* = -0.14, $p < .05$) and 21–30 years of experience (*Mdn* = 0.05, $p < .05$). The post hoc analysis on Idealized Behavior scores revealed no significant differences between any experience level groups. The post hoc analysis also revealed that SSAOs with 31+ years of experience had significantly higher Individual Consideration scores (*Mdn* = 0.24) than SSAOs with 21–30 years of experience (*Mdn* = -.027, $p < .01$). There were no significant differences between any other groupings.

The post hoc pairwise comparisons on Management by Exception: Active revealed that SSAOs with 31+ years of experience (*Mdn* = -.43) reported significantly lower medians than

both SSAOs with 10–20 years ($Mdn = -.09, p < .05$) and 21–30 years of experience ($Mdn = -.10, p < .05$).

Table 3

Leadership Behavior Differences Between SSAO Experience Level

Leadership Behavior	Median Experience Level (Rank)			Test Statistics	
	10–20	21–30	31+	χ^2	df
Transformational	–	–	–	–	–
IA	-0.141 (3)	0.049 (2)	0.183 (1)	8.487*	2
IB	0.033 (3)	0.144 (2)	0.336 (1)	6.396*	2
IM	0.224 (2)	-0.203 (3)	0.307 (1)	5.096	2
IS	0.075 (2)	0.038 (3)	0.109 (1)	4.21	2
IC	0.130 (2)	-0.274 (3)	0.244 (1)	10.124*	2
Transactional	–	–	–	–	–
CR	0.098 (2)	-0.066 (3)	0.125 (1)	2.353	2
MBEA	-0.088 (1)	-0.099 (2)	-0.433 (3)	9.211*	2
MBEP	-0.174 (1)	-0.174 (1)	-0.174 (1)	1.742	2
Laissez-Faire	0.069 (1)	-0.003 (2)	-0.355 (3)	4.041	2

Note. Parenthetical rank considers the median experience level medians within each leadership behavior, with 1 representing the highest median. IA = Idealized Influence: Attributes; IB = Idealized Influence: Behaviors; IM = Idealized Motivation; IS = Intellectual Stimulation; IC = Individualized Consideration; CR = Contingent Reward; MBEA = Management by Exception: Active; MBEP = Management by Exception: Passive.

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

The degree to which SSAOs leadership behaviors have been studied has been limited to date. This study sought to examine if statistically significant differences in SSAOs leadership

behaviors existed when comparing for gender, education, years of experience and/or institutional type. Additionally, if statistically significant differences were discovered, researchers wanted to know what leadership behaviors differed and what (if any) relationships could be concluded as a result. The following discussion omits considering *laissez-faire* leadership style because the results revealed no significant differences in any of the studied variables, likely due to the fact that the SSAO roles and responsibilities outlined in the literature review are not conducive to *laissez-faire* leadership style. Thus, this section focuses on transformational and transactional leadership styles.

The current study generally supports past research exploring leadership styles broadly between genders (unspecific to organizational function). For instance, males exhibiting more transactional leadership behaviors than transformational compared to their female counterparts (Eagly et al., 2003); females displaying more transformational leadership behaviors than their male counterparts (Carless, 1998; Eagly et al., 2003); and, females rating themselves as more transformational than their male counterparts (Carless, 1998).

Comparatively, between SSAO gender groups, some significant differences existed among leadership traits within both transformational and transactional leadership styles; specifically, females scoring higher than their male counterparts in three of the five transformational traits (Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individual Consideration), and one of the three transactional traits (Contingent Reward). Female SSAOs were also found to score notably higher on Contingent Reward Behaviors for transactional leadership, which specifically aligns with previous research (Eagly et al., 2003). Since the previous studies broadly looked at gender and leadership behaviors without specifically focusing

on the subset of SSAOs, the aligning support provided by the current study suggest that current SSAOs fulfill established gender norms with respect to leadership behaviors.

No significant differences were found between SSAO leadership behaviors for institutional type for transformational or transactional leadership styles, which deviates from previous findings. For example, previous studies have found leaders of public organizations to demonstrate more transformational leadership behaviors than those leaders of private organizations (Dumdum et al., 2013). Another past study found leaders of public organizations have also been found to exhibit more behaviors related to Management by Exception than those in private organizations (Lowe et al., 1996). The deviation in findings between the two studies and the current study may be attributed to the difference in educationally-based organizations compared to the overarching general public or private organizations.

No significant differences were found between SSAO leadership behaviors for educational level differences for laissez-faire leadership yet were found in transformational and transactional behaviors. Studies on educational levels and demonstration of leadership behaviors is absent from the leadership literature (Barbuto et al., 2007). When studying a combination of educational level and age Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) found that those with higher educational levels had a preference for greater task-oriented (or transactional leadership behaviors), while those with less education (particularly with regard to men) had a preference for more relationship-oriented (or transformational leadership behaviors). Of note though, those who have completed a doctoral-level degree scored notably higher on Inspirational Motivation and Intellectual Stimulation for transformational leadership. Also, those with a masters-level degree scored notably higher than those with doctoral-level degrees on Management by Exception. This leadership trait falls under transactional leadership behaviors (Hartog et al., 1997). Differences

found for the above leadership traits, when examined for educational level, may produce different findings for others. The authors cannot generalize that those with higher levels of education have greater preferences for transformational leadership behaviors and those with lower levels have a greater preference for transactional leadership behaviors.

Significant differences were found between SSAO leadership behaviors for experience differences for Idealized Attributes and Individual Consideration for transformational leadership. While significant differences for the two attributes were found, related to experience, results of previous studies have found leaders at higher levels to practice more transactional leadership behaviors, while those at lower levels practice more transformational leadership behaviors (Lowe et al., 1996). Of particular note, the position level at an organization may not directly equal greater levels of experience. This is true as different institutional types have differing numbers of layers in their organizational structures (e.g. in a larger organization a director may have many years of experience, where this may be different in a smaller organization). We make this distinction as researchers, absent much research connecting experience to MLQ leadership behaviors. Significant differences were also found between SSAO leadership behaviors for experience differences for Management by Exception: Active for transactional and laissez-faire leadership.

Limitations

As with many studies in the field of student affairs and higher education, several limitations exist that should be identified. As the data analyzed for this study is based on those who responded only, it may not fully represent the leadership traits of SSAOs. For example, the sample limited the representation of SSAOs identifying outside the male-female binary. The decision to dichotomize the gender variable was not done with intent to negate the experiences of

transgender and gender non-conforming SSAOs, but rather because of sampling. To address this limitation, future research efforts should install more intentional efforts in recruiting and ensuring a representative sample to achieve greater generalizability of the results.

This study only examined leadership traits within three different leadership styles (transformational, transactional and laissez-faire). Other measurable traits may also exist that would help tell the story of SSAO's leadership experiences and may be explored by other researchers in the field. Lastly, researchers and administrators should understand that SSAO's are not solely reliant on any single trait mentioned above, as they may exhibit characteristics of each of these at various points in their practice of leadership as SSAOs.

Implications for Practice

This study has addressed one set of common leadership traits exhibited by SSAOs to measure transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire leadership utilizing the MLQ but does not measure all leadership types and/or traits. Results from this study, and others on the topic, can have important implications for those serving in this role. Within this study, significant differences were found between male and female SSAOs as well as SSAO professional experiences. However, there were no significant differences of educational attainment and institutional types. These findings have consideration for SSAOs with particular knowledge of their own preferences for particular leadership traits (transformational, transactional or laissez-faire) might make better-informed leadership decisions when possessing these insights. SSAOs may also better practice particular traits as necessary, given different situational expectations or needs of those they lead. For example, SSAOs may need to practice more transformational leadership traits when leading efforts around strategic planning for their organizations, a situation that may require them gain buy-in of a shared vision and goals. Those responsible for

preparing future SSAOs for their positions, either formally or informally should consider making leadership traits such as those examined in our study (or others) a part of their curriculums. By doing so SSAOs can gain early exposure to new knowledge and insights into leadership traits, in order to best identify what traits of leadership to practice given the expectations or needs they are presented with.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of the present study provide some new information with regard to our knowledge about SSAO leadership, particularly around the three leadership behavior types examined. More could be done to extend this research in the future. The authors recommend that researchers seek a more representative and balanced sample of SSAOs to achieve greater generalizability. While the whole sample (i.e., all SSAOs) were given the opportunity to participate, the sample is not fully representative. To accomplish this task in the future researchers might replicate the current study with SSAOs from those institutional types not well represented in the current study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). As we only focused on formal training (i.e., types educational degrees attained) researchers should examine other less formal training and socialization activities that SSAO's participate in, such as special institutes, management training programs, and conferences. The important impact that these activities may have on shaping the use of particular leadership traits should not go unnoticed. They too may directly influence the leadership traits exhibited by SSAOs. Lastly, as leadership by SSAOs is a complex task requiring engagement in and responses to a variety of situations (as discussed in the review of literature) researchers may want to examine what particular traits are best for certain situations. This is in keeping with the idea that SSAOs would not rely on any one type of

trait at all times, rather employing different traits as necessary depending on a best required response.

Conclusion

This study sought to add to the existing literature on SSAOs and their practice of leadership at colleges and universities. While SSAO demographics and career paths have been a part of existing literature for some time, common leadership behaviors have been absent. The bodies of literature in the fields of leadership, management and organizational psychology have regularly included studies using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire as a valid and reliable instrument to study leadership behavior. For this reason, we embarked on our study of SSAOs while using this widely used measure of leadership behaviors. Our use of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, allowed for the use of a widely used instrument (from the broader field of leadership) within the context of student affairs and higher education. Our study found some results where significant differences were found between demographic variables related to those SSAOs examined. The authors did find similar results been related to those demographic variables examined with previous studies, in the fields, outside of higher education, identified above. The authors have identified several implications for practice and recommendations for future research. As much of the research on SSAOs occurred around the 1980s and as much has changed with regard to the role of the SSAO, we suggest that others pick up the mantle on this important topic for both SSAOs and those that they lead in student affairs organizations on college and university campuses.

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