

## **Key Events in Student Leaders' Lives and Lessons Learned from Them**

### **Dr. Valerie I. Sessa**

Associate Professor, Psychology  
Director of Leadership Development through Civic Engagement  
Montclair State University  
Montclair, New Jersey 07043  
[sessav@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:sessav@mail.montclair.edu)

### **Brett V. Morgan**

Director, Business Change and Transformation  
Wyndham Hotel Group  
[bvmorgan@gmail.com](mailto:bvmorgan@gmail.com)

### **Selin Kalenderli**

Graduate student  
Montclair State University  
[selin\\_kalenderli@fulbrightmail.org](mailto:selin_kalenderli@fulbrightmail.org)

### **Fanny E. Hammond**

Graduate Student  
Montclair State University  
[fannyh19@gmail.com](mailto:fannyh19@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

This descriptive study used an interview protocol developed by the Center for Creative Leadership with 50 college student leaders to determine what key developmental events young college leaders experience and the leadership lessons learned from these events. Students discussed 180 events and 734 lessons learned from them. Most events defined by students were challenging assignments, although events dealing with other people, coursework, and formal leadership programs were also mentioned. Top lessons included communication, self-identity, leadership identity, and developing leadership task and management skills. While many lessons could be learned in a variety of different ways, a number of challenging assignments stood out as important for learning certain lessons.

Findings suggest that faculty and administrators involved with student leaders can help the students take a proactive approach to developing themselves as leaders by targeting important events and important lessons to learn.

## **Introduction**

Although scholars and practitioners in the academy have long been interested in the theory and practice of leader development in college students, less attention has been paid to the students' point of view in these matters. It is generally accepted that leader development should be part of the education system's responsibility for preparing individuals to participate in a democratic and progressive society (Astin & Astin, 2000; Brubacher & Rudy, 2002; Dewey, 1938, as cited in Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007). Many colleges and universities across the nation provide their students with leadership courses, curricular programs, and co-curricular programs that are designed to develop students' formal knowledge about leadership as well as opportunities and experiences to develop students as leaders and actually practice leadership (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Additionally, student leader development theory and research is alive and well (Dugan & Komives, 2007). However, how to best approach the task of developing student leaders is a gray area with scholars and practitioners often left to their "best guess" regarding how to proceed (Allen & Hartman, 2009). In addition, only a handful of studies (e.g., Hall, Forrester, & Borsz, 2008; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Logue, Hutchens, & Hector, 2005) have sought to understand leader development from the students' point of view, with students describing their own experiences and what they learned from them in their own words (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007).

Important questions that remain to be asked include: What are the experiences students think make the most difference in their own leader development? What do they learn from these experiences? And are certain experiences linked to certain lessons? Studies investigating what and how leader development occurs in students would be invaluable for those involved in and responsible for student leader development (Posner, 2004). The purpose of this descriptive study is to determine what key developmental events college student leaders experience and see as important and the leadership lessons they learn from them.

### **What we “know” about leader development in students**

Leader development is about enhancing the capacity of individuals to experience and participate in leadership roles and processes (McCauley, Van Velsor, & Ruderman, 2010) and can be accomplished both within a natural process (Day, Zaccaro, & Halpin, 2004) and via planned interventions or a combination of the two. Although students do come into college with some already developed leadership skills (Antonio, 2001; Dugan, Garland, Jacoby, & Gasiorski, 2008; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Smart, Ethington, Riggs, & Thompson, 2002), students begin to develop or increase their leadership skills during their college years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Existing research has examined the impact of a wide array of collegiate experiences on leader development. Positive predictive relationships have been established between leader development and general student involvement, community service, internships, interracial interaction, positional leadership roles, faculty interactions and mentoring, and formal leader training programs (Antonio, 2001; Astin, 1993; Astin, Keup, & Lindholm, 2002; Astin, Vogelgesang,

Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2002; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Dugan, 2006; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Smart et al., 2002; Thompson, 2006; Whitt, 1994).

What the works cited above do not do, and what the literature in general lacks, is the production of credible accounts of leader development from the students' point of view. To date, the research cited above uses quantitative design with variables of interest identified in advance. Thus students respond to their investigators' *a priori* notions about the topic.

There are a few recent exceptions. For example, Logue et al. (2005) provide insight into what student leaders think leadership roles are comprised of. They interviewed six student leaders in depth regarding their experiences of being a leader. They found that the students overall saw their experiences as positive. Their experiences could be grouped into three themes: People (interpersonal experiences including leading, helping, and working in a team), taking action (including getting things done, success, and busy lives), and leadership experiences in relation to organizations, events, and activities (including defining events, role differentiation, and structure). However, there was no attempt to determine what students learned from being in these leadership roles.

Hall et al. (2008) provide insight into skills that are developed by participating in student leadership roles. They interviewed 21 students currently involved in a variety of leadership roles in campus recreational sports clubs and they found that these student leaders learned organization, planning, and delegation through such experiences as accounting and budgeting, coordinating and running meetings, and organizing events.

Through involvement in multiple roles, student leaders learned to balance the demands of academic, personal, and professional responsibilities. Positional leadership roles taught students to motivate, influence, and mentor/role model positive behaviors. Student leaders learned problem solving and decision-making through financial decisions, hosting events, and personal interactions. They learned communication by utilizing a variety of methods including e-mails, meeting agendas, newsletters, listservs, flyers, and website development, making announcements, facilitating meetings, and holding office hours. And finally, by just being involved in general, they learned how to work with others and how to give and receive feedback. However, in this study, researchers did not attempt to see if different leadership roles were associated with different types of lessons learned.

Komives et al. (2005) provide insight regarding developmental influences in developing a leadership identity (answering the question, “who am I as a leader?” as opposed to “what is the role of the leader?” see Gee, 2001). Using a series of three in-depth interviews with 13 participants, they determined the influences that fostered the development of leadership identity. Students identified the following influences: (a) Adults helped students recognize themselves as leaders, served as role models, mentors, advisors, and friends; (b) Peers sponsored them, were role models, and were collaborators, teammates, and followers; and (c) Engaging in groups, meaningful involvement experiences, and reflective learning opportunities helped the students develop their leadership identities.

While these studies provide an important start into our nascent understanding of leader development from the student point of view, they also provide a guide or scaffold for a next step in this research. The above research suggests the following questions: In the

broad array of possible experiences that students have over the course of their tenure in college, what are the experiences students think have made the most difference in their own leader development? What do they learn from these experiences? And are certain experiences linked to certain lessons?

Interestingly, these questions have already been explored in studies on adult leader development in organizations. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has been studying these questions for the past 25 years on a variety of successful leaders and managers in formal work organizations. By using events, the original research capitalized on the idea that people tend to remember unusual, unexpected life events that had important consequences and were emotionally evocative (Brewer, 1986). These life events may endow more personal meaning and lessons learned (McAdams, 1985). This research has highlighted the importance of challenging job assignments, events dealing with other people, and hardships in the development of leaders (see Douglas, 2003; Lindsey, Homes, & McCall, 1987; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987). However, to date, this research has not been extended to leaders within college student populations. In this study, we extend and combine research on student leaders with research on adult leadership development through key events through the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What key events do student leaders in college report as significantly impacting their development as a leader?

Research Question 2: What lessons do student leaders in college report learning as a result of the key events they have experienced?

Research Question 3: Are certain key events more likely to be linked to particular lessons?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The researchers approached senior level Student Affairs Administrators at four different types of colleges and universities surrounding a large metropolitan area in the mid-Atlantic region who were in charge of leader development at their institution. These institutions were approached because they differed on a variety of characteristics such as size (2 large, 2 small), Carnegie classification (2 teaching, 2 research), and public/private (2 public, 2 private). The administrators were interested in the study and agreed to participate. We asked them to identify the students they felt were the best leaders their college or university had to offer. The qualifications for being the top junior and senior leaders on their campus were left up to the discretion of the administrator. The administrators each sent out emails to 30 to 35 traditionally aged juniors or seniors, who they identified as the top student leaders on their campus, to ask if they would be interested in participating in the research study. Approximately 130 students were contacted. If the student indicated interest, the administrators sent the student's email address to the researchers. Seventy-two (55%) of the 130 students originally contacted responded they were interested. Two of the interested students were ineligible because they were sophomores. Researchers were able to schedule interviews with 50 students

(38% response rate). Of these students, 62% were female; 60% identified themselves as white, 16% Asian, 10% Black, and 8% as Latino/Hispanic.

### **Procedure**

The researchers emailed the participants and asked them to sign up for an interview time. In addition, the participants were asked to complete the following assignment in preparation for the interview:

To help you get ready for the interview we want to give you time to think about the following questions:

When you think back on your collegiate leadership experiences, certain events or stories probably come to mind -- things that lead you to change or affirm the way you lead. Please write down some notes for yourself and identify at least three "key events" from your years in college, which helped shape you into the leader you are today. What happened and what did you learn from those experiences (the good and the bad)?

A reminder email was sent to the participants confirming the time and place of the interview. This email also re-prompted the students to think about the main interview questions.

### **In-depth interviews**

Two members of the research team were present for each 15-45 minute interview. One member served as the primary interviewer while the second ran the audio equipment,

listened, and asked prompts as necessary to provide sufficient details. We explained the reason for the study to the participant and had them sign the consent form. We turned on the audio digital recorder and began the interview. The standard interview protocol developed by CCL was tailored for use with college student leaders. The students were asked the following, “When you think back over your time as an undergraduate student, certain events or episodes probably stand out in your mind—things that led to lasting change in you as a leader. Let’s start with the first key event that made a difference in you as a leader. What happened? As participants described their experiences, the interviewer and the second member posed follow-up prompts (such as “Please tell me more about that?” or “Can you describe that in more detail?” or “What was important about this event?”) to elicit sufficient detail from the participant. Once they fully described the event, they were asked, “What did you learn from this event (for better or for worse)? This was repeated until the participant had no more lessons to add.

The participants were asked for two more events and lessons. In the event that they had time and additional events, some students spoke about a 4<sup>th</sup> and in some instances a 5<sup>th</sup> event and the lessons learned.

The interviews were transcribed and prepared for analysis using a pragmatic mixed-methods approach. Specifically, the open-ended interviews were transformed by using or creating codes and themes, and then the codes and themes were quantified according to their frequency in the text (see Creswell, 2009, p. 218).

## **Key Events**

There were a total of 180 Events from the 50 participants. Key Events were coded into the four broad and 16 event categories similar to those developed by Douglas (2003) and Lindsey et al. (1987). Two members of the research team used the following steps to code these events: (a) Events were coded into the original broad event categories. The two members discussed what constituted a Challenging Assignment (which stretched students beyond their current skills), a Hardship (including a mistake or failure or a personal trauma or tragedy that has at its core a sense of loss. For example, a loss of identity, or safety/security, or sense of control, or self-confidence, or meaning or purpose), an Event Dealing with Other People (something is learned through another person), and a Miscellaneous Event; (b) They used 18 randomly chosen events to help clarify their understanding; (c) They separately coded the Events into one of the four broad categories of Challenging Assignments, Hardships, Events Dealing with Other People, and Miscellaneous and compared their scores. Kappa scores were calculated to determine reliability (Kappa  $>.70$ ); and (d) Discrepancies were discussed and resolved with consensus coding.

Next the same two members of the research team coded Events into event categories using the following steps: (a) the two members discussed what constituted an event in each of the original 16 categories; (b) They used 20 randomly chosen events to determine if the event categories from the original studies were similar enough to use. Here, the original CCL 16 event categories were modified into 13 event categories (See Table 1 for the list and definitions of the modified events). For example, fix-its were dropped, line to

staff switch was modified to organizational switch, and early work and first supervision were moved from “miscellaneous” to “challenging assignments”. Hardships were collapsed into a single category, because there were so few of them. In Events Dealing with Other People, peers, feedback, and recognition were added as new event categories. Coursework or leader development program was taken out of the miscellaneous category and given its own category. (c) The two coders separately coded the Events into one of the event categories and compared their scores ( $Kappa > .80$ ); and (d) Discrepancies were discussed and resolved with consensus coding. (Full coding schemes, definitions, and examples are available upon request.)

**Table 1**  
**Key events**

<b>Key Events</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Challenging Assignments</b>	
Start from Scratch	Building something (i.e., a club) from nothing or almost nothing.
Project/Taskforce/Program	These are temporary in nature and have specific deadlines, beginnings, and ends.
Change in scope or scale	Job expands or the person moves into a higher position that adds new elements broadening the scope and scale of responsibility
Organization Switch	Taking a similar position in a new organization that requires the person to do things in a different way
Pre-leadership Experience	Experiences which took place before taking on a leadership role exposing students to new environments. Sometimes characterized by ambivalence.
First leadership role in college	First time overseeing someone else.
Other job challenges	
<b>Hardships</b> (e.g., lousy job, problems with others, race/gender matters, and personal trauma)	Including a mistake or failure or a personal trauma or tragedy that has at its core a sense of loss.
<b>Events Dealing with Other People</b>	
Role Models	Superiors (either students in a higher leadership position, supervisors or faculty/staff) who the participant interacted with or observed and profoundly influenced the participant's leadership.
Mentors	Superiors who took special interest in the participant and helped them.
Peers	Interactions with peers either negative or positive which effected the participants
Feedback/Recognition	Events in which the participant was given feedback or recognition related to performance, pivotal conversations, etc...
Role Modeling/Mentoring	Events in which the participant was a role model or served as a mentor for another person
Other Events dealing with people	
<b>Coursework/Leadership Development programs</b>	Formal academic courses or formal trainings, attended by participants
<b>Other Events</b>	

Modified from Douglas (2003) and Lindsey, Homes, & McCall (1987).

## **Lessons Learned**

There are a total of 734 lessons from the 180 events. Two members of the research team agreed on what constituted separate lessons for each event. Once the Lessons were delineated, two members of the research team began coding the lessons using the original

CCL lessons codes. It soon became clear that the coding plan did not adequately capture the lessons that the student leaders were discussing. A new coding system was designed in the following way: (a) Each of the two members independently read and inductively categorized every lesson; (b) The two members met and compared their codes and refined the codes into a single coding scheme through discussions; (c) Two members of the research team separately coded the lessons learned using the new coding scheme (See Table 2 for the list and definitions of the lessons). Scores were compared ( $Kappa > .90$ ). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved with consensus coding. (Full coding schemes, definitions, and examples are available upon request.)

**Table 2*****Lessons Learned***

<b>Lessons Learned</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Identity</b>	
Self Identity	Learning about who they are on a personal level.
Leadership Identity	Developing a leadership identity and learning what it means to be a leader.
Professionalism	The proper way to act in a leadership roles when dealing with others.
Balancing Roles	Balancing and separating differing roles
<b>Individual Competencies</b>	
Delegation	Importance of delegating, the need to delegate, and how to delegate
Decision Making	Decision-making skills and the importance of making decisions.
Adaptability/Flexibility	Being flexible, making adjustments, using different tactics and strategies, and adapting one's leadership style.
Resilience/Persistence/Hard Work	Working hard, being persistent, and being resilient.
Taking Initiative	Asserting oneself.
Accountability/Responsibility	Accountability and learning to take responsibility for themselves, others, and the roles in which they acted as leaders.
Big Picture	Seeing the bigger picture, seeing another perspective, seeing where they fit into the bigger picture, or seeing themselves from another perspective.
Learning to Teach/Learn	Learning to teach and learn and the importance of this.
<b>Support Systems</b>	
Developing and Using Support Systems	The importance and use of networking, resources, and asking for help Being a part of someone else's network, being seen as a resource, and helping others.
Being a Support System	
<b>Working with Others</b>	
Communication	The importance of communication and listening as well as how to communicate and listen.
Teamwork	Working with others as a team.
Conflict	How to and the importance of confrontation, conflict management, and approaches to conflict.
Diversity	Learning about and appreciating other's differences
Inspiring and motivating others	Getting buy in. Learning to encourage. Learning how to inspire and motivate other people to do something.
Other working with others	
<b>Getting the job done</b>	
Task skills	Importance of and learning how to organize, plan, budget,

Environment	and time management.
	Structure of the organization, the resources available to them in the organization, and the organization in general.

---

## Results

### Key Events

At the broad events level, of the 180 key events, 48.9% (88) were Challenging Assignments, 28.3% (51) were Events Dealing with Other People, 10% (18) were Coursework or leader development program, 5% (9) were Hardships, and 7.8% (14) were Miscellaneous Events.

See Table 3 for a description of the 180 key events by event category. The 5 most frequently mentioned events by event category were as follows: 11.2% (20) were Receiving feedback or recognition, 10.1% (18) were Coursework or leader development programs, 8.9% (16) were first leadership role in college, 8.4% (15) were project or task force, and 8.4% (15) were change in scope or scale.

**Table 3**  
*Key events*

<b>Key Events</b>	<b>Number mentioned</b>
<b>Challenging Assignments</b>	
Start from Scratch	13
Project/Taskforce/Program	15
Change in scope or scale	15
Organization Switch	11
Pre-leadership Experience	11
First leadership role in college	16
Other job challenges	6
<b>Hardships</b> (e.g., lousy job, problems with others, race/gender matters, and personal trauma)	9
<b>Events Dealing with Other People</b>	
Role Models	5
Mentors	4
Peers	12
Feedback/Recognition	20
Role Modeling/Mentoring	6

Other Events dealing with people	4
<b>Coursework/Leadership Development programs</b>	18
<b>Other Events</b>	14

---

N=180 Key events

### Lessons Learned

Of the 734 lessons, the most frequently mentioned lessons learned were as follows: 7.9% (58) were about learning to communicate, 7.8% (57) learning about self identity, 7.4% (54) learning about leadership identity, and 7.4% (54) developing leadership task and management skills. See Table 4 for a description of the 734 lessons learned.

**Table 4**

***Lessons Learned***

<b>Lessons Learned</b>	<b>Number mentioned</b>
<b>Identity</b>	
Self Identity	58
Leadership Identity	54
Professionalism	30
Balancing Roles	19
<b>Individual Competencies</b>	
Delegation	17
Decision Making	15
Adaptability/Flexibility	38
Resilience/Persistence/Hard Work	18
Taking Initiative	36
Accountability/Responsibility	29
Big Picture	27
Learning to Teach/Learn	18
<b>Support Systems</b>	
Developing and Using Support Systems	36
Being a Support System	28
<b>Working with Others</b>	
Communication	59
Teamwork	26
Conflict	21
Diversity	32
Inspiring and motivating others	17
Other working with others	30
<b>Getting the job done</b>	
Task skills	55
Environment	34

---

N=734 lessons

### Lessons learned by Key Events

Students averaged 4.1 lessons for each event (with a range of 1 to 12 lessons). There was no difference in number of lessons learned between challenging assignments, hardships, other people, and coursework/LDPs. To determine if there was an association between any of the lessons by key events, we ran a series of analyses using Goodman & Kruskal's tau (Bishop, Feinberg, & Holland, 1975, Goodman & Kruskal, 1954). Five of these were significant. Student leaders mentioning:

1. Organizational switches (50%), changes in scope and scale (33%) and being a role model/mentor (33%) were more likely to report that they learned professionalism than other key events (Goodman & Kruskal's  $\tau=.13$ ,  $p<.01$ ).
2. Participating in a project or task force (33%) were more likely to report that they learned delegation than other key events (Goodman & Kruskal's  $\tau=.11$ ,  $p<.05$ ).
3. Starting a club from scratch (31%), participating in a project or task force (40%), organizational switches (50%), having a mentor (50%), and being a role model/mentor (33%) were more likely to report that they learned adaptability and flexibility (Goodman & Kruskal's  $\tau=.13$ ,  $p<.05$ ).
4. Their first leadership experience (44%) were more likely to report that they learned teamwork (Goodman & Kruskal's  $\tau=.15$ ,  $P<.001$ ).

5. Starting a club from scratch (31%), changes in scope and scale (40%), and their first leadership experience (37%) were more likely to report that they learned about the school environment (Goodman & Kruskal's  $\tau=.14$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Three analyses approached significance. Students who mentioned:

1. Changes in scope and scale (33%) and their first leadership experience (37%) were more likely to report that they learned accountability and responsibility (Goodman & Kruskal's  $\tau=.10$ ,  $p<.10$ ).
2. Changes in scope or scale (47%), hardships (33%), and peers (50%) were more likely to report that they learned to develop and use their support systems (Goodman & Kruskal's  $\tau=.12$ ,  $p<.10$ ).
3. Pre-leadership positions (36%), organizational switches (40%), and being a role model/mentor (33%) were more likely to mention that they learned diversity (Goodman & Kruskal's  $\tau=.10$ ,  $p<.10$ ).

There were no relationships between key events and lessons about self identity, leadership identity, balancing roles, decision-making, resilience/persistence, taking initiative, big picture, learning to learn, being a support system, communication, conflict, inspiring and motivating others, and task skills.

## Discussion

The purpose of this descriptive study was to identify what key developmental events successful college student leaders experience, the leadership lessons they learn from these

events, and if different events were associated with different lessons. The approach used was to understand leader development from the students' point of view with students describing their own experiences and what they learned in their own words (see Dempster & Lizzio, 2007). In addition, by using events, we capitalized on the idea that people tend to remember unusual, unexpected life events that had important consequences and were emotionally evocative (Brewer, 1986). These events may endow more personal meaning and lessons learned (McAdams, 1985). Students were capable of reflecting back on their experiences, recalling events that they believe significantly impacted their development as leaders, and articulating what they learned from these events.

The first thing this study did was replicate and extend the key leadership experiences studied in previous research (Antonio, 2001; Astin, 1993; Astin et al., 2002; Astin et al., 2000; Berger & Milem, 2002; Cress et al., 2001; Dugan, 2006; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Logue, et al., 2005; Smart et al., 2002; Thompson, 2006; Whitt, 1994). Similar to these studies, the student leaders in this study mentioned courses, positional leadership roles, other people, and leader training programs. But they also extended the experiences to include starting clubs from scratch, participating in task forces, moving into leadership positions that are broader in scope and scale, and switching into leadership positions in different organizations. In addition, they mentioned being role models and mentoring others (not just learning from role models and mentors).

Our findings add credence to Posner's (2009) statement, "Leaders learn through practice, they 'do'." The majority of the events recalled were experiential challenging assignments encountered through student jobs and participation in co-curricular clubs, associations, and Greek life. However, receiving feedback or recognition and participating in coursework and leader development programs were also important events, suggesting that "doing" alone is not sufficient. Student leaders need to also engage in activities that allow them to formally learn leadership theories and practices through curricular and formal programs and receive information regarding how they are doing (feedback).

The second thing this study did was begin to answer the question: What lessons are student leaders learning from their experiences? Little previous research has explored this question (see Hall et al., 2008). This study describes the rich array of leadership lessons that students are learning through their experiences. They are engaged in *identity work*, including "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising" relevant self as well as leadership identities (Komives et al., 2005, Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, pp. 1165; cf. Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Similar to Hall et al. (2008), they are learning foundational leadership skills and competencies related to how to accomplish work, how to work with others, and how to be both supported by and support others.

Finally, in this study, we began to determine if different events were related to different lessons. Little research in the student leader development literature has explored if leaders learn different lessons from different experiences. We found that although students are able to learn many leadership lessons through a variety of experiences, a

number of challenging assignments stood out as important for learning certain lessons: (a) Participating in task forces and projects was associated with learning delegation and adaptability and flexibility; (b) The first leadership experience was associated with learning accountability and responsibility, team work, and about working within the school environment; (c) Leadership changes in scope and scale were associated with learning professionalism, accountability and responsibility, developing and using support systems, and about working within the school environment; (d) Starting a club from scratch was associated with learning adaptability and flexibility and about working within the school environment; (e) Switching from leading in one organization into leading in another organization was associated with learning professionalism, adaptability and flexibility, and diversity. Finally, although the previous literature has shown that having a mentor and role model is important to developing as a leader, our research demonstrates that being a mentor and role model is also important for learning such lessons as professionalism, adaptability and flexibility, and diversity.

### **Limitations**

Similar to the early seminal work from CCL, this study included a small sample size of traditionally aged college juniors and seniors. In addition, although students came from all over the country (and some were from other countries), all attended colleges and universities in a single region around a large metropolitan area. To further refine the key events, the lessons learned, and whether certain lessons are associated with certain key events, more research is needed to extend both the sample size and the sample area to include a broader array of student leaders across the United States (and then globally). In

addition, we left the identification and qualification for being the top junior and senior leaders on their campus up to the discretion of the student affairs administrators. Future research should consider developing some sort of rubric or rating scheme to help administrators select the highest potential leaders. With a larger number of campuses to draw from, we could also limit the number of leaders selected from each campus, again helping to ensure that the student leaders included are the highest potential.

### **Future research**

Although the student leaders in this study mentioned similar key events to the key events mentioned by adults in organizations in the original CCL research, they mentioned a different set of lessons. In line with the nascent realization that as leaders are developing as leaders, they are also developing as adults (see Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009), this study, compared to the CCL research, suggests that leadership lessons learned varies by age or level of maturity. A next research question to explore is: How does level of maturity or development impact leadership lessons learned for leaders at different life stages?

### **Practical implications**

Because the findings demonstrate both the events that successful student leaders experience as important as well as what they are learning from them, this study can help those involved in and responsible for student leader development on college campuses advise students on how to develop themselves as leaders. This study suggests that the students recognized that they are learning and developing as leaders through a “mosaic”

of leadership education, training, and development activities (Scroggs, Sattler, & McMillan, 2009) encompassing both “learning and doing” (Middlebrooks & Allen, 2009). Learning about leadership, developing leadership skills and competencies, and doing leadership are different ways of learning and developing as leaders. And all three ways are important to include in developing leadership in our students. This study suggests that our best approach is integrated along all three lines. When done intentionally learning about, learning to do, and actually doing can augment each other. Conger (1992) suggests that to develop into leaders, students must have a conceptual understanding of leadership, they must build leadership skills and competencies, they must grow and change as individuals, and they must receive feedback regarding how they are doing on all these things. While the students in this study emphasized learning through “doing leadership” such as project teams, their first leadership role, changes in scope and scale, and organizational switches, they also mentioned formal leadership courses (where students can learn about leadership), leader development programs (where students can receive assessments, try out new skills, receive feedback), and receiving feedback on their actions as relevant to their learning about leadership.

Thus, leadership faculty and administrators should encourage students interested in developing their leadership skills to consider choosing from a menu of curricular and co-curricular experiences. In addition, faculty and administrators should encourage students to broaden their experiences over time, starting with being a member of a project team or task force, next taking on a lower level leadership position and then a higher-level position that broadens their responsibilities, taking on a leadership position in another arena, starting up a club, and mentoring and being a role model to others. Finally, student

leaders need feedback to determine how they are doing. Faculty and administrators can provide feedback via formal assessments and informal conversations. They can also train the leaders themselves in how to give feedback to each other.

Regarding lessons, faculty and administrators can educate students on the types of leadership lessons that they might want to learn. Then they can help students decide what lessons about leadership that they would like to target, ahead of time, and select challenges or events that will help them learn those lessons. At the end of their college years, student leaders can be encouraged to reflect on their development as leaders and what they learned. Formal mechanisms to help student leaders realize and document this learning could be through capstone experiences, leadership learning portfolios, or co-curricular transcripts.

## References

- Allen, S. J., & Hartman, N. S. (2009). Sources of learning in student leadership development programming. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 3(3), 6-16.
- Antonio, A. L. (2001). The role of interracial interaction in the development of leadership skills and cultural knowledge and understanding. *Research in Higher Education*, 42(5), 593-617.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W., & Astin, H. S. (2000). *Leadership Reconsidered*: Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation.
- Astin, A. W., Keup, J. R., & Lindholm, J. A. (2002). A decade of changes in undergraduate education: A national study of system "transformation". *The Review of Higher Education*, 25(2), 141-162.
- Astin, A., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K., & Yee, J. A. (2000). How service learning affects students. Los Angeles: UCLA, Higher Education Research Institute.

- Benson, L., Harkavy, I., & Puckett, J. (2007). *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Berger, J. B., & Milem, J. F., (2002). The impact of community service involvement on three measures of undergraduate self-concept, *NASPA Journal*, 40, 85-103.
- Bishop, Y. M. M., Feinberg, S. E., & Holland, P. W. (1975). *Discrete Multivariate Analysis: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Brewer, U. F. (1986). What is autobiographical memory? In D. C. Rubin (Ed.), *Autobiographical Memory*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 25-49.
- Brubacher, J. S., & Rudy, W. (2002). *Higher Education in Transition: A history of American Colleges and Universities, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Conger, J. (1992). *Learning to lead: The art of transforming managers into leaders*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cress, C. M., Astin, H. S., Zimmerman-Oster, K., & Burkhardt, J. C. (2001). Developmental outcomes of college students' involvement in leadership activities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 42, 15-27.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Day, D. V., Harrison, M. M., & Halpin, S. M. (2009). *An integrative approach to leader development: Connecting adult development, identity, and expertise*. New York: Routledge.
- Day, D. V., Zaccaro, S. J., & Halpin, S. (2004). *Leader development for transforming organizations: Growing leaders for tomorrow*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Dempster, N., & Lizzio, A. (2007). Student leadership: Necessary research. *Australian Journal of Education*, 51, 276-285.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books.
- Douglas, C. A. (2003). *Key events and lessons for managers in a diverse workforce: A report of research findings*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Dugan, J. P. (2006). Involvement and leadership: A descriptive analysis of socially responsible leadership. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47, 335-343.

- Dugan, J. P., Garland, J. L., Jacoby, B., & Gasiorski, A. (2008). Understanding commuter student self-efficacy for leadership: A within-group analysis. *NASPA Journal, 45*, 282-310.
- Dugan, J. P., & Komives, S. R. (2007). *Developing leadership capacity in college students: Findings from a national study*. College Park, MD: National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs, Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership.
- Dugan, J. P., & Komives, S. R. (2010). Influences on college students' capacities for socially responsible leadership. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*, 525-549.
- Gee, J. P. (2001). Identity as an analytical lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 25*, 99-125.
- Goodman, L. A., & Kruskal, W. H. (1954). Measures of association for cross-classification. *Journal of the American Statistical Association, 49*, 732-764.
- Hall, S. L., Forrester, S., & Borsz, M. (2008). A constructivist case study examining the leadership development of undergraduate students in campus recreational sports. *Journal of College Student Development, 49*, 125-140.
- Kezar A., & Moriarty, D. (2000). Expanding our understanding of student leadership development: A study of gender and ethnic identity. *Journal of College Student Development, 41*, 55-69.
- Komives, S. R., Owen, J. E., Longerbeam, S. D., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. (2005). Developing a leadership identity: A grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*, 593-611.
- Lindsey, E. H., Homes, V., & McCall, M. W., Jr. (1987). *Key Events in Executives' Lives*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Logue, C. T., Hutchens, T. A., & Hector, M. A. (2005). Student leadership: A phenomenological exploration of post-secondary experiences. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*, 393-408.
- McAdams, D. P. (1985). *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. New York: Guilford Press.
- McCauley, C. D., Ruderman, M.N. Ohlott, P. J., & Morrow, J.E. (1994). Assessing the developmental components of managerial jobs. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 79*, 544-560.
- McCauley, C. D., Van Velsor, E., & Ruderman, M. N. (2010). *The Center for Creative Leadership handbook of leadership development*. San Francisco: Wiley.

- McCall, M. W., Jr., & Hollenbeck, G. P. (2002). *Developing global executives: The lessons of international experience*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- McCall, M. W., Jr., Lombardo, M. M., & Morrison, A. M. (1988). *The lessons of experiences: How successful executives develop on the job*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Press.
- Middlebrooks, A., & Allen, S. J. (2009). Editors' introduction: The education of leadership, volume 8, number 1, 2009. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 8 (1), ix-xxi.
- Morrison, A. M., White, R. P., & Van Velsor, E. (1987). *Breaking the glass ceiling: Can women reach the top of America's largest corporations?* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Petriglieri, G., & Petriglieri, J. (2010). Identity workspaces: The case of business schools. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 9, 44-60.
- Posner, B. Z. (2004). A leadership development instrument for students: Updated. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 443-456.
- Posner, B. Z. (2009). Inside out: Beyond teaching about leadership. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 8, 1-10.
- Scroggs, L. E., Sattler, J.L., & McMillan, B. (2009). The undergraduate Leadership Mosaic: A challenge of shared purpose. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 8, 48-58.
- Smart, J. C., Ethington, C. A., Riggs, R. O., & Thompson, M. D. (2002). Influences of institutional expenditure patterns on the development of students' leadership competencies. *Research in Higher Education*, 43, 115-132.
- Sveningsson, S., & Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse, and identity struggle. *Human Relations*, 56, 1163-1193.
- Thompson, M. D. (2006). Student leadership process development: An assessment of contributing college resources. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(3), 343-350.
- Whitt, E. J. (1994). I can be anything!: Student leadership in three women's colleges. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35, 198-207.

### **Author Biographies**

Dr. Valerie I. Sessa is an Associate Professor of Psychology and the Director of Leadership Development through Civic Engagement minor at Montclair State University. Prior to Montclair, she worked as a research scientist and director at the Center for Creative Leadership. Her current research interests include student leadership development, and learning at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

Brett V. Morgan is a recent graduate of the Industrial and Organizational Psychology master's program at Montclair State University. Currently, he is the Director of Business Change and Transformation at Wyndham Hotel Group. He also teaches psychology and leadership classes as an adjunct faculty member at Montclair State University.

Selin Kalenderli, a Fulbright Scholar, is a recent graduate of the Industrial and Organizational Psychology master's program at Montclair State University. She has returned to Turkey where she hopes to further specialize in talent management and leadership development.

Fanny E. Hammond, a Fulbright Scholar from Ghana, is currently a graduate student in the Industrial and Organizational Psychology master's program at Montclair State University.