



# Advancing Women in Leadership

JOURNAL

VOLUME 41, 2022  
ISSN 1093-7099

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EDITORS: BEVERLY J. IRBY, NAHED ABDELRAHMAN, AND BRAD BIZZELL  
ASSISTANT EDITOR: JORDAN DONOP

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*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Are We Teaching College Women to Aspire for Elite Leadership Roles?: Teaching College Women to Aspire for Leadership**

### **Authors:**

**Karyn Boatwright, Shayla Dailey, Kristie McAlpine, Caitlin Finan, Meredith Hallisey, Kate McCracken, & Andrea Dendrinis**

**Karyn Boatwright:** Associate Professor of Psychology, Kalamazoo College, [karyn.boatwright@kzoo.edu](mailto:karyn.boatwright@kzoo.edu)

**Shayla Dailey:** Senior Research Assistant in Psychology, Kalamazoo College, [Shayla.Dailey@kzoo.edu](mailto:Shayla.Dailey@kzoo.edu)

**Caitlin Finan:** Research Scientist at Evolent Health, Illinois, [ccfinan@gmail.com](mailto:ccfinan@gmail.com)

**Andrea PottHoff Dendrinis:** Licensed Psychologist, Minnesota, [andrea@dendrinopsychology.com](mailto:andrea@dendrinopsychology.com)

**Rhonda K. Egidio:** Professor Emeritus in the Higher Education & Counseling and Rehabilitation Department, Michigan State University, [rhonda\\_egidio@yahoo.com](mailto:rhonda_egidio@yahoo.com)

**Stephanie Vibbert, was one of the student founders of this project. She passed away during the first phase of data collection. In her honor, her parents established the Stephanie Vibbert Women's Leadership Research Endowment which continues to fund this research. A special thanks to the remaining members of the team who worked with Stephanie to gather and analyze data: Kristie McAlpine, D'Angelo Bailey, Leigh Ann Ulrey, Rachel Carson, Claire Deikman, Meredith Lacina Hallisey, Sara Nestor, Katherine Curley, Dana Allswede, Grace McGookey, Kate McCracken, and Becca Riser.**

Accepted October 24, 2022

**In this longitudinal study we conducted annual interviews with 19 randomly selected college women for four years to ask them to describe the skills of an effective leader, their current leadership skills, post-college leadership aspirations, and college experiences that adversely and positively affected their aspirations for future leadership roles. As anticipated, growth and changes were not uniform among all participants; in fact, the varieties revealed a complex picture of women's leadership aspirations and the leadership skill development they favoured to enliven their aspirations, as well as the college experiences that shaped their evolving notion of their own desire for top leadership roles. An analysis of their interview responses indicated that over the span of four years: although most women increased their beliefs that effective leaders should possess both relational and task-oriented skills, the majority reported that they developed stronger traditional authoritative leadership skills; women reported stronger leadership aspirations, particularly those who had developed stronger traditional leadership skills. Those who developed stronger relational skills reported lower leadership aspirations. Suggestions for leadership mentors, professors, administrators, college student personnel and faculty are presented.**

**Keywords:** Leadership aspirations, college women's leadership, elite leadership roles

The pipeline that supplies the educated workforce is chock-full of women at the entry level, but by the time that same pipeline is filling leadership positions, it is overwhelmingly stocked with men. There are so many reasons for this winnowing out, but one important contributor is a leadership ambition gap.

—Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean in for Graduates*

The enduring underrepresentation of women in upper-level leadership roles continues to perplex leadership scholars, college faculty, and student development personnel. Clearly, many middle and top-management women leaders earn praise from their employees and supervisors yet continue to occupy a

disproportionately low percentage of elite positions (Pfaff, et al., 2013; Wilson, 2020). Why is this still the case? For decades, it has been widely assumed that women hit invisible barriers labeled by Loden in 1978 as the "glass ceiling" (Guvenen et al., 2021; Salvaj & Kuschel, 2020) that thwart the progress of aspiring women leaders but another factor is that too few women aspire to hierarchical advancement (Sandberg & Scovell, 2014). Are women on a continuous path of low aspirations for leadership roles or does something happen along the way of women's college trajectory to shift their aspirations? In phase one of our 24-year longitudinal study, we interviewed 19 college women annually throughout their college careers. Compared to

their first year, most senior participants reported stronger leadership aspirations. Several of these seniors reported a corresponding interest in employing traditional task-oriented leadership behaviors such as delegating tasks, setting job objectives, making decisions, setting firm expectations, acting decisively, etc. These particular women also failed to see the need for balancing this task-oriented style with relational strategies such as demonstrating consideration to employees' needs, developing personal relationships with supervisees, showing care and concern for others, attending to the unique preferences and work styles of employees, empathizing, and facilitating cooperation among work teams. Those who more strongly valued the relational leadership model experienced lower leadership aspirations. These trends appear relevant because progressive organizations are currently seeking leaders with both task-oriented and relational leadership skills. Does something occur during college to undermine their early aspirations? Does something occur during their early professional careers to undermine their aspirations for elite roles?

How did a Midwestern private liberal arts college that purposefully admits students with previous leadership experience create an environment that strengthened women's traditional task-oriented skills while weakening their relationally-oriented skills? What occurred to reduce their balanced set of task and relational-oriented behaviors? What transpired to decrease or extinguish some women's leadership aspirations? This is a compelling curiosity in the quest for gender equity. Over the past few decades, education researchers found that girls' interest in math and science falls off at 5th grade education. Scholars provided teachers with a plethora of successful educational strategies to address this problematic trend. In a similar vein, we must better understand what may be a fallout period for some potential women leaders during the college years as young women envision and prepare for their careers and in many cases either desert their relational leadership style or give up on their interest in aspiring to leadership positions altogether. With knowledge of why this shift occurs in these critical career development years, more targeted strategies to maintain and even build stronger leadership aspirations and more progressive relational and organizational (i.e., balanced) leadership styles for women in the college years can be designed and implemented.

Thus, a critical presenting question in the advancement of women in society is why some women's leadership aspirations decline during the college years and why those who maintain or strengthen their commitment shift toward more stereotypical task-oriented approaches even though a blend of task-oriented and relational styles is more desired in many contemporary business and educational organizations. Now more than ever, the contemporary leadership skills needed in today's workforce that combine relational with task-oriented managerial skills favor women. Yet, a gender disparity persists that is further exacerbated for higher level women leaders of color. Although women workers constitute approximately 46.8% of the

workforce and hold over half of the middle management positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), they still only hold 8.2% of Fortune 500 executive positions and between 8% and 18% of organizational and political leadership positions. Unsurprisingly, the percentages for women of color are significantly lower: Black and Latina women hold only 1.3% and 1.2% respectively of the highest-level executive positions in the United States (Catalyst, 2017; Hinchliffe, 2021).

A woman's crafted set of leadership skills as a leader and a receptive environment to recognize women's leadership capabilities are both critically important (Fritz & Knippenberg, 2017). The third leg of that stool is a woman's aspirational level for leadership roles. Without the internal birthing of the woman's own sense of desire to be a leader, there is no starting block (Sandberg & Scovell, 2014). Given the potential importance of leadership aspirations, it surprises us that few researchers have examined factors that adversely or positively influence women's desire to lead.

Mounting evidence suggests that a persistent gender-gap exists in leadership aspirations (Keller & Molina, 2020). Although women may be well situated to pursue these roles, women are less likely than men to aspire to higher level leadership positions. Over two decades ago, only 15% of women aspired to a "powerful" position in their professional future (Konrad et al., 2000). Current data suggest that men continue to express stronger interest in high-level corporate positions (Keller & Molina, 2020).

Historically, desirable leadership skills were almost exclusively authoritative, task-oriented managerial skills associated with men and "masculinity" such as strategizing, dictating work policies, decisively solving problems, monitoring and evaluating employees' behaviors, and teaching them how to lead other employees. For over a decade, leadership scholars have drawn attention to an emerging paradigm shift in organizational leadership models that include traditional task-oriented skills as well as those associated with "femininity" such as the ability to empower, build consensus, express concern for others, listen, validate workers' opinions, build solid professional relationships, empower employees, encourage collaboration, demonstrate mutual respect among diverse populations, and develop cohesive teams and communities (Fletcher, 2012; Patel et al., 2020; Salvaj & Kuschel, 2020). Within the organizational world, employers are increasingly seeking leaders who possess both sets of skills included in this new task and relationally-oriented model. This is because many organizations want their leaders to tailor their leadership behaviors to meet their employees' needs. Not only do workers frequently prefer leaders with these skills (e.g., Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Boatwright et al., 2010), but this leadership style can potentially enhance employees' work satisfaction, organizational loyalty, and productivity.

Even though men significantly outnumber women in elite leadership roles today, this should not be equated with the notion that men are better suited to lead within this new leadership

paradigm. In comparison to women, many men are socialized at a young age to develop more authoritative leadership behaviors such as taking a clear stand, organizing, delegating tasks, but not explicitly encouraged to solidify relational skills. In some cases, some boys are socialized to “deny in themselves the relational skills needed to survive psychologically [and instead], they tend to rely on women to provide these attributes” (Korabik & Ayman, 2007, p. 9).

Conversely, many women may be particularly well-suited for leadership roles because as young girls they were not only encouraged by parents, teachers, and peers to acquire task-oriented skills assumed necessary for success in the “man’s world” but encouraged to build and hone relational skills (Patel et al., 2020) In short, when combined with task-oriented skills, many stereotypical “feminine” traits fostered by gender socialization that have traditionally derailed women’s leadership trajectories now make women potential frontrunners for senior positions. Fortunately, women’s socially constructed and diverse repertoire of leadership behaviors has influenced their progress in obtaining more lower and middle level management positions but unfortunately has not substantially affected the alarmingly wide gender gap in higher-level roles or increased women’s aspirations.

Both external and internal factors are forces in understanding why women’s aspirations for higher-level leadership roles are lower than men’s. We have known for some time that both social (external) and psychological (internal) factors adversely influence women’s underrepresentation in leadership roles (Eagly et al., 2020). However, the social factors, such as stereotyping, social marginalization, gender-biased hiring practices, slower promotions, gender-biased feedback process, and lower levels of organizational development due to managers’ biased perceptions of women’s desire to pursue positions, have received significantly more empirical attention in recent years (Sandberg & Scovell, 2014). Comparatively, psychological factors have largely been ignored leading some to speculate that women simply naturally “opt out” or are “naturally” disinterested in upper-level positions. While recognizing that psychological variables do not develop within a social vacuum, a handful of researchers have begun to illuminate five variables that adversely influence leadership aspirations: women’s negative cognitions about themselves as elite leaders; negative beliefs about abilities perpetuated by television; insufficient role models; effect of personal responsibilities such as household chores and tasks; and perception of oppressive environments for women.

### **Women’s Negative Cognitions About Themselves as Senior Leaders**

Before aspiring for higher-level leadership positions, young women must first believe that they possess leadership potential: these beliefs begin to form in childhood. Many may foreclose on leadership roles early after internalizing messages that they should not directly express their thoughts and that their relational traits are not valued leadership skills. In one study, 65% of

women participants reported that in childhood, they were reluctant to demonstrate their leadership abilities (Veihmeyer & Doughtie, 2017). Additionally, some college women, poised to enter corporate America, are socialized to feel less worthy of the rewards associated with higher-level roles (Veihmeyer & Doughtie, 2017), express lower self-efficacy beliefs regarding their leadership abilities (Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019), and voice stronger fears of negative evaluation (Boatwright & Egidio, 2003). Even in the professional world, many women describe themselves as less confident, competitive, qualified than their male counterparts and thus less likely to seek access to senior leadership roles (Veihmeyer & Doughtie, 2017).

### **Negative Beliefs About Abilities Perpetuated by Television**

Even though women’s leadership abilities have been consistently documented, television’s outdated negative portrayal of overly aggressive or weak women leaders adversely influences young women’s thoughts regarding their interest in leading groups. A study conducted with University of Waterloo undergraduate men and women was designed to examine the effect of television on college women’s interest in leadership roles. Participants watched either gender neutral or stereotypically negative television segments of women leaders. Immediately following this exposure, researchers asked participants to serve as either a leader or a subordinate in a group exercise. Compared to participants who watched the gender-neutral segments, women who watched the gender-biased television segments expressed lower interest in serving as a leader (Davies et al., 2005).

### **Insufficient Role Models**

In their seminal study, Bandura et al. (1961) posited that observing the rewarded behaviors of others influences one’s desire to engage in similar behaviors. Following this assertion, when girls or young women observe elite women leaders, they will be more apt to aspire for top leadership roles. Although they did not explicitly study leadership aspirations, Beaman et al. (2012) assessed career aspirations by analyzing data from over 3600 adolescents from 495 villages in India who had been exposed to Indian women leaders. Following this exposure, the young girls’ career aspirations increased.

### **Gender Disparity in Personal Responsibilities**

Although women work a comparable number of hours to men within the workplace, a gender disparity exists among professional men and women educators, lawyers, and business personnel with elite leadership potential. Women report six to ten times more hours completing household tasks and providing childcare than men (Masterson, et. al., 2020). These heavier domestic workloads in turn often decrease women’s desire to pursue top management positions (Salvaj & Kuschel, 2020).

### **Women’s Expectation of Gender-Biased Environments**

We know that gender-biased institutional factors often impede women’s advancement, yet we do not yet fully understand the set of psychological factors that directly or indirectly influence women’s desire to seek higher level leadership roles. Even when

organizations establish gender parity in advancement policies, women's beliefs regarding leadership roles must positively fuel their aspirations before they choose to seek these roles.

To better understand the foundations of college women's aspirations to seek leadership positions, we studied a randomly selected group of college women attending an elite private liberal arts college who were considered to be potential leaders in their future professional fields. Over the course of their four-year college experience, we conducted annual interviews to assess fluctuations in their conceptualization of effective leadership, perceptions of their own leadership skills, leadership aspirations, and experiences that influenced their aspirations in future professional leadership roles.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

We invited 30 women undergraduate students from the entire pool of 150 female students enrolled in their first year at a private Midwestern liberal arts college to participate in our 25-year longitudinal study. To ensure a random sample, we invited every 5th woman student and each accepted. The only selection criterion used was that they were categorized by our admissions office as first-year women students. Over the course of the four years, ten withdrew from the college and one opted not to participate after her third year. Nineteen women participated in the first phase and each graduated within one month of the final interview. Additionally, all agreed to be interviewed in Phase II of the longitudinal study 20 to 25 years after graduation.

Participation involved an initial baseline interview in their first trimester of college followed by interviews near the end of their first, sophomore, junior, and senior years. The mean age of the participants at the beginning of the study was 19 with the youngest and the oldest being 18 and 19, respectively. Seventy percent of the participants identified as White which reflected the composition of the student body; 24% of the participants identified as Asian American; 6% as African American. All participants were from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds, single, and represented a cross section of academic interests and majors.

#### **Our Four Research Questions:**

1. Do women change their conceptualization of effective leadership skills during college?
2. Which effective task-oriented and relational-oriented leadership skills do participants develop during college?
3. Do women's leadership aspirations for future leadership roles shift during their college years?
4. Which college experiences increase college women's leadership aspirations for future roles?
5. Which college experiences decrease college women's leadership aspirations for future roles?

### **Measures**

#### ***Demographic Questionnaire***

A 13-item questionnaire was used to acquire information regarding the participants' age, gender, race and ethnicity, academic interests, and socioeconomic status.

#### ***Interview Questions***

In semi-structured interviews during their first trimester of college as well as the end of each of their four years of study, participants answered the following five open-ended questions.

1. Which skills do you believe an effective leader should possess?
2. Which skills do you currently possess that might help you manage, supervise, or train others effectively?
3. Comparing yourself with where you were a year ago in terms of your interest in leading, supervising, training, or managing others, has your interest in becoming a leader (aspirations) in your professional field, whatever that might be, decreased or increased?
4. Would you please describe any college experiences in the last year that have increased your interest in leading, supervising, training, or managing others in your future professional field? (Note: This question was not asked in the first baseline interview since it took place during their first college trimester.)
5. Would you please describe college experiences in the last year that have undermined the way you perceive yourself as a future leader? (This question was also omitted from the baseline interview.)

#### ***Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ): Ideal Preference version***

To categorize participants' ideal and actual leadership skills, we were guided by the LBDQ (Halpin, 1957), the most extensively used instrument in leadership research (Landy, 1989). The LBDQ has been employed in many organizational research studies because of its behavioral specificity with regard to leadership behaviors and concretely delineates relationally-oriented (Consideration) and task-oriented (Initiating Structure) dimensions of leadership style. Leadership behaviors labeled relational include demonstrating mutual trust, respect, concern for workers' needs and showing warmth and rapport between themselves and workers. Task-oriented behaviors include leadership skills such as maintaining work standards, delegating tasks, providing direction to organizational members, planning, coordinating, trying out ideas on employees instead of asking for their ideas, maintaining standards of performance, and encouraging the use of uniform procedures. Relational traits include leadership behaviors such as demonstrating consideration to employees' needs, developing personal relationships with supervisees, showing care and concern for others, attending to the unique preferences and work styles of employees, empathizing, and facilitating cooperation among members of a work-team.

## Procedure

After obtaining approval from the college's Institutional Review Board, the primary researcher invited 30 randomly selected first-year women who were enrolled in a Midwestern private liberal arts college to participate in our longitudinal study. All agreed to participate without a promise of compensation, although to enhance their persistence we annually sent small tokens of our appreciation to them in their campus mailboxes (e.g., a college mug, candy bar).

Over a four-year span, four male and female members of an undergraduate research team, all of whom were selected due to their interest in women's leadership aspirations and interest in acquiring research experience, conducted a series of private, open-ended, face-to-face interviews with participants in the research lab near the beginning of their freshman year and during the last month of their freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years. Before the initial interview, participants received a verbal and written description of the research procedures and agreed to the conditions by signing an informed consent form. The first author's research team was composed of six college women who were selected due to their interest in examining college women's leadership aspirations. Research team members conducted and transcribed all audio-taped interviews. When necessary, interviewers used specific prompts or probes such as "could you expand on that answer" to ensure that each question was answered. On average, each interview lasted 30 minutes. To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, participants' names were excluded from the transcription and replaced with a self-selected codename.

## Data Analysis

To refrain from skewing the results or guiding the interviews toward a particular direction, our research team did not discuss anticipated findings before interviewing our participants. In our interviews we asked open-ended interview questions, relied on participants' words, acknowledged the role of context in the construction of our participants' experiences, and employed a team consensus approach to code and analyze the data. Following the interviews, each skill cited by our participants in the first and fifth questions was coded and consensually determined by the team to be task-oriented or relational behavior based on the skills and categories used in the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (Halpin, 1957).

Next, the number of relational and task-oriented responses were counted and the ratio of relational and task-oriented skills to their total set of responses reported during their first and fourth-year interviews was calculated. Responses that were neither relational nor task-oriented were omitted from the calculations. Depending on their percentage of responses, each participant's leadership style was categorized as either relational (R) or task-oriented (T). If a participant's response set in either category was equal to or greater than 66% of her entire response set, she was categorized as relational or task-oriented. If the difference between a participant's percentage of identified relational and

task-oriented behaviors was less than 33%, she was categorized as possessing a "balanced" conceptualization of leadership. After much discussion the percentages of 66% and 33% were selected by the research team since two-thirds of similar responses seemed sufficient to label the set of responses as relational or task-oriented. For the remaining questions, we coded and categorized each response to identify the primary themes, comparing each year's responses with their responses from a previous year as well as comparing their first and fourth-year responses for more significant shifts. Because we were unable to find previous studies that had used this type of categorizing, we relied on our intuitions to develop the ratio model and asked three different organizational researchers to comment on our method of analysis. All three agreed that the majority ratio model seemed to be a creative and rational way to categorize the traits.

## Results

Results of our study are offered in the order of the research questions identified above and occasionally illustrated by participants' words.

### Question 1: Which Skills Do You Believe an Effective Leader Should Possess?

In their first college trimester interview, 40% of our participants described effective leadership skills as primarily relational. This suggests that before college, some students were exposed to the benefits of relational leadership traits. For example, Romeo described an effective leader as "someone who is not only concerned with what they are trying to achieve, but as far as the feelings of others and furthering, helping others with their goals as well as them." Similarly, Cobi believed leaders should listen to "everyone's opinions in the group...and [be] able to listen well and...listen to everyone's personal ideas." In contrast, 37% of the women described leadership as consisting of mostly task-oriented behaviors. For example, Eddie believed that listening was important but that leaders needed to "decide which one's the best." Only 23% of the women cited a relatively equal amount of relational and task-oriented skills. One participant, Sunshine, highlighted this balance stating that effective leaders should be "responsible, respectful, assertive, open minded and organized." By the end of their senior year, most of the women (71%) used fewer task-oriented leadership skills to describe an effective leader and developed, maintained, or solidified their belief in the effectiveness of primarily a relational or a balanced set of relational and task-oriented skills. Overall, our data suggest that most participants increasingly learned to value either a predominantly relational or a balanced relational and task-oriented skillset and devalue a primarily task-oriented skillset.

### Question 2: Which Skills Do You Currently Possess That Might Help You to Manage, Supervise, or Train Others Effectively?

Two major themes emerged from participants' responses to this question. When asked at the beginning of their first year to describe their current leadership skills, 76% of the women self-

reported possessing either a set of primarily relational leadership skills (44%) or a balanced set of skills (32%). Ashley, whose list of effective leadership skills was categorized as relational, for example, described her “fairly decent communication skills...and [ability] to communicate with others without coming off as incredibly airy or, um, like really distant.” Cobi reported both relational and task-oriented skills when she stated that she was “pretty unbiased and able to listen to other people’s ideas, and I tend to be able to control groups easily.” Only three of the women (25%) felt they possessed a higher percentage of task-oriented skills.

By the end of their senior year, 44% of the women reported possessing a higher percentage of task-oriented skills than relational-oriented skills, 31% reported possessing a higher percentage of relational-oriented skills, and 25% of women reported employing a balanced set of skills in their leadership behaviors. Mia fell into this latter category, stating that she felt “quite organized” and tended to be a “good listener and, um, I like to simplify things so that others can understand them better.” Another senior who reported possessing task-oriented and relational skills, Albrunner, acknowledged that she occasionally needed to be “very top-down in my leadership but so over the years I have learned to be more perceptive to what other people’s needs are and to kind of...not really announce my presence with authority.”

As these data reveal, the percentage of participants who in their first trimester of college reported possessing a higher number of relational skills dropped from 44% to 31% by the end of their senior year (27% decrease). Similarly, women who initially reported a relatively equal number of relational and task-oriented skills dropped from 31% to 25% (20% decrease). However, the percentage of women who reported possessing a larger percentage of task-oriented skills than relational grew from 25% to 44% (76% increase). Overtime, the women who had learned to value relational skills as more important to an effectively balanced leadership style felt they had developed more task-oriented skills during college, suggesting an inverse correlation between belief and behavior development over time.

**Question 3: Comparing Yourself with Where You Were a Year Ago in Terms of Your Interest in Leading, Supervising, Training, or Managing Others, Has Your interest in Becoming a Leader in Your Professional Field, Whatever That Might Be, Decreased or Increased?**

When we compared our participants’ reports over the course of four years, we noticed three intriguing patterns:

***Most Women Reported an Increase in Leadership Aspirations***

Senior Josie, for example, stated:

I think it’s probably increased, which I didn’t really think was possible because I thought I already had these really high aspirations, but, I guess the more time I spend in math classrooms and with math students, the more things I realize are wrong with the current system

and the way textbooks are written, the way teachers teach the courses...so those are the kinds of things that I hope to be able to address as a professor and in hoping to reform those things I think that that’s like a whole new, you know, level of, of leadership that I wasn’t really even thinking about before...

***Most Participants Who Formed, Maintained, or Solidified Their Belief in The Superiority of Task-Oriented Leadership Reported an Increase in Their Aspirations***

Superfan, for example, specifically noted that her aspirations increased in response to the internal satisfaction experienced when exerting “power over” other students, unabashedly proclaiming that she enjoyed her off-campus position as “a manager... so now I am the boss of all my friends.”

***Most Participants Who Formed, Maintained, or Solidified Their Belief in The Superiority of Relational Leadership Reported a Decrease in Their Overall Leadership Aspirations***

Sunshine, for example, who reported a stronger belief in relational skills in an earlier question indicated that:

“[Leadership aspirations have] definitely decreased as far as what I want to do. Maybe later on, once I realize that I can actually modify policy, then I will be more focused on getting...um...attaining a higher administrative-type position, but not right now.”

**Question 4: Would You Please Describe College Experiences in the Last Year That Have Increased Your Interest in Managing, Supervising, or Training Others in Your Future Field (Whatever that Might Be)?**

Asking participants to identify experiences that affected their leadership aspirations over the course of four years provided us with additional insights. When asked to report experiences that positively influenced their aspirations, participants listed a myriad of classroom and out-of-classroom experiences. Two major themes emerged from participants’ responses to this question:

***Classroom Group Projects Were Cited as The Most Important Experience***

As early as their first year and each year thereafter, approximately one third of the women stated that classroom group-project participation had been critically important in fueling their leadership aspirations by bolstering their confidence in their leadership abilities. The most reported confidence-boosting component of group projects was positive feedback from peers. Romeo, for example, felt this confidence boost when peers told her that her “opinion really mattered,” asked her how they could “make this section of the paper better?” or commended her on the “really great piece of research” that she found for a project.

According to Josie, before she started a particular group project during her sophomore year, she wasn’t certain how peers would

react to her attempts to lead but “Because they reacted positively and [have] accepted that I’ve taken on this role, it’s encouraged me to do so in the future.”

### ***Leadership Roles in Class and in Off-campus Jobs Increased Leadership Aspirations***

Many women in our interviews reported that assuming teaching assistant positions and leadership roles in student organizations and off-campus jobs strengthened their leadership aspirations. In these roles, a couple participants reported that the peer reinforcement increased their leadership aspirations. When displaying relational behaviors, for example, Josie, who worked as a teaching assistant, explained that she gets:

“to work with students one on one, small groups, whatever and uh... working with them has really been a great experience because they’ll say things to me later like “oh you’re really helpful” or “oh you’re going to make such a great professor” and like that is such a huge like confidence booster just to have people tell you that you are actually succeeding at what you’re attempting to do and you’re managing to teach people.”

At the end of her senior year, another participant, Cobi, felt that the empowering feedback from her science professors increased her leadership aspirations:

“A lot of the professors... umm... in my department have, you know, acknowledged me. You know, I always felt like there were always four other people above me, you know, not necessarily four, but you know, that group of people above me who were, they were looking to... really... as going to be the future leaders in chemistry, you know. That they really had confidence, and I think I’ve kind of finally, been accepted into that group, I think, I don’t know, and you know, acknowledged, as someone that they are confident will succeed well in the field.”

Ashley felt that her experiences with peers increased her belief and confidence in employing relational skills and decreased her enjoyment of occupying a hierarchical position stating:

“I think there was definitely a part in my life where I would relish in that feeling of hierarchy or that... but... I feel like at this point it feels so rewarding to help others. Not help others but to work with others through that process and like teach each other and empower each other that um... that is just a really awesome feeling and I think that’s, that’s very encouraging to want to be in positions of leadership or even to be in positions where leadership interactions are valued or personal interactions are highly valued where you are gonna work with each other and teach each other. And I think that’s huge.”

Cobi reported that employing task-oriented behaviors in her role as a science lab teaching assistant increased her desire to pursue leadership roles because “it was kind of fun to be able to explain

to people how to do things and be like, ‘I know how to work this, and this is how you should do it.’ That’s kind of fun.” Sunshine similarly reported that group members completed “our own little parts” and that “we all pull[ed] our weight” but when the group needed direction, she did not mind “giving some direction one way or the other to what the goal should be.”

### **Question 5: Would You Please Describe College Experiences in the Last Year That Have Undermined Your Interest in Managing, Supervising, or Training Others in Your Future Field?**

When thematically organizing responses to this question, we noticed two common obstacles that thwarted student aspirations:

#### ***Negative Comparisons to Peers/Feeling Less Intelligent***

Eight of the women admitted that negative academic comparisons with their peers during their first year seriously undermined their leadership aspirations. Toriamos<sup>40</sup>, for example, who planned to enter the medical field, felt that her science major was “competitive... and... kind of discouraging at times and overwhelming.” Even in their senior year, feeling less intelligent than their peers remained the most common experience that undermined their leadership aspirations. One of the women noticed that her “own lack of ability to assist people in the way that, you know, I should or would want ideally has really shown me that um... maybe almost dissuaded me from wanting to be in a position of leadership just because. If that makes sense?”

#### ***Negative Experiences with Professors***

For three of our interviewees, negative relationships or experiences with their professors emerged during their sophomore, junior, and senior year interviews. 3.14159 described her irritation with a professor that she felt undermined her leadership aspirations:

“I had a teacher this year write a fairly condescending e-mail when she thought I was under-qualified to be in one of her classes... It would be situations like that where people don’t just give you benefit of the doubt as to what your potential is or what you’re able to do.”

Similarly, Jane Doe revealed that her relationship with her professor provided “a sense of doubt in my leadership aspirations” but chose not to expand. As a teaching assistant her senior year, Superfan mentioned feeling as though the professor she was working for undermined her authority as a leader by changing grades she gave to students without consulting her first:

“I felt like he has tended to undermine me a little in the way we handle the students... it just, you know, kind of draws from the desire to be in a leadership position when other leaders are, um, working against you.”

For these participants, messages from professors were not easily discarded and seemed to solidify their underlying self-doubt regarding their leadership skills.

## Discussion

Despite their advances in attaining entry level and middle management leadership positions, women continue to be poorly represented in upper-level leadership roles across many occupational domains. The most cited sociocultural factors responsible for this include institutional gender-biased policies, lack of role models, stereotypical assumptions regarding women's leadership styles, gender-biased performance evaluations, personal and familial sacrifices, and women's self-efficacy (Eagle et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers have found that many potential women leaders perceive themselves to be less skilled than men in competition for elite roles and less worthy of leadership rewards in the workplace. Even women in lower or middle-management positions often describe themselves as less confident, competitive, and qualified than their male counterparts for leadership roles and report lower leadership ambition. As a result, these women candidates may possess minimal interest in leadership, particularly the higher-level positions. Surprisingly, leadership aspirations have received insufficient research attention. Unless women aspire to lead, they will continue to be underrepresented in higher-level leadership roles.

The college experience is a critical time for women to learn about progressive models of leadership, to build leadership skills, and to solidify their leadership aspirations. In order to examine this more closely, we followed a select group of 19 college women for four years to study fluctuations in their self-perceptions as leaders and conceptualizations of effective leadership. We paid close attention to patterns in their development of relational and task-oriented leadership skills, shifts in their leadership aspirations, and experiences that strengthened or undermined their leadership aspirations for future leadership roles. Our team hoped the findings would jumpstart the process of designing college-based interventions to increase women's interest in and confidence in pursuing professional positions of higher-level leadership.

In our initial interview, we expected most of our first-year participants to describe effective leadership skills as traditional (e.g., delegating tasks, setting job objectives, making decisions, setting firm expectations, acting decisively, etc.). To our surprise, most (63%) described effective leadership as including more relational skills while the remaining participants (37%) described skilled leaders as primarily task-oriented. Moreover, by the end of their senior year all but two had developed, maintained, or solidified their belief that a leadership style that included relational behaviors would be most useful. Although our sample group of college women attending an elite college was intentionally very specific and thus generalizations for other women cannot be made, our results suggest that before starting college, some women already understand the advantages of infusing relational traits into their leadership style and during college, many increasingly learn to appreciate the importance of relational skills.

These findings caused us to expect an increase in the development of their own relational leadership skills over the four-year span: however, the opposite occurred. In the initial interview, most reported that they possessed almost twice as many relational as task-oriented leadership skills, but by graduation most reported a stronger set of task-oriented skills. In other words, most participants developed stronger beliefs in the value of relational leadership behaviors throughout college but developed more task-oriented skills and incorporated them into their behaviors.

Let us be clear, developing non-authoritative task-oriented skills is important in a well-rounded leader. However, since newer leadership models require both relational and task-oriented behaviors, developing a strong set of relational leadership skills is also of value in a premier leader role. We found that many of our participants put enhancement and refinement of their relational leadership skills on hold which might very well be the set of skills that will distinguish them in the higher-level leadership roles needed for modern organizations. This surprising finding invites our thoughtful reflection on two questions. One, why did most of our participants learn to value relational skills but mostly strengthen their task-oriented skills? And two, how might academicians help students develop both sets of skills?

In regard to the first question, the most important factor cited was group participation. For example, three women who did report an increase in their relational skills between their first and senior college years cited meaningful group project interaction with peers who shared a common goal, co-constructed a plan, collaborated with each other, and made consensual decisions as critically important. From their descriptions, it seems the group members co-constructed experiences that strengthened their relationally-oriented skills—a possibility that requires additional empirical attention.

Interestingly, half of the women who reported an increase in their task-oriented skills also reported that empowering experiences within a group context helped increase those skills. However, those particular groups were described as being authoritatively structured with an emphasis on hierarchy. Additionally, some felt most empowered when they emerged as the leader who "took charge." For example, two interviewees acknowledged internal positive reinforcement when assuming authoritative "power over" other students, particularly when receiving compliments from their peers for their ability to plan, strategize, delegate tasks, organize meeting times, and assume responsibility for a disproportionate number of group tasks. When discussing this finding as a research team, we wondered if this could have occurred because groups often evolve into hierarchical structures with one person assuming the leadership position without pre-project collaboration training. Another possibility requiring additional empirical attention is that students solidify their task-oriented skills simply by observing their professors. Within the classroom, some faculty model and

thus unintentionally promote the social learning of traditional and more authoritative behaviors more so than relationally-oriented leadership skills. This style is deeply rooted in the historically traditional college classroom that has been hierarchically constructed. The professor typically employs task-oriented skills including traditional lectures, Socratic questioning, and teacher-led discussions.

This leads to our second reflection question, “how might academicians help students develop both (relational and task) sets of skills?” Professors are frequently taught how to select course content and design effective pedagogical strategies, but they are rarely shown how to infuse leadership principles directly into the classroom. Perhaps we can convince faculty that the academic classroom may be an underutilized and ideal learning laboratory for developing leadership skills, though, historically, leadership has been perceived as extracurricular and the exclusive responsibility of student development staff.

With training on how to combine leadership skill development into their pedagogy, professors could learn to model a more balanced set of leadership competencies. Perhaps this could be achieved by decreasing traditional hierarchical strategies and increasing relational skills through collaborative discussions, student-centered group projects, teaching assistant involvement, student facilitated discussions, team-building assignments, student-designed course content reading lists, and syllabus construction. These strategies can foster the development of both relational and task-oriented skills but only if students are adequately prepared. For example, our participant responses implicitly suggest that too often faculty assign group projects without providing instructions on the process of a group, resulting in a missed educational opportunity. To remedy this problem when assigning group projects, professors should explain the purpose of a collaborative group project and the importance of cultivating a balanced set of leadership skills required for future higher-level leadership positions. Additionally, they should teach students how to reflect on their own leadership development while working on the group project, maybe by assigning an article related to progressive leadership models and distributing instructions to explain collaborative principles such as constructing an equally distributed list. Professors—or better yet teaching assistants—could facilitate small group discussions to reflect on leadership challenges currently encountered by group members (e.g., the urge to assume responsibility for the tasks assigned to other group members, the urge to wait for the emergence of a strong leader, etc.). Following the completion of the group project, the professor and/or teaching assistant could meet with each group to discuss not only the quality of the project but also to process strengths and weaknesses of their individual and team leadership skills.

That being said, do professors and teaching assistants even know how to support the group processes and thus inspire students to develop balanced leadership skills? Some may, but many may

benefit from working with student development staff or trained faculty to prepare for these group discussions. Imagine if these two groups collaborated to develop student leadership skills within the academic experience instead of exclusively within extracurricular workshops.

### **Leadership Aspirations**

Not only should women develop competencies in both relational and task-oriented skills to meet the progressive trend of hiring worker-centered leaders, but in their professional careers, they must aspire for executive leadership positions before striving for these roles. What can faculty do to encourage women to develop these skills and seek elite positions? Extrapolating from our participants’ experiences, we identified three key suggestions: leadership aspiration education, leadership aspiration workshops, and leadership aspiration support groups.

#### ***Leadership Aspiration Education***

Many women who reported stronger task-oriented skills and an increase in their leadership aspirations noted that in their campus or off-campus leadership roles, they received consistent positive feedback when employing more traditional, authoritative behaviors. To encourage these women to revise their assumptions regarding leadership styles and to develop stronger leadership aspirations, faculty could model more relational skills in their classroom as well as integrate research, documentaries, and speakers to demonstrate the value of a balanced leadership style that relies on their empathic skills and interpersonal perceptiveness and teaches students not to exert power over employees but to empower employees to participate actively in the organizational process. Additionally, professors could help women reconceptualize their relational traits, such as commitment to collaboration, teamwork, community involvement, mutuality, interactive discussion, and connection with others as signs of their leadership capabilities. Even more importantly, college women could learn to appreciate how their relational attributes are not simply skills to lead employees toward organizational goals; they also carry the potential to empower employees toward personal growth and organizational transformation, thus empowering them to aspire for higher positions.

#### ***Leadership Aspirations Workshops***

Across the country, college personnel frequently offer leadership skill-building workshops but rarely develop leadership aspiration training. In leadership aspiration building workshops, committed faculty and staff leaders within departments like gender studies and psychology could describe their leadership aspirations and how they blend relational and task-oriented skills into their leadership style. Hearing strong women role models talk about women’s strengths and how well-suited task and relationally-oriented women are for modern leadership could strengthen women students’ aspirations. Participants could also examine factors empirically shown to influence aspirations such as self-esteem, leadership self-efficacy, work climate, labor division,

relational issues, and reflection on the personal and professional pros and cons involved in seeking leadership roles. Additionally, students could learn how to develop critical skills predictive of future career success as elite leaders.

College leadership workshops often attract women who fit the stereotypical authoritative leadership model and who have received praise for their assertive managerial skills. They fail to attract women who not only possess task-oriented organizational skills but also relational-oriented leadership skills. Due to outdated and patriarchal assumptions about “natural born” authoritative leaders, some relationally skilled women with minimal leadership experience doubt their leadership acumen and prematurely foreclose on these workshop opportunities. The finding that many participants who reported a decline in their leadership aspirations by their senior year were more inclined to conceptualize effective leadership as relational further illuminates the need to recruit these women for leadership aspiration workshops.

How do we attract all potential women leaders to these workshops? Faculty and advisors should encourage these often overlooked and relationally skilled women to participate in leadership aspiration workshops designed to help them realize their potential for the balanced leadership positions that require both sets of skills. Additionally, because solid students with effective relational or team-building traits may be less likely to “stand out” in a classroom and thus less likely to receive a professor’s recommendation for a leadership program, workshop developers could work closely with faculty to familiarize them with leadership model changes and help them identify these overlooked but capable women.

### **Leadership Aspirations Support Groups**

Student development personnel could also offer leadership aspirational training in the context of a women’s support group. As we learned from our participants, students are highly influenced by the perceptions that their peers hold of their leadership capabilities. Additionally, several of our participants reported that they often evaluated themselves negatively when comparing their leadership skills with those of their peers. A non-competitive and supportive environment would enable groups of women to recognize each other’s relational and task-oriented strengths as well as help them consolidate a multifaceted leadership skill set.

Clearly, more women are needed in elite leadership positions. We see evidence of effective leadership in corporate America and women heads of state. Very recently, New Zealand and Taiwanese women leaders were lauded for having the most effective responses to the global Covid-19 pandemic (Maclean, 2020). They were successful because they were relational and task-oriented leaders who combined a sense of humanity and inclusion with effective task management. They motivated broad cooperation along with effective management and received praise for their leadership.

Certainly, women have developed their task-oriented skills, but they need to see their relational skills as a strength not to be deserted in emerging leadership. Faculty and student personnel have a responsibility to support the next generation of leaders by recognizing not only how to build skills but to start at the very foundation. We begin by understanding, tapping, and supporting further growth of leadership aspirations for women during the college years so that aspirations are strengthened based on women’s relational skills rather than the falling away that we observed in our study. Our hope is that this research will stimulate even more investigation leading to a deeper understanding and resultant actions to support the growth of leadership aspirations for women during the college years.

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