

College Student Leaders: Meet the Alpha Female

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Abstract

With the emergence of a new generation of strong and empowered female student leaders on college campuses, a special type of female leader, the Alpha Female, has developed. This study examines the essence of having an Alpha Female identity for 13 undergraduate women at a Midwestern university. Extensive interviews were conducted; transcripts were generated; emergent themes were derived; horizontalization and cross-case analysis was conducted; and, constant comparative method among the researches was employed. Findings reveal that strong positive antecedent family variables are present. Each participant perceives strong advantages and a positive impact from being an Alpha Female in the collegiate environment. Suggestions for further rich, qualitative investigations and Possible educational interventions and institutional support are offered.

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The combination of and increase in a number of personality traits has led to the recent development of the alpha personality. While the leadership literature explores many types of leaders (e.g. transformational, charismatic, situational), it has yet to develop the concept of the Alpha personality or the dominant leader who has extreme confidence, is extroverted, and feels driven to succeed. In the

current generation, research is reporting an increase in these behaviors and beliefs (Jean M. Twenge, 1997a, 1997b, 2001a; J. M. Twenge & Campbell, 2002), therefore leading to the development of the Alpha personality (Kindlon, 2006; Ludeman & Erlandson, 2006). The current study explores the phenomenon of the alpha personality in college women.

Across the research literature a number of definitions arise for the term “leadership.” Early schools of thought believed that it came from “great men” who demonstrated certain traits (Carlyle, 1841). Corresponding to the American behavioral movement, it was later believed that leadership results in the use of certain behaviors that could be measured (Stogdill, 1948). By the 1960s the work of Fiedler (1967) and others examined leadership with respect to the situational and contextual dynamics at play between the leaders and the follower. More recently leadership has been defined in a variety of related ways including visionary, charismatic, and servant leadership (Bass, 1990).

Much of the current leadership literature has focused on variations of the transformational leader (Bass, 1990; Carey, 1992; Zacharatos, Barling, & Kelloway, 2000). The transformational leader builds a sense of purpose and a focus on a mission in the followers. These leaders inspire a passion in others and encourage them to transcend their barriers. While the transformational leader inspires followers, the Alpha personality aims to be a leader through the use of dominance.

The primary area in which the concept of the Alpha personality has been studied has been in the primate literature. Research has examined Alpha Male behavior in baboons (Wittig, et al., 2008), monkeys (Teichroeb & Sicotte, 2008), and chimpanzees (Gilby, Eberly, & Wrangham, 2008). Across this literature the Alpha Male is dominant to the point of being aggressive, is deferred to by lower rank animals, and is sexually in control of the females. Current Alpha Male literature builds on the primate literature and extends it to human males. In this literature the definition of the Alpha Male is altered to reflect “a person tending to assume a dominant role in social or professional situations, or thought to possess the qualities and confidence for leadership” in a given context (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2006, p. 3). Additional traits used to define the Alpha Male are aggressive, results-driven, self-confident, command attention, and belligerent.

The popular press and many websites provide insights and “tests” to determine one’s level of alpha in males. While these resources are interesting, they fail to account for the rise of female leaders and the differences between male and female leaders (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Research on women leaders has shown a prejudice against female leaders and explains the prejudice with respect to role-incongruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In short, the characteristics expected for a woman and for a leader are in conflict. Women

leaders who act in ways that are not typically consistent with male leadership styles (e.g., more communal traits) are rated as more positive than women who embrace characteristics of male leaders (Helgesen, 1990; Rhode, 2003).

Due to these differences between male and female leadership styles, the alpha personality expresses itself differently in males and females. In contrast to the aforementioned definition of the Alpha Male provided above, the current project defined alpha in females as a women who reports being a leader, having others seek her guidance, feeling a sense of superiority or dominance over other females, believing that males and females are equal, feeling driven, and feeling extroverted in social situations. Being an Alpha Female is related to high self-confidence.

The field of the alpha personality as it is applied to females is relatively unexplored except for the popular press book, *Alpha Girls* (Kindlon, 2006). This dynamic is critical for those who prepare women to lead on college campuses and beyond. The current study seeks to examine the phenomenon of the Alpha Female college student and to encourage new understandings of what it means to be a woman and a leader.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Participants and Recruitment

The research team met to clarify its understanding of the term Alpha Female. Once there was agreement, names of female students who fit the aforementioned definition were elicited from students currently enrolled at the university. Each of the women was well known on campus and was a leader in a student organization such as a sorority, an athletic team, or some other unit in student life. A purposeful sampling strategy appropriate for qualitative studies was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and engaged in an appropriate number of interviews for a phenomenological study (McCracken, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1989). While up to 10 participants is generally suggested for a phenomenological study, the current study included 13.

The 13 female participants had an average age of 20.92 (sd=.95) and an average grade point average of 3.75 (sd=.25). They were almost equally spread across academic years (sophomore $n=4$; junior $n=4$; senior $n=5$). Over 84% of the participants were Caucasian ($n=11$) and 92.3% were not married. They reported that their mothers had a college or advanced degree (69.3%); their fathers had a college or advanced degree (46.2%); and, that their family income was above \$100,000 (69.3%). A majority of the participants also indicated that their parents were married (61.5%).

Phenomenology and the Alpha Female

This study employed the basic features of a phenomenological approach. As a phenomenologist an a priori decision is made that he or she will examine the meaning of experiences for individuals. There is an attempt to describe the significance of the lived experiences for several individuals about being an Alpha Female student on a college campus. This approach attempts to find the essence of meaning across human experiences, in keeping with the foundational works of Husserl (1931) in philosophical approach and Polkinghorne (1989) from the field of psychology. This examination honors the individual meaning of the experiences of the participants while looking for possible essential constructs.

The core framework of our research follows the methodological standard of Moustakas (1994) in that our attempt was “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essence...of the experience” (p. 13).

Using this approach, we engaged 13 participants in describing their lived experiences as Alpha Females. We collected data using long interviews from individuals who had practical knowledge of the phenomenon of being an Alpha Female. We then followed standard phenomenological data analysis steps (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). The interviews were transcribed and organized into statements using horizontalization. Then the statements were transformed into clusters of meaning or themes. These themes were compared across all participants looking for textural and structural similarities. The intention of this process was to better understand the essential, invariant essence of the experience, recognizing that unifying meanings of the experience exists.

Interviews

Each participant was informed of the nature of the study, signed a consent form, and filled out a short demographic form. Confidentiality was guaranteed and labeling each interview with a number protected the identity of the participants. The names of the participants are known only to the researchers involved and individual identities are not revealed in this report or in any transcription.

One-on-one interviews were conducted by the primary author on campus in the office of the primary author. Each interview was recorded on a digital device. Interviews lasted between 24 and 56 minutes. Interview questions were all open-ended. The questions focused on characteristics and life experiences that the interviewee felt were important. The final aspect of the interview presented the female leaders with the definition of an Alpha Female and they were asked if they

identified with the definition. The electronic audio files were sent to a transcription service and returned as word documents. These documents were presented in numerical order and readied for analysis.

Data Analysis and Emergent Themes

The research team generally employed the data analysis procedure as recommended by methodologist Creswell (1998) which includes (a) create and organize transcript files, (b) read through text, make margin notes and form initial thematic codes, (c) list the statements of significant meaning for individuals, (d) groups statements into meaning units, (e) developed textural and structural and overall descriptions of the experience, and (f) present the essence of the experience using tables.

The three researchers engaged in this process individually so that there would be no bias in our initial analysis. We then came together to compare themes and searched for common experiences and understandings across all participants. This process added to a type of validity present in phenomenological study in that the aim was getting to the truth of things, discovering core and well-grounded facets, and presenting findings that are well-supported (Creswell, 1998; Giorgi, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Results

There were three broad themes discovered in our analysis. First, the current study found consistent antecedent variables present in the families and early socialization of Alpha Females. The relationship with parents was strong, especially with their mothers. There were also gender neutral or pro-feminist messages in the socialization. Secondly, there were a number of perceived advantages and strengths in identification as an Alpha Female including a sense of efficacy and relative strength in relation to other females. Thirdly, these perceived strengths and advantages were balanced by reported negative aspects of being in the role including negative stereotypes and labels and an almost universal struggle with intimate relationships.

Table 1
Statements Relating to Support from Parents

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My parents have supported me in whatever I want. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are very much unconditional love sort of people.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My parents are amazing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can count on either of them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have a really good relationship with my parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (My relationship with them is) Extremely close now. My parents are extremely, extremely supportive. I think I'm really lucky because a lot of girls can't talk with their dads. I talk to both (parents) every single day.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My parents, I rely on them for advice and everything. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm close to them, absolutely.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Relationship with parents) Phenomenal. They're awesome. They're more...my peers but they don't control my life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The best thing about my parents, though, I really like their parental style because they were incredibly involved in our lives, but not to the point where they were hovering parents at all. They let us make our own decisions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm equally close to both, but in a different way. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My parents always encouraged me to be my own person 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm close to both of them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have a very, very strong family that's just, "you can do anything, anything you want."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had parents who encouraged me to strike out on my own. 	

Antecedent Variables

Parental support. Virtually all of the participants reported having great support from their parents. A list of related comments is presented in Table 1. It is clear from these statements that these Alpha Females felt empowered by their relationship with their parents. This is consistent with the findings of Hartman and Harris and others (Hartman & Harris, 1992). This sense of personal efficacy (Bandura, 1997) was learned at an early age and could be seen in the way they spoke about what was possible. It appears that the home environment was conducive to personal growth and development in virtually every case.

Relationship with mother. In addition to reporting general support from their parents, eight of the participants spoke about a particularly close relationship with their mothers, many of whom still speak with their mothers on a daily basis. The strong bond between mother and daughter is clear and resonates in the sample

remarks included in Table 2.

Table 2
Statements Regarding Relationship with Mother

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I talk to my mom daily. • I'm closer to my mother but I'm daddy's girl. • She (mom) is the most important person I know. • I try to be more like my mother. I think I can see myself becoming my mother. • (My mom) is by far one of my best friends. I try to talk to her at least once, if not twice a day. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mom is the one I talk to about all close things or personal issues. • We talk every single day. • (I'm) closer to mom. I can count on either of them. • (I'm closer to) my mother, but I have all the traits of my father, I think. • My nickname in my apartment is "Mom Two."
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Gender neutral or pro-Feminist socialization. Twelve of the 13 participants directly or indirectly referred to receiving gender neutral or pro-feminist messages growing up. The one woman who received a strong anti-feminist message from her father reported using this as a motivation to achieve. The messages about gender, efficacy, and personal possibility that Alpha Females received growing up at home appear to be paramount. These comments are found in Table 3. These comments make it clear that gender roles and expectations are, indeed, changing. This is in line with the findings of Twenge, Helgesen and others (Helgesen, 1990; Twenge, 1997b, 2001a).

Table 3
Gender Neutral or Pro-Feminist Statements

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was raised that women had the upper hand. In my family the women make the decisions. It's definitely like a matriarchy. • I never had any gender-focused comments that I can even remember in my life, and I had two brothers. • (My parent's relationship) It's always been very equal. • I've always gotten positive input that women can do anything. • There was never any, "Because you're a girl..." It was, "It shouldn't matter that you're a girl." • I think it was more "you" empowerment than it was about my gender. • They (my parents) always had me aspire to do the best. • (Gender-specific messages growing up?) Not really, to be honest, at all. • All of the women on that side of the family were like teachers or nurses. I thought that was really weird. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both of my parents work full-time, and I think that had a big impact on me. • I think women should be involved outside the home and they should do big things. • I have a very, very strong family that's just, "You can do anything...anything you want." • I come from a family of completely strong women. Like, it's matriarchs. I mean it's just from the very beginning, "You can do anything." I think it was that there's no limit. • Well, my mom's like a blazing feminist. I guess my dad's the same. So, I mean, I was always in math classes and science classes. • My older sister is an engineer. • When I was like young, my dad would tell me that like women were inferior in multiple ways. My dad really wanted a boy. • (My mom) didn't take my dad's last name when she got married.
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Perceived Positive Aspects of Being an Alpha Female

For these women, the experience of being an Alpha Female in college has many positive features as noted in the comments below. The findings support quantitative research by Ward, Popson, and DiPaolo (2008) in that Alpha Females report being extroverted, eager to identify and perform as a leader, and believed

they were “stronger” than other females.

Advantage and efficacy. Each of the women describes a level of comfort and relative advantage in the role of Alpha Female. The self-descriptors indicate many of the features reported by alpha girls in the work of Kindlon (2006) and suggest a cohort of young women who are capable and confident in their environment. Sample statements appear in Table 4.

Table 4
Sample Statements About Positive Impact of being an Alpha Female

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I act like a role model. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (I am) very driven. I was always the one that worked out the hardest.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I go after what I want. I’m very confident. I like things my way. I consider myself rather aggressive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (I am) Independent...outgoing, strong-willed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I’m trying to get a point across, I’m really aggressive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lot of my friends I guess are alphas, and (I would) say we challenge guys every day.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’m the more dominant one. I am confident. I like being myself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there is something I want to accomplish, I’m pretty aggressive in chasing after what I want.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like to be very loud. I’m a pretty big extrovert. I am pretty assertive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I could talk to a salt and peppershaker and probably make a good conversation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On a scale of one to ten, (my confidence level is) like eleven. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wouldn’t say that I shy away from being assertive, especially in the classroom environment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In organizational roles in group settings, I’m very confident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (I am a) Perfectionist, passionate, intense. If I’m going to do something, I’m going to do it 130%.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (I am) ambitious, confident, and outspoken. I’m good at most things I try to do. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to be a woman who fights for other women someday.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (My friends and I) We’re all very opinionated people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Self-description) determination, intelligence, assertiveness, resilience.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Confidence level) is high, to the point of too high sometimes. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In class, normally, I am kind of a dominant person. 	

Identification as leader. The participants all identified as leaders and expressed relative ease in the role. Each felt a sense of personal charisma and empowerment that allowed them to step into a variety of roles that had previously been off-limits to young women. These statements are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5
Statements Related to Identity as Leader

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm a leader on the team. • People...look to me. I give off that aura. • If nobody else is going to step forward, I will step forward very quickly. • I tend to take control. • (Hates group projects) I could do what they're doing better. I guess that's kind of my initial leadership style. • Almost all of them (leadership positions in organizations to which she belongs). • In almost any situation I take a leadership role. • I definitely want to be a team player, but if it involved team captain, I'd be captain. • I'll try to like subconsciously manipulate (others) to what I want (them) to do. • I don't like being one of those passive people who just kind of gets told what to do. • (I like) running the show. I am President. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I try and start and just join the organization but...I get like the natural born leader mentality. • I hate group projects...I end up doing everything. • I also know when passivity might be more...advantageous to...accomplish something. • I display characteristics of all those at different points (different leadership traits), depending on the situation. • (In leadership situations I can) change my leadership style. You just have to adapt. • I've always been a leader in everything. • I've always been like a leader of leaders. • When I got in my sorority, I was like determined to be president. • You have to be somewhat aggressive and you have to be a leader and you have to stand out from the pack and get away from this (university) girl image that portrays the (university) girl as dumb, here for her "Mrs. degree," stuff that I absolutely hate.
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Statements Related to Perceptions of Relative Strength. The interviews also elicited comments regarding the strength that these women felt in comparison with other women. There was a level of knowing and expressing oneself that was not just in opposition to men. The Alpha Females in the current study saw themselves as higher ranking than other female students on campus. In many ways, they saw themselves as leaders of leaders, instead of just leaders. These comments are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6
Statements Related to Perceptions of Relative Strength

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probably (stronger than average female). Like, I have big muscles. (I am) bigger than the average female. (Stronger than the average female?) Yes. (I am) strong-willed. (Am I more physically strong?) Really, yeah. (I have a) strong personality. I don't think it's so much that I'm stronger, but more that I understand my identities more. I have a stronger sense of self-awareness...because I know what I'm capable of. I think a lot of women don't know what they're capable of and so they settle. (Am I stronger than average female?) Yes. (Am I physically stronger?) On this campus, yes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I knew that inside I had a lot of strength and so that's why I think so many girls at (my university) fall victim to eating disorders and all these other emotional problems because they think that in order to be beautiful, there is this one cookie cutter image. (Am I stronger than the average female?) Yes. (In what ways?) I'm stronger in the classroom. I'm not afraid to share a perspective. I'm definitely strong-willed. Once I set my mind to something, I will find a way to make it happen. I think like I'm a fighter and I feel like I will stand for myself and I will stand up for other people. I stood up for my mom and I always stood up for my siblings. (Am I stronger than the average female?) Definitely, yes.,” stuff that I absolutely hate.
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Perceived Negative Aspects of Being an Alpha Female

While there may be positive aspects of this emergent identity and personal accomplishments of this generation of new female students, the participants clearly pay a price for their status and strong identity. With the advantages they enjoy as Alpha Females, come the disadvantages. These women report being

negatively labeled and stereotyped, feeling forced to live up to very high expectations, and struggle with intimate and personal relationships. The Alpha Female identity is not all positive and it appears to be a persona that is managed in creative ways by each of these women.

Labels, stereotypes, and the price paid. As our participants spoke about their experiences on campus, each provided examples of how others have categorized or labeled their actions. These comments have come from friends, other students, faculty, and staff members. While being very aware of this dynamic, none of them expressed great discomfort with the denigrating remarks. A summary is provided in Table 7.

Table 7
Statements Related to Perceptions of Relative Strength

• called pushy	• I can be a heinous bitch
• labeled “feminazi”	• called intimidating
• They’ve called me “penis-eater.”	• called bitchy
• have been resented	• called stubborn
• “It’s not only girls who are leaders but girls who...are honest, strong who are called ‘bitchy.’ I feel like in many ways we’ve reclaimed the word ‘bitch.’”	• lack of confidence in beauty
	• forced to put up fronts like they are stronger than they are (multiple responses)

Struggles with intimate relationships. An unexpected and significant theme that emerged in the data was the self-reported struggles that virtually all of these women reported in intimate relationships, both romantic and non-romantic. While these Alpha Females readily admit a sense of personal accomplishment in virtually every area of their lives, they disclosed feelings of inadequacy, fear and failure in this one arena, as summarized in Table 8.

Table 8
Challenges in Intimate Relationships

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With my boyfriend, I'm very dependent. • I'm weak when it comes to relationships; very weak. • To this day, I don't feel like I'm ready to date anybody. • I feel like I'm a very confident person, outwardly, but I think I have some deeper self-confidence and self-esteem issues. For each situation I feel both very confident and not confident at all. • (I went from one boyfriend to the next and) I didn't know how to not have someone to talk to every night. • At the beginning of the semester I'd say that I was completely emotionally dependent on men. • Girls can be really good at putting on a front, too. • I am a little intimidated and it's hard to find a guy (that doesn't intimidate me). So, I would say that definitely makes a relationship a little bit harder. • I don't want to be tied down to a guy right now. • It's kind of strange sometimes because usually I thrive on competition, but in social situations, it's a little different. • I think almost all women struggle with self-esteem, physical self-esteem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think that a lot of girls that are similar to me are very confident...in some things, but...my confidence level as far as romantic relationship is nowhere near as strong as it is with school work...(and) leadership in an organization. • The thing that I'm least confident with is my relationship with men...we invest in much more in them than men do. • I feel like I have much more confidence (in leadership situations) than I do in my personal setting. I sacrificed other things, social aspects. • I consider myself independent, but I know that I'm dependent on my parents and my fiancée. • (Speaking of first boyfriend) We broke up because he had a problem with me being involved on campus. He told me...that women didn't really have a role in leadership at (my university). • (My university) somehow, grossly conditioned me to not feel confident in my beauty. • The last person I dated was exactly the same as me. Very strong-willed...we didn't really prioritize each other. It was kind of hard for one of us to compromise...I need someone that's maybe less hardcore. • (I believe I have) less confidence physically, and like (in) romantic relationships.
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Discussion and Implications

The antecedent variables are critical in the lives of the Alpha Females. The strong base that family empowerment and support gave them served to pay dividends in the college environment. Not only did Alpha Females have a nurturing environment, but they also had role models that taught them that being female was either a non-issue or an advantage. This teaching has led Alpha Females to push boundaries and has conflicting evidence in the literature (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

Being an Alpha Female college student has many advantages. Our study mirrors the findings of Kindlon (2006) in that there appears to be a new generation of thriving, influential, and effective “girls.” In general, the participants in this study were proud of their identification and, in one case, were committed to help other women evolve and improve their lives. There appear to be cultural and personality changes as reported by Twenge (1997a, 1997b, 2001, 2007) that are impacting the trajectory of an entire generation of women that will continue to change the way roles and relationships are negotiated on campus. The women in this study were eager and adaptive leaders who had experienced significant accomplishments and advantages from their status (Helgesen, 1990).

A general analysis might conclude that the emergence of the Alpha Female college student is a positive development for the student, university, and society at large. However, this advance comes with a price. Indicative of inconsistent standards for men and women, each of the participants reported being the victim of verbal insults or negative stereotypes. While our population appeared resilient enough to withstand this, there remains great resistance to women in equal or superior roles on campus and an effort to keep women in a place of traditional inferiority. This finding is consistent with the arguments of Eagly’s role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Conclusion

There is much to learn about the experiences and essence of being an Alpha Female student in college. The fields of educational research and student development would especially benefit from an intentional effort to explore this certain and swelling phenomenon. The implications of this cultural shift will have echoes for years to come as generations of young Alpha Females forge individual and collective identities that will reshape society.

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Dr. Rose Marie Ward is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Health at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. She is a health psychologist who examines the impact of college on health behavior change. Her recent research examined the prevalence of the Alpha Female personality across 12 different universities and colleges. This research assessed the risk associated with the alpha personality with respect to alcohol use and sexual assault risk.

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Halle Popson is a graduate student pursuing a masters degree in Health Promotion in the Department of Kinesiology and Health at Miami University. She obtained her undergraduate degree in Health Studies at Miami University while compiling a record setting career as a Miami University varsity softball player. Her research on sexual assault and the Alpha Female was presented at the National Conference of Undergraduate Research in 2008; highlighting her research interests in the areas of women's health, athletics, and leadership.