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*Elizabeth A. Matejczyk graduated from the CSPA program in 1996. She received a B.A. in Sociology, with a minor in French, from Wheaton College (MA) in 1994. At IU, Elizabeth served as an Assistant Coordinator for Residence Life in Wright Quad, and was an executive board officer of IUSPA.*

*Elizabeth S. Rubin graduated from the CSPA program in 1996. She received a B.A. in 1994 from Indiana University in English, with a minor in French. At IU, Elizabeth served as an Assistant Coordinator for Residence Life in Read Center.*

*Shaun R. Travers graduated from the CSPA program in 1996. He received a B.A. in 1994 in Psychology and Theatre Arts from California Lutheran University. At IU, Shaun served as an Assistant Coordinator for Residence Life in Read Center.*

## ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN STUDENT LEADERS

*Suzanne Mendoza*

*This paper explores the impact of environmental influences unique to coeducational and single-sex campuses on women student leaders. Recommendations for fostering the development of women student leaders are provided based on the examination of the environmental factors.*

The development of abilities such as leadership skills are outcomes often associated with the college experience. Astin (1993) notes the close connection between increases in the leadership skills of undergraduates and the college experience. Among undergraduate women, leadership experiences have been shown to enhance competence and self-confidence (Astin & Leland, 1991). Despite the fact that women account for approximately half of undergraduate students attending colleges and universities today, their male counterparts occupy the majority of campus leadership positions (Leonard & Sigall, 1989; Wilkerson, 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the impact of the environmental influences of a coeducational institution and those of a single-sex (all women's) campus on the development of women student leaders. First, this paper will investigate the impact of negative environmental factors on the development of women leaders on a coeducational campus. Then, the impact of positive environmental factors on student leadership development on a single-sex college campus will be examined. Finally, there will be an assessment of the environmental factors characteristic of single-sex campuses which can be implemented at coeducational institutions to promote the development of female student leaders.

Women on coeducational campuses face many barriers to becoming leaders. One of those barriers is the biased treatment that occurs when women earn less respect than men, which causes their voices to be ignored and devalued (Leonard & Sigall, 1989). A recent study by the National Association for Women in Education on the treatment of women in college

classrooms illustrates this lack of respect for women on coeducational campuses. Joan Morgan (1996) reports:

Troublesome practices by faculty members identified by the study included: using women students as examples in hypothetical situations with sexual or other inappropriate overtones; interrupting women's comments more than men's; responding extensively to men's comments with praise, criticism or coaching but to women with patronizing brush-offs; and attributing women's achievement to luck or affirmative action but men's to talent or ability. (p. 21)

Other factors that inhibit leadership development in women are intimidation due to men's competitiveness and fear of social disapproval when taking the initiative (Leonard & Sigall, 1989). Unfortunately, women who do overcome this intimidation and take initiative are often criticized for being overaggressive by peers, male and female alike. With these potential demoralizing outcomes in mind, leadership often does not seem worth the price to women on a coeducational campus.

At an all-women's institution, however, the price of leadership is more affordable for students because of the positive impact of certain environmental factors on campus. One of the most significant environmental influences on these campuses is the role modeling by faculty and administrative leaders. Whitt (1994) explains that "a consensus style of leadership in which everyone is valued equally" (p. 201) prevails among women student leaders. These students claim that working with, rather than for, faculty and administrators fosters this consensus leadership style. Another positive environmental factor is a consistent availability of various leadership development activities such as workshops on women's leadership styles. A final influence can be seen in the numerous opportunities offered to students for involvement in the actual operation of the institution. Whitt reports that at one women's college, students have the opportunity to be "voting members of most college committees and chair the faculty-student committee responsible for enforcing Honor Codes" (p. 202).

Given the information presented on the impact of different institutional environments on the development of female student leaders, the best option for increasing the number of women leaders on coeducational campuses is to create the nurturing environmental factors seen on single-sex campuses.

Suggestions for fostering such nurturing factors include hiring more female faculty and administrators; recognizing outstanding global, national, and local women leaders; establishing leadership development activities specifically aimed toward women (Whitt, 1994); and developing a mentor program between female undergraduates and campus professionals. The possibilities for encouraging the development of women leaders on a college campus are numerous. However, it is important to solicit the support of faculty and staff to ensure the success of these numerous opportunities for women on coeducational campuses.

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*Suzanne Mendoza graduated from Santa Clara University in 1995 with a B.A. in English. She is a first-year student in the CSPA program and plans to graduate in May, 1997. Suzanne is also an assistant coordinator in Forest Residence Center, an all-women's residence hall.*