

## **Perceptions of Leadership: An Examination of College Students' Understandings of the Concept of Leadership**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine how college students define the concept of leadership and to identify gender, racial, and age differences within these definitions. Participants were 1100 undergraduate students drawn from a national sample. Participants were asked to detail their definitions of leadership, which were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The definitional themes served as dependent variables in determining differences by gender, race, and age. Ten leadership themes describing the relationship between the leader and followers, leader characteristics, and leadership outcomes were identified, and the frequency of themes reflected fairly hierarchical perceptions of leadership. Findings by gender, race, and age emerged for nine of the ten themes. More contemporary understandings of leadership were demonstrated by women than by men, and the interaction of gender and age for three themes suggested more contemporary understandings of leadership for traditionally-aged students than non-traditionally aged students.

### **Introduction**

Despite the strong emphasis on leadership today and, perhaps, *because* of the demand for better leadership across many contexts, there is a lack of common understanding or agreement on what leadership is and how leadership should be practiced (Bass, 1990; Goethals & Sorenson, 2007). Over the years scholars have defined leadership in many different ways; some as an inherent trait, others as set of skills or behaviors, and others as a process or relationship (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2007). Thus, the concept of leadership is perceived and promoted in different ways. Traditional, industrial perspectives promote leadership as transactional, hierarchical, and exclusive, while more contemporary, post-industrial perspectives embrace leadership as inclusive, empowering, and relational (Northouse, 2007; Rost, 1991).

While the scholarly discourse and debate on leadership continues, there remains a significant gap in systematic research about the general population's understandings of the concept of leadership. Leadership scholars and educators are contributing to this discourse and promoting more contemporary approaches to leadership with little understanding of how leadership is perceived within the larger population. This serves as a significant roadblock in leadership education, particularly within the arena of higher education.

Leadership development receives considerable attention as an outcome of student learning within higher education at institutional and national levels. Many institutional mission statements emphasize leadership, striving to develop students who will be leaders in various aspects of society (Astin & Astin, 2000), and a variety of leadership training, education, and development efforts are implemented on college campuses (Komives, Dugan, Owen, Slack, & Wagner, 2011). There is a growing body of research on student leadership as an outcome of the college experience, with a focus on students' leadership behaviors and styles. Very little is known, though, about how students perceive the concept of leadership.

Information on how college students understand the concept of leadership can help inform the development and implementation of leadership programs. Further, this information can assist leadership educators in constructing learning environments to best address students' leadership development needs and the leadership development goals of the institution. Students' understandings of leadership could influence their motivation for participating in leadership programs or for seeking out leadership experiences during college and post-college. Such information is valuable for leadership educators, who are encouraged to approach leadership education in an inclusive and broad way that reaches more than the students who seek out and select leadership opportunities (Komives et al., 2011). Further, information on how students understand the concept of leadership can provide insight into their expectations for leadership and may even inform how one engages in or seeks to engage in leadership.

### **College Students' Understandings of Leadership**

Research on college students' understandings of leadership is sparse, and the existing studies on this topic are limited in scope. Two identified studies are qualitative in nature and focus on small and select college student populations (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). Research on students' leadership identity development suggests that over time students' understandings of leadership became more complex and relational, moving from hierarchical to more collaborative (Komives et al., 2005), while Shertzer and Schuh's (2004) study identified that students holding formal leadership roles tended to have more traditional and trait-focused understandings of leadership than the students who did not hold formal leadership roles.

Another small group of studies quantitatively examine college students' understandings of leadership through two dominant frames: hierarchical thinking, characterized by top-down control and authority, and systemic thinking, characterized by an ecological and complex systems perspective (Allen, Stelzner, & Wielkiewicz, 1998; Wielkiewicz, 2000). The studies suggest the presence of both hierarchical and collaborative views of leadership within college student populations, with hierarchical perspectives being more dominant (Fischer, Overland, & Adams, 2010; Wielkiewicz, 2000, 2002). With a prescribed framework, these studies limit the potential range of perceptions of leadership that may exist.

These studies on students' perceptions of leadership also suggest potential differences based on gender and race. Men tended to view leadership as more hierarchical than women, and women tended to view leadership as more collaborative than men (Fischer et al., 2010; Komives et al., 2010; Wielkiewicz, 2000). Komives et al.'s (2005) leadership identity development research also suggested differing understandings of leadership by race, with students of color tending to have more relational views of leadership than their White counterparts. Further, a study on the leadership experiences of students of color identified that many student leaders of color did not see themselves as leaders; others even "resented the term 'leader' being used to describe them" (Arminio et al., 2000, p. 500).

The suggestion that leadership perceptions differ by gender and race parallel evidence within the body of student leadership outcomes research, which indicates that students' leadership styles and behaviors differ by gender and race (Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008; Haber & Komives, 2009; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). Further, the broader literature base outside of college student leadership suggest that women and people of color tend to have more communal approaches to leadership that focus on positive change (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Javidan, House, & Dorfman, 2004). Further, research on leadership as a developmental process suggests that age may play a role in how people understand and practice leadership (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2008; Komives et al., 2005; Lord & Hall, 2005). Thus, there is opportunity to expand the existing research on student leadership to gain a better and broader understanding of how college students' define the concept of leadership and how race, gender, and age may influence their definitions.

### **Methods of the Study**

The researcher examined students' free-written definitions of leadership to build themes in order better understand how their perceptions of leadership differ based on gender, race, and age. The two research questions were (a) What themes emerge in students' written definitions of leadership? and (b) How do students' leadership definition themes differ by gender, race, and age? To address the research questions of this study, data from the 2009 Multi-Institutional Study of

Leadership (MSL) were analyzed using mixed-methods procedures. The MSL was an appropriate dataset for this study, as it included a large number of undergraduate college students across the United States, allowing for a sampling strategy that reflects diversity within students' identified gender, race, and age. Data used in this study were collected through an online survey at 101 diverse U.S. colleges and universities. There was an overall response rate of 34%, with 94,317 participants completing 90% of the core survey.

### **Participants**

A total of 1100 undergraduate participants were selected through random criterion sampling from the national dataset in order to identify a sample reflecting diverse sub-populations of college students. This sampling strategy was used in order to have enough participants per racial and gender group to examine differences across groups. A total of 220 participants each were selected from the following self-identified racial groups: White/Caucasian, African American/Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian American/Asian, and Latino/Hispanic. Multiracial students were not selected as a racial group for analysis due to the immense within-group diversity in this population (Renn & Shang, 2008). The 220 participants in each racial group were split evenly between men and women. The number of participants was selected in order to accommodate loglinear analysis procedures used in the data analysis of research question two (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

### **Variables and Data Analysis**

Participants' free response definitions of leadership were analyzed using content analysis procedures, which enables researchers to break down a text into more manageable themes, categories, words, or phrases; this is particularly useful for studying leadership, of which language is a fundamental aspect (Klenke, 2008). Thematic content analysis allowed for replicable, reliable, and valid conclusions or deductions to be drawn from text by use of explicit coding (Boyatzis, 1998; Krippendorff, 2004). Initial coding categories for the thematic analysis were determined based on categories suggested in the leadership studies literature and were modified based two preliminary category searches and through consultation from colleagues. Once the final themes were identified, independent raters assessed reliability of these themes; two independent raters selected due to their expertise with the field of college student leadership were asked to code 50 responses using the identified categories and accompanying codebook. The raters' coding was compared to the researcher's as a reliability check, resulting in 81% and 84% respectively, which reflect strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

To examine gender, race, and age differences, the identified leadership themes served as the dependent variables for the second research question. The independent variables included students' race, gender, and age (ages 18-23 as traditionally-aged and ages 24 and older as non-traditionally aged). To examine

differences by group, loglinear analysis procedures were employed, which allowed for examination of multiple categorical and dichotomous variables and for the identification of main effects (i.e. gender) and interaction effects (i.e., gender and age) (Field, 2009). Findings were determined at the statistical significance levels of 10% ( $p < .10$ ), 5% ( $p < .05$ ), and 1% ( $p < .01$ ). Although not as rigorous as the other significance levels, the 10% level is appropriate for exploratory studies of this kind (Cohen, 1992), resulting not in absolute conclusions, but rather providing insight to the phenomena being studied and suggesting areas for continued inquiry.

## Results

The analysis resulted in the emergence of 10 leadership themes, many of which differed by gender, race, and age. The leadership themes are presented and described. Additionally, frequency of themes within the participant responses and findings on differences by gender, race, and age are presented.

### Themes

Thematic content analysis of participants' leadership definitions resulted in identification of 10 themes. Thirty-three definitions (3%) were coded as unusable by all raters, meaning they were insubstantial or did not fall into one of the 10 themes. The themes span three broader categories: (a) the nature of the leader and follower relationship, (b) leader characteristics and behaviors, (c) the outcomes of leadership. Theme categories, definitions, and descriptors are provided in Table 1.

### Leader and Follower Relationship Themes

This category includes the four themes of *collaborate*, *inspire*, *influence*, and *direct* which can be viewed on a continuum of leader-follower relations, ranging from relational and democratic (*collaborate*) to transactional and authoritarian (*direct*).

The *collaborate* theme emphasizes working together, including others' ideas, and knowing that one must follow as well as lead. While there may still be mention of leader and follower as distinct roles, the nature of interaction is not based on power dynamics. An example of a definition this theme is – *It means leading the team to perform as best they can, taking into account each individual member's assets and what they can contribute to the group.*

The *inspire* theme involves an emphasis on the interaction between a leader and others in the group through getting people involved, activated, and engaged in the process. There is evidence of motivating, empowering, or inspiring others. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *Leadership is the ability to motivate others towards a common goal.*

The *influence* theme involves a leader and other people in a transactional or top-down relationship, whereby the leader influences, leads, or guides others. The emphasis is on having others follow a leader in a transactional, top-down way. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *Leadership means that you can actually lead a group of people into accomplishing a goal or task.*

The *direct* theme involves mention of other people or a group in a strictly transactional or top-down manner, which emphasizes controlling, directing, exerting authority, or using power. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *Leadership means that there is some form of authority/or leader that takes charge of whatever a task may be.*

### **Leader Characteristics and Behaviors Themes**

This category includes the three themes of *support*, *modeling*, and *personal qualities* which reflect characteristics and behaviors of a leader.

The *support* theme focuses on the leader helping, supporting or giving advice to an individual. It also relates to putting others' needs before one's own and helping people be their best. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *Leadership is to take charge and help others get through situations. To be a guide and a mentor to others. To put others before yourself.*

The *modeling* theme involves setting a positive example or being a role model. It also includes a focus on aligning one's actions with his or her words, emphasizing morality and ethics. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *A true leader is someone who influences and directs others by their actions. It is someone who sets the example for others to follow.*

The *personal qualities* theme emphasizes positive or admirable personal qualities that an individual has or demonstrates, such as passion, intelligence, problem-solving ability, and confidence. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *To me, leadership describes a person that is self-motivated, has set goals, good influence, great spirit and a great leader.*

Table 1: Theme Categories, Definitions, and Descriptors

	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Theme Definition</b>	<b>Theme Descriptors</b>
Leader and Follower Relationship	Collaborate	<i>Collaborate</i> involves people working together, including others' ideas, and knowing that one must follow as well as lead. While there may still be mention of leader and follower as distinct roles, the nature of interaction is reciprocal.	Collaborating; Working together; Sharing tasks and responsibilities; Following as well as leading
	Inspire	<i>Inspire</i> involves an emphasis on the interaction between a leader and others in the group through getting people involved, activated, and engaged in the process. There is some evidence of motivating, empowering, or inspiring others.	Inspire; Motivate; Empower; Teach
	Influence	<i>Influence</i> involves mention of a leader and other people or a group in a transactional or top-down manner, whereby the leader influences, leads, or guides others. The emphasis is on having others follow a leader. There is not a negative or controlling focus in this theme.	Influence; Lead; Guide [a group]; Others follow you; Provide direction
	Direct	<i>Direct</i> involves mention of other people or a group in a strictly transactional or top-down manner. The emphasis is on controlling, directing, exerting authority or using power.	Directing; Dictating; Being in charge; Taking charge of a person, group, or situation; Having control; Power; Emphasis on role/ authority
Leader Characteristics and Behaviors	Support	<i>Support</i> involves a focus on the leader helping, supporting or giving advice to an individual. It also relates to putting others' needs before one's own and helping people be their best.	Helping; Giving advice; Supporting; Mentoring; Caring for people; Providing guidance [to an individual]; Putting others before self; Well-being of others; Serving others
	Modeling	<i>Modeling</i> involves someone setting a positive example or being a role model in his/ her actions or overall sense of being. It also relates to leading with morality and ethics.	Look up to; Modeling; Role Model; Set Example; Positive Example; Morals; Ethics; Lead through actions (not just words)
	Personal Qualities	<i>Personal Qualities</i> involves mention of positive or admirable personal qualities that an individual has or demonstrates.	Respected; Likeability; Passion; Problem solving ability; intelligent; Charisma; Ambition; Confidence; Wisdom; Success; Strength; Stands out

Leadership Outcome	Positive Difference	<i>Positive Difference</i> involves leadership for a greater good, making a positive difference, caring about the larger community, or affecting something beyond the group or individual.	Make a difference; Positive difference; Common good; Community focus; Greater good; Making things better; Caring about the larger community/ bigger picture; Responsibility to a cause or purpose
	Shared Goal	<i>Shared Goal</i> involves recognition of a common or shared goal or purpose within a group.	Common/ shared goal; Common/ shared purpose; Agreed upon goal or direction
	Task	<i>Task</i> involves accomplishing a goal or engaging in a task or action. It can also involve stepping up and taking initiative.	Complete a task; Accomplish a goal; Take action; Take initiative (on accomplishing a task); Step up; Get things done; Output or outcome; Objective

### Leadership Outcome Themes

The final category of leadership themes includes the three themes of *positive difference*, *shared goal*, and *task*, reflecting the outcome of leadership.

The *positive difference* theme involves leadership for a greater good, caring about the larger community, or affecting something beyond the group or individual. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *Leadership means having ambition, the drive to have a purpose in your personal space, in your living area, your community, and your world.*

The *shared goal* theme involves recognition of a common goal or purpose within a group. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *Ability to take others in a direction agreed upon by the entire group.*

The *task* theme involves accomplishing a goal (not shared), action, engaging in a task, stepping up, and taking initiative. An example of a definition reflecting this theme is – *Pulling together a group and getting stuff done.*

### Theme Frequencies

The themes varied in frequency among participants' definitions of leadership. Table 2 provides frequencies of the themes by total participants, gender, age, and race. The most prevalent themes were influence (n=467), task (n=267), shared goal (n=260), personal qualities (n=219), and direct (n=218). The least prevalent themes were inspire (n=144), support (n=151), modeling (n=160), positive difference (n=161), and collaborate (n=177). Nearly three-quarters of participants' definitions spanned multiple leadership themes, ranging from one theme to as many as five. The most commonly paired themes were: influence and shared goal (n=117), influence and task (n=105), collaborate and shared goal (n=67), direct and task (n=63), and influence and personal qualities (n=62).

### Main Effect Findings by Gender, Race, and Age

Significant main effects emerged for six of the leadership themes, with significant differences found for age, gender, and race (Tables 3-8). Based on the loglinear analyses, three themes (*collaborate*, *personal qualities*, and *positive difference*) reflected significant main effects by gender. For each of these main effects, the theme was more prevalent for women than for men. Findings for the *collaborate* theme ( $\chi^2 = 7.38, p < .01$ ) suggest, based on the odds ratio, women were 1.53 times more likely to include a focus on collaboration in their definitions of leadership than men, with an effect of  $r = .17$ . Findings for the *personal qualities* theme ( $\chi^2 = 7.90, p < .01$ ) suggest, based on the odds ratio, women were 1.50 times more likely to include a focus on admirable personal qualities in their definitions of leadership than men, with an effect of  $r = .16$ . Last, findings for the *positive difference* theme ( $\chi^2 = 4.69, p < .05$ ) suggest, based on the odds ratio, women were 1.43 times more likely to include a focus on positive difference in their definition of leadership than men, with an effect of  $r = .14$ . These findings suggest small but significant gender differences in students' perceptions of leadership, with women including a focus on collaboration, admirable personal qualities, and positive change more so than men.

Table 2: Frequencies of Leadership Themes – Total, Gender, Age, and Race

Theme	Total		Female		Male		Age: 18-23		Age: 24+		White		African Amer.		Amer. Indian		Asian Amer.		Latino	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. Collaborate	177	16	105	19	41	19	32	15	32	15	30	14	40	18	32	15	72	13	145	16
2. Inspire	144	13	72	13	32	15	22	10	28	13	26	12	32	15	32	15	72	13	116	13
3. Influence	467	43	241	44	84	38	105	48	97	45	86	39	99	45	93	42	226	41	370	42
4. Direct	218	20	104	19	50	23	45	20	52	24	49	22	41	19	33	15	114	21	166	19
5. Support	151	14	78	14	24	11	25	11	26	12	28	13	37	17	37	17	73	13	125	14
6. Modeling	160	15	81	15	33	15	28	13	24	11	35	16	30	14	34	15	79	14	136	15
7. Pers. Qualities	219	20	128	23	33	15	45	20	45	21	49	22	43	20	49	22	91	17	174	20
8. Positive Difference	161	15	93	17	27	12	29	13	36	17	38	17	28	13	39	18	68	12	125	14
9. Shared Goal	260	24	132	24	64	29	50	23	56	26	40	18	48	22	58	26	128	23	204	23
10. Task	267	24	136	25	65	30	59	27	49	23	53	24	49	22	41	19	131	24	218	28

NOTE: Percentages do not total 100 because responses could fall into more than one theme. Additionally, percentages were rounded.

For race, the loglinear analyses resulted in significant main effects for the themes of *shared goal* and *task*. Findings for the *shared goal* theme ( $\chi^2 = 10.51, p < .05$ ) suggest, based on the standardized residuals of the observed and expected frequencies for each racial group, White students were overrepresented in this theme compared to the expected frequency ( $z = 1.66, p < .10$ ), and American Indian/Alaska Native students were underrepresented in this theme compared to the expected frequency ( $z = -1.66, p < .10$ ). Findings for the *task* theme ( $\chi^2 = 8.54, p < .10$ ) suggest, based on the standardized residuals of the observed and expected frequencies for each racial group, Latino/Hispanic students were underrepresented in this theme compared to the expected frequency ( $z = -1.70, p < .10$ ). These findings suggest differences by race in students' perceptions of the outcomes of leadership, with White students associating leadership more with involving a shared goal, American Indian/Alaska Native students being less likely to view leadership as involving a shared goal, and Latino/Hispanic students being less likely to view leadership as involving a focus on task.

Based on the loglinear analyses, the themes of *shared goal* and *modeling* reflected significant main effects by age. Findings for the *shared goal* theme ( $\chi^2 = 2.76, p < .10$ ) suggest, based on the odds ratio, students aged 24 and older were 1.18 times more likely to include a focus on a shared goal in their definitions of leadership than students aged 18-23, with an effect of  $r = .06$ . Findings for the *modeling* theme ( $\chi^2 = 2.76, p < .10$ ) suggest, based on the odds ratio, students aged 18-23 were 1.43 times more likely to view leadership as involving modeling than students 24 years and older, with an effect of  $r = .14$ . These findings suggest small, yet significant, differences in students' perceptions of leadership based on age when it comes to understanding leadership as involving a focus on shared goals and modeling.

### **Interaction Effect Findings**

Four interaction effects emerged from the loglinear analyses; three analyses resulted in significant associations between the theme, gender, and age, and one analysis resulted in a significant association between the theme, gender, age, and race (Tables 3-8). Tables 3, 5, and 7 provide a summary of the observed frequencies of the different leadership themes in which there were significant findings by gender, race, and age. Tables 4, 6, and 8 include the findings of main effects and interaction effects by gender, race, and each for each of the leadership themes in which there were significant findings.

Since the main effects of gender and age were not significant, the interaction effects for the *influence*, *direct*, and *support* themes can be best understood as cross-over interaction effects, which allow for identification of patterns through

which the themes can be better understood. Findings for the *influence* theme ( $\chi^2=2.75, p < .10$ ), suggest, based on the odds ratio, women aged 24 and older are 1.72 times more likely than men aged 18-23 ( $r = .17$ ) and 1.53 times more likely than women aged 18-23 ( $r = .17$ ) to view leadership as involving influencing. Findings for the *direct* theme ( $\chi^2=3.80, p < .10$ ) suggest, based on the odds ratio, men aged 24 and older were 1.78 times more likely to view leadership as involving directing compared to men aged 18-23 and all women, with an effect of  $r = .22$ . Findings for the *support* theme ( $\chi^2=2.78, p < .10$ ) suggest, based on the odds ratio, that women aged 24 and older were 1.8 times less likely than men aged 24 and older ( $r = .23$ ), 1.8 times less likely than women aged 18-23 ( $r = .23$ ), and 1.5 times less likely than men aged 18-23 ( $r = .16$ ) to include a focus on support in their definitions of leadership. These findings suggest small but significant patterns based on gender and age in students' perception of the nature of the leader and follower relationship and the presence of support in students' definitions of leadership. Lastly, for the *shared goal* theme there was also a significant three-way cross-over interaction effect for gender, race, and age ( $\chi^2=9.05, p < .10$ ). It is difficult to interpret this complex interaction without the ability to graphically depict this cross-over interaction effect. Due to the complexity of this interaction, it will be noted as a significant finding for potential future examination.

Table 3: Summary of Observed Frequencies and Percentages for Significant Effects for Themes 1-4 by Gender, Race, and Age

Theme 1: Collaborate			
Gender		Yes	No
Women		105 (20)	445 (80)
Men		72 (13)	478 (87)
Theme 3: Influence			
Age	Gender	Yes	No
18-23	Women	188 (42)	261 (58)
	Men	182 (42)	255 (58)
24+	Women	53 (53)	48 (47)
	Men	44 (39)	69 (61)
Theme 4: Direct			
Age	Gender	Yes	No
18-23	Women	85(19)	364 (81)
	Men	81 (19)	356 (81)
24+	Women	19 (19)	82 (81)
	Men	33 (29)	80 (71)

*Note.* No significant effects emerged for Theme 2; therefore, the frequencies are not included. Percentages appear in parentheses.

Table 4: Summary of Loglinear Analysis of the Relation Between Leadership Themes 1-4, Gender, Race, and Age

Theme	Association	df	$\chi^2$
T = Theme 1: Collaborate	T x G x R x A	4	1.50
	T x G x R	4	1.56
	T x G x A	1	0.02
	T x R x A	4	1.01
	T x G	1	7.38***
	T x R	4	3.03
	T x A	1	0.00
T= Theme 2: Inspire	T x G x R x A	4	2.59
	T x G x R	4	1.35
	T x G x A	1	0.03
	T x R x A	4	6.87
	T x G	1	0.00
	T x R	4	3.68
	T x A	1	0.17
T= Theme 3: Influence	T x G x R x A	4	2.95
	T x G x R	4	2.72
	T x G x A	1	2.75*
	T x R x A	4	2.98
	T x G	1	0.89
	T x R	4	5.76
	T x A	1	0.95
T= Theme 4: Direct	T x G x R x A	4	4.72
	T x G x R	4	5.23
	T x G x A	1	3.80*
	T x R x A	4	7.05
	T x G	1	0.51
	T x R	4	5.09
	T x A	1	2.61

Note: T = Leadership Theme, G = Gender, R = Race, A = Age. \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table 5: Summary of Observed Frequencies and Percentages for Significant Effects for Themes 5-7 by Gender, Race, and Age

Theme 5: Support			
Age	Gender	Yes	No
18-23	Women	69 (15)	380 (85)
	Men	56 (13)	381 (87)
24+	Women	9 (9)	92 (91)
	Men	17 (15)	96 (85)

  

Theme 6: Modeling			
Age		Yes	No
18-23		136 (15)	750 (85)
24+		24 (11)	190 (89)

  

Theme 7: Personal Qualities			
	Gender	Yes	No
	Women	128 (23)	422 (77)
	Men	91 (17)	459 (83)

*Note.* Percentages appear in parentheses.

Table 6: Summary of Loglinear Analysis of the Relation Between Leadership Themes 5-7, Gender, Race, and Age

Theme	Association	df	$\chi^2$
T= Theme 5: Support	T x G x R x A	4	1.81
	T x G x R	4	1.98
	T x G x A	1	2.78*
	T x R x A	4	2.02
	T x G	1	0.18
	T x R	4	5.93
	T x A	1	0.28
T=Theme 6: Modeling	T x G x R x A	4	3.19
	T x G x R	4	2.55
	T x G x A	1	0.22
	T x R x A	4	3.50
	T x G	1	0.02
	T x R	4	1.53
	T x A	1	2.76*
T= Theme 7: Personal Qualities	T x G x R x A	4	1.97
	T x G x R	4	3.06
	T x G x A	1	0.41
	T x R x A	4	2.92
	T x G	1	7.90***
	T x R	4	4.91
	T x A	1	0.04

*Note:* T = Leadership Theme, G = Gender, R = Race, A = Age. \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Table 7: Summary of Observed Frequencies and Percentages for Significant Effects for Themes 8-10 by Gender, Race, and Age

Theme 8: Positive Difference				
Gender	Yes	No		
Women	93 (17)	457 (83)		
Men	68 (12)	482 (88)		
Theme 9: Shared Goal				
Race	Yes	No		
White/Caucasian	64 (29)	156 (71)		
African American/Black	50 (23)	170 (77)		
American Indian/Alaska Native	40 (18)	180 (82)		
Asian American/Asian	48 (22)	172 (78)		
Latino/Hispanic	58 (26)	162 (74)		
Age	Yes	No		
18-23	204 (23)	682 (77)		
24+	56 (26)	158 (74)		
Women				
Age	Race	Yes	No	
18-23	White/Caucasian	23 (23)	79 (77)	
	African American/Black	19 (25)	60 (75)	
	American Indian/Alaska Native	10 (14)	60 (86)	
	Asian American/Asian	28 (27)	74 (73)	
	Latino/Hispanic	25 (26)	71 (74)	
24+	White/Caucasian	5 (63)	3 (37)	
	African American/Black	8 (26)	23 (74)	
	American Indian/Alaska Native	9 (23)	31 (77)	
	Asian American/Asian	1 (13)	7 (87)	
	Latino/Hispanic	4 (29)	10 (71)	
Men				
Age	Race	Yes	No	
18-23	White/Caucasian	33 (34)	65 (66)	
	African American/Black	16 (20)	65 (80)	
	American Indian/Alaska Native	14 (20)	57 (80)	
	Asian American/Asian	14 (15)	79 (85)	
	Latino/Hispanic	22 (23)	72 (77)	
24+	White/Caucasian	3 (25)	9 (75)	
	African American/Black	7 (24)	22 (76)	
	American Indian/Alaska Native	7 (18)	32 (82)	
	Asian American/Asian	5 (29)	12 (71)	
	Latino/Hispanic	7 (44)	9 (56)	
Theme 10: Task				
Race	Yes	No		
White/Caucasian	65 (30)	155 (70)		
African American/Black	59 (27)	161 (73)		
American Indian/Alaska Native	53 (24)	167 (76)		
Asian American/Asian	49 (22)	171 (78)		
Latino/Hispanic	41 (19)	179 (81)		

*Note.* Percentages appear in parentheses.

Table 8: Summary of Loglinear Analysis of the Relation Between Leadership Themes 8-10, Gender, Race, and Age

Theme	Association	df	$\chi^2$
T= Theme 8: Positive Difference	T x G x R x A	4	5.13
	T x G x R	4	4.34
	T x G x A	1	0.08
	T x R x A	4	3.54
	T x G	1	4.69**
	T x R	4	4.44
	T x A	1	0.69
T= Theme 9: Shared Goal	T x G x R x A	4	9.05*
	T x G x R	4	4.54
	T x G x A	1	0.03
	T x R x A	4	0.79
	T x G	1	0.11
	T x R	4	10.51**
	T x A	1	2.76*
T= Theme 10: Task	T x G x R x A	4	5.06
	T x G x R	4	1.66
	T x G x A	1	0.39
	T x R x A	4	2.29
	T x G	1	0.11
	T x R	4	8.54*
	T x A	1	0.34

Note: T = Leadership Theme, G = Gender, R = Race, A = Age. \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

## Discussion

The identification of 10 different leadership themes within students' definitions of leadership suggests that college students understand leadership in many different ways. The findings from this study suggest an overall pattern that students tended to have more hierarchical and leader-centric understandings of leadership than collaborative understandings of leadership. This can be seen in examining the leader and follower/group themes, whereby there was greater frequency of the more hierarchical themes (*influence* and *direct*), which reflect industrial perspectives on leadership, than the more relational themes (*collaborate* and *inspire*), which are mostly post-industrial in nature (Rost, 1991). Another overall pattern was participants' strong focus on leadership as involving a goal or task, which is evident in the prevalence of the *shared goal* and *task* themes.

Some of leadership themes that were not as prevalent were the *collaborate*, *inspire*, *support*, *modeling*, and *positive difference* themes. These less-represented leadership themes are reflective of some of the more contemporary and post-industrial perspectives of leadership within the field of leadership studies (Northouse, 2007; Rost, 1991). These themes also reflect values emphasized within leadership models and frameworks for college students (Astin & Astin, 2000; Komives et al., 2011). The finding that students' perceptions of leadership are in many cases somewhat contradictory to more contemporary and post-industrial perspectives of leadership suggests a disconnect between how leadership is promoted and conceptualized by leadership educators and scholars and how it is understood by students. This gap in students' understandings and the goals of leadership educators should not be viewed as a serious problem, but rather as evidence of leadership identity development, whereby "students must first understand and practice the skills of a hierarchical structure in order to recognize the interdependent relationships within the structure supporting their transition to viewing leadership as non-hierarchical and process" (Komives et al., 2009, p. 33). Leadership educators must recognize and respond to this process of students' changing understandings of leadership in a way that supports, yet challenges them.

Gender, race, age, and the interaction of these variables emerged as significant variables for nine of the 10 leadership themes (all but the *inspire* theme). These findings suggest that, given the plethora of possible individual environmental variables affecting students' understandings of leadership, one's gender, race, age, and/ or combination of their identities continues to play a small but significant role in determining how students understand the concept of leadership.

### **Discussion of Findings by Gender, Age, and Race**

Gender difference findings for the leadership themes of *collaborate* and *positive difference*, with women identifying these themes more so than men, is consistent with research on students' understandings of leadership as well as their leadership practice. Women's greater emphasis on collaboration is reflective of findings from previous research that men tended to have more hierarchical thinking about leadership than women and that women demonstrated greater focus on interdependence than men (Fischer et al., 2010; Wielkiewicz, 2000). The findings from this study on gender differences for the themes of *collaborate* and *positive difference* reflect findings of women's greater self-reported behavioral measures of collaboration and citizenship as compared to men (Dugan et al., 2008). Further, a larger body of literature on women and leadership suggests women are motivated to engage in leadership in order to make a positive impact and serve their organizations and community (Barsh, Cranston, & Lewis, 2009).

The finding that women were significantly more likely than men to understand leadership as involving *personal qualities* is perhaps less conclusive in the research. In fact, past research suggests that men's understandings of leadership are more leader-centric, reflecting the individual leader and the skills or qualities of that leader (Fischer et al., 2010; Wielkiewicz, 2000). Many of the identified leader qualities were admirable, desirable, and positive qualities that were also paired with other leadership themes including *influence*, *modeling*, and *support*. This could suggest that women, more so than men, view leadership as possessing positive qualities, which often accompany leadership behaviors. This finding could also suggest that women view leadership as being personalized and involving qualified, deserving, and competent leaders.

The interaction of gender and age across a number of the leadership themes is an interesting pattern to note. The *influence* theme and *direct* themes are both themes that reflect the leader and follower relationship. Based on these findings, one could conclude that students aged 24 and older have a more leader-centric and less relational understanding of leadership compared to younger students, with men 24 and older associating leadership more with *directing* and women 24 and older associating leadership more with *influencing*. The pattern by age in these findings is in some ways contradictory to the research on leadership as a developmental process, which suggests that over time people's understandings and practice of leadership and one's understanding of self with others become more interdependent and complex (Day et al., 2008; Komives et al., 2005; Lord & Hall, 2005). This does not appear to be the case with the findings on age and gender for the *influence* and *direct* themes.

The findings that older men and women tended to have more hierarchical understandings of leadership as compared to younger men and women could reflect the life experiences and work experiences that older students may have prior to or during college, which are often front line or lower level jobs in industries such as sales, service, and manufacturing, which may have a more hierarchical organizational structure and may reward hierarchical thinking. This finding could also relate to the higher number of veterans returning to college, many of whom are men. With the military reflecting often more hierarchical practices of leadership, many of these older men on college campuses could have more of a directive way of understanding leadership. Another way of looking at this finding is that for men, there may be a generational difference, whereby younger men may be approaching and understanding leadership less so like their older male counterparts and more like their female counterparts, with less association of leadership as directing or controlling others. While a generational difference may be at play, without really understanding how students from older generations viewed leadership when they were 18-23, it is unclear if these

findings reflect a generational change or a change based on growing older; this finding warrants additional exploration.

The combination of gender and age was also significant for the *support* theme, whereby women aged 24 and older were less likely to define leadership as involving *support*. This finding is a bit perplexing, as women in this age group are more often mothers and responsible for childcare and household responsibilities (i.e., supporting) than younger women and men. This could be understood that although women may engage in these behaviors more often, they may not view supporting behaviors as leadership.

There was one theme, *modeling*, in which age alone (not as a cross-over effect) emerged as a significant main effect. The finding suggests that younger students might place a greater focus on leadership as leading by example and with morals than their older counterparts. Since these younger students likely have less life experience and work experience than their older peers, this finding could suggest that younger students may be more idealistic when it comes to leadership and older students may see lack of role modeling or morality in their previous experiences.

For the demographic variable of race, significant findings emerged for only two of the leadership themes. This suggests that for the most part, students think about leadership similarly, regardless of race. The differences across race that do emerge have to do with the outcome or the purpose of leadership. One of these findings identified Latino/Hispanic students as less likely to define leadership with an emphasis on *task*. This supports literature that suggests that the Latino community has a relational and reflective concept of leadership (Bordas, 2007) and the research on culture and leadership that indicates that the Latino community tends to have a low focus on performance orientation, characterized by goal attainment, performance improvement, and a high focus on in-group collectivism, which reflects cohesiveness in organizations, families, and society (Javidan et al., 2004).

Interestingly, though, the other findings related to race were fairly contradictory to the literature on race and leadership, which suggests that people (and students) of color tend to have more relational and communal approaches to and understandings of leadership (Arminio et al., 2000; Bordas, 2007; Javidan et al., 2004). For example, the finding that American Indian students associated leadership less so with *common purpose* than other racial groups is contradictory to the literature on traditional American Indian cultures that suggests that American Indians tend to approach leadership with a community focus and orientation (American Indian Research and Policy Institute, 1997; Bordas, 2007). Further, the findings suggest that White students were more likely to view

leadership as related to a *shared goal* as compared to other groups. This contradicts research on culture and leadership, which suggests that the Anglo culture tends to be more individualized and less communal than other cultures, placing a greater focus on performance and accomplishment (Javidan et al., 2004) which reflect values more characteristic of *task* theme than the *shared goal* theme.

With these potentially contradictory findings in mind, it is important to note that this study examined data on participants' personal associations with the term *leadership*. How participants defined leadership may not be how they think leadership should be practiced, how they engage with others in a group, how they would aspire to lead, or how they imagine a group or community to function or attempt to affect change. Rather, the findings reflect students' association with and basic interpretation of the term *leadership*. This could help explain why some of the findings seem contradictory to the literature. This finding, paired with the other literature on leadership within communities of color, warrants additional exploration into if and how students personally identify with the concept of leadership. Nonetheless, these findings provide insight into students' initial perceptions of the concept of leadership, which is important to note as leadership educators.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings from this study can inform the marketing of leadership programs, leadership curriculum, and an institution's overall focus on leadership. It is imperative for administrators and faculty members to recognize that students have fairly traditional understandings of leadership. Although these hierarchical views on leadership are a natural stage of students' process of understanding the concept of leadership (Komives et al., 2009), they are contradictory to the type of leadership promoted by leadership scholars and educators (Komives et al., 2011) and found to be successful for organizational success (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Further, students' predominantly hierarchical views of leadership can be limiting and may discourage some students from seeking out leadership development opportunities. Thus, administrators and faculty can use these findings to inform how they promote leadership opportunities and how they recruit students for leadership programs. A variety of recruitment strategies may be needed in order to draw in different types of students. Additionally, leadership programs may need to be further explained when promoting these opportunities, since leadership means different things to different people.

The finding that many students hold traditional and hierarchical understandings of leadership can also inform leadership curriculum, particularly within students' early experiences with such programs. Students may not, for example, view leadership efforts such as teambuilding and collaborative assignments as

*leadership.* Administrators and faculty members should therefore seek to understand how students view leadership upon entering a leadership program and find ways to not only support students' views of leadership, but also to challenge them by debunking traditional leadership myths and actively promoting other more contemporary leadership values. Further, administrators and faculty should find ways to affirm and encourage understandings of leadership that promote more contemporary values, particularly since more relational views of leadership may be contradictory to more prominent, traditional understandings of leadership among many college students. These implications may be more prevalent when working with men and with non-traditionally aged college students, who tended to have more industrial perspectives of leadership as compared to women and traditionally-aged students. As an example, programs and organizations targeting men, such as men's retreats, athletic teams, or fraternities, may be arenas conducive to promoting contemporary understandings of leadership and challenging the more traditional, hierarchical concepts of leadership.

Last, there are implications beyond the scope of leadership programs for the larger institution. As colleges and universities continue to strive to develop students who are leaders and capable of leading and affecting change (Astin & Astin, 2000), it is important that institutional leaders clarify what values around leadership they seek to develop in their students. To accompany this, administrators should examine the programs and student involvement opportunities on their campuses and examine what assumptions and values about leadership they are teaching, promoting, and modeling. If there is a widespread institutional commitment to leadership, administrators and faculty members might consider developing an agreed-upon set of assumptions or values of leadership that they can promote and use to purposefully design their programs and courses. This purposeful defining and potential reframing of the concept of leadership on college campuses could help create an environment that supports students' understandings of leadership to be more aligned with institutional goals and with contemporary understandings of leadership.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Particularly since this was the first study to examine college students' understandings of leadership in a broad and open-ended way, there are a number of directions in which this research can continue in order to increase the understanding of college students' leadership development as it relates to how they understand the concept of leadership. First, while this study provided a baseline and broad snapshot of students' understandings of the concept of leadership, it was limited in the depth it was able to provide due to collecting data through a free-response item on a larger survey. Thus, there is opportunity to expand this research by examining students' views of leadership through a more

in-depth, qualitative study of students' understandings of the concept of leadership and influences to this understanding. This could be done through one-on-one interviews or examination of course papers or journals.

Another valuable area for further research is examining participants' understandings of leadership in conjunction with their leadership behaviors, providing insight on the relationships that may or may not exist between how students view leadership and how they engage in leadership. This could be done quantitatively through using self-assessed and peer-assessed leadership behaviors. Lastly, to explore influences on students' leadership perceptions, the findings could be further explored with a focus on different pre-college or college experiences that may predict the different understandings of leadership. For example, an examination of students' understandings of leadership alongside information about whether or not students participated in leadership programs, held formal leadership positions, or engaged in other involvement activities would be contribute the body of research on college student leadership.

## **Conclusion**

Leadership development continues to be emphasized as an outcome and goal of the college experience, and the role of leadership educators in serving these institutional outcomes continues to expand (Huber, 2002). This study contributes to the relatively uncharted territory of understanding how college students define the concept of leadership. The study resulted in a number of different ways in which college students understanding of leadership and the conclusion students' understandings of leadership tended to reflect more industrial views of leadership than post-industrial perspectives. Further, this study examined the relationship between students' understandings of leadership and the demographic variables of gender, race, and age, and a number of significant differences based on gender, race, and age emerged.

A recent article from the *Chronicle for Higher Education* focuses the importance of leadership development on college campuses. The author suggests that in order to best address the leadership needs of the students, "each institution needs to define leadership in a meaningful way before it can develop a meaningful curriculum for its students" (Greenwald, 2010, December 5). Institutions should approach the goals of leadership development intentionally and identify what values about leadership should be promoted, taught, modeled, and celebrated. To further this intentional focus on student leadership development, this current study suggests that leadership educators must, too, seek to understand how students define leadership as they seek to enhance programs, meet the leadership development goals of the institution, and prepare future leaders.



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