

## Why We Lead: Reflections of Female Student Government Presidents

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## Introduction

Female students have many choices to make regarding their college experience. Students may choose to attend private institutions, large public research universities, or smaller regional comprehensive state universities. Other students may prefer faith-based institutions. Still others may choose to attend two-year institutions. Regardless of size and mission, all institutions provide students with opportunities to pursue their interests, challenge themselves personally and academically, and decide on career paths. Students may become involved in the college community through academic and social interactions. They may take that involvement to another level and serve as leaders in student organizations and programs.

When students serve as leaders in college and universities, they learn skills that they may use throughout their professional and personal lives. Student organization leaders must learn to interact with others, represent the needs of their groups, and interact with multiple constituencies. Student leaders are also responsible for the futures of their organization.

The purpose of the current study was to describe the experiences of female student government presidents. Five female student government association presidents were interviewed. The women described their experiences as leaders of their institutions' student governance bodies.

## Background of the Study

Student participation in college and university decision-making has been accepted since the mid-1970s (Miles & Miller, 2006). Student government participation has a positive effect on the overall campus community and assists with the development of the

individual students involved (Kuh & Lund, 1994). Skills that are gained through student government involvement, including planning and organizational skills, allow students to put what they learn in their classes into practice. Involvement in student government associations can assist with student development (Kuh & Lund, 1994) and retention (Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfe, 1988).

Students are more likely to engage in activities that are related to their career goals (McCannon & Bennett, 1996). Women may choose to become involved in student organizations and activities that are connected to their interests and academic majors. Women who do not participate may be missing out on the opportunity to gain experiences that would assist them in their careers (Miller & Krauss, 2004).

Miller and Krauss (2004) surveyed student government leaders regarding the gender of current and past student government leaders. Participants included 21 student government leaders in seven states in the Midwestern region of the United States. While women held half of the student government positions, the majority of student government leadership positions were held by men. Over 70% of the student government presidents and vice presidents were male.

Ideally, democracy in society includes women. In practice however, women are not always equally represented. Women's access to politics can be influenced by cultural, socio-economic, and political factors (Tremblay, 2007). Rationale underlying women's lack of representation in politics in greater society can also be applied to campus governance. Women may choose not participate in student governance because the student government does not address the concerns of women or because they do not believe they are qualified (Miller & Krauss, 2004).

## Methodology

Five female student government presidents were interviewed for this qualitative study. All of the students were currently serving as president of their institution's student governance body. The institutions included one regional comprehensive university, one faith-based college, two community colleges, and one two-year women's college. All institutions were located in the Midwestern region of the United States.

Qualitative research was chosen for this study. Qualitative methods allow the investigator the opportunity to question and probe, resulting in greater insights regarding the viewpoints and perceptions of the participants (Merriam, 1988). The presidents were each asked to describe their experiences as president of their institution's student governance unit. All interviews were audio-taped and field notes were taken. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were conducted on campus at locations chosen by the students.

## Analysis

In this qualitative study, two themes emerged. The themes included benefits and challenges experienced by the five participants.

## *Participants*

### *Student 1*

Student 1 is a 21 year old woman. She is a senior at a regional comprehensive four-year institution. She first learned of the university because her father had attended the institution. Her father was also student government president when he was a student there. In addition to serving as student government president, she is also a member of a sorority. She is involved in community service. Student 1 volunteers at a recycling

center, a homeless shelter, and a pre-school for children with developmental delays. She has been part of student government since her freshman year. In her first year, she was a student government senator, in her sophomore year, she was campus affairs director. In her junior year, she was vice-president. She became student government president in the spring of her junior year. She is majoring in Finance.

*Student 2*

Student 2 is a 20 year old woman. She is a junior at a faith-based institution. She first joined student government as a senator during her sophomore year. She also works for the campus newspaper and leads a bible study group. Her career goal is to work in marketing and publishing. She is majoring in Journalism with a minor in Graphic Design.

*Student 3*

Student 3 is a 19 year old woman. She is a second year student at a community college. In addition to student government, she is involved in Phi Theta Kappa and serves as Student Trustee. She became president of her college's student governance body in the spring of her first year. She is pursuing her Associate of Arts degree and hopes to continue her education at a four-year institution where she will study Architecture.

*Student 4*

Student 4 is a 20 year old woman from a small rural town. She is a student at a community college. The campus she attends is one of five campuses of the college. Her older sister also attended the college. In addition to student government, she volunteers with two ministries, works 15 hours a week as a work study student, is a member of an

adult volleyball league, is a member of a Christian band, is writing a series of children's books, and is planning on beginning to substitute teach at a high school and elementary school. She is pursuing an Associate of Arts degree in English and Creative Writing. She is planning on transferring to a four year institution to complete a Bachelor's degree in English. Because of the number of credits she's earned at her community college and a nearby four-year institution, she will only need to take one semester of coursework at her next institution.

#### *Student 5*

Student 5 is a second year student at a two-year liberal arts women's college. Her activities outside of student government include a leadership certification program, Phi Theta Kappa, an English honorary, and serving as a college tour guide. She is pursuing her associate's degree in Business and Marketing. She is planning on transferring to a four-year institution to earn her bachelor's degree. She is considering pursuing a master's and doctorate in Business Administration.

#### *Themes*

#### *Benefits*

All five women described how they have benefitted from serving as student government president. Those benefits affected both their personal and professional lives. The women expressed that they grew and developed during their time as president.

Students mentioned that their leadership skills and interpersonal skills improved. The students had to learn how and when to delegate and to represent the institution and the student government. The students were responsible for assigning students to college and university committees and for appointing students to positions. In addition, the

student government presidents had to serve on boards and committees in which they represented their institutions to on-campus and off-campus constituencies. In the words of one student:

I can do things. Even when I'm busy I can do things even with my busy schedule. If you sit down and write it up and decide to do it, you push yourself. I know I have no excuse other than being busy. If it's within my power I will do everything to get it done and not make up any excuses.

All of the students mentioned interacting with faculty and staff. They worked directly with student government advisors and senior level administrators. Through these interactions, the students gained confidence and learned to express themselves. Because of these experiences, the students are less intimidated by staff and faculty. One student shared that this will help her when she transfers to her next institution. The student said that "It won't be such a foreign thing to interact with staff. I think it'll make things just a tad easier."

Another student commented that her interpersonal skills have improved. Her position has necessitated communication with community leaders. She saw one of her roles as ambassador for her college with the local community. She has become more comfortable working with new people. She shared that "You get better skills in terms of interacting with people. You really have to if you want to get things donated or people interested in your school."

The students mentioned the career preparation they have gained through their student government presidencies. Serving as student government president has helped with delegation, learning to get along with others, planning and organization. One student expressed the following:

I have learned a lot. I didn't think I would. I've learned to cool down and sit back and let others talk. One of my roles as leader is to let others lead. If I own my own business or am a CEO this will help me facilitate other people and deal with criticism.

### *Challenges*

All of the students who were interviewed described challenges. The challenges included learning about their responsibilities, interacting with the campus community, and managing their time. The students had to carry out their responsibilities and continue to be a student. The students were also concerned about the future of their student government associations.

One student expressed frustration regarding the organizational structure of her institution's student government. When asked about a constitution for the student government, she did not know if one existed. She found that following the formal structure of the student government, including carrying out key responsibilities and filling positions, was going to be difficult. The student shared that "Right now, it's not about specific positions. It's more about getting excited about SGA." She was focusing on keeping the student government active and trying to encourage students to be part of the student government. She said that "It feels like a job sometimes. Keeps you busy, but it's worth it."

The students needed to learn about the organizational structure of their institution, as well as their student government. In order to accomplish specific goals or implement programs, they had to navigate the bureaucracy of their institutions. Learning the appropriate steps was frustrating for some of the students and could diminish their enthusiasm. In the words of one student, "At the beginning of the semester and year you

have so many great ideas. There are so many hoops and loops you need to go through to get anything done."

The students expressed frustration in terms of fulfilling expectations of their constituents. The students would hear students complain and not know how to address all of their concerns. One student shared that frustration by saying "When they say SGA doesn't do anything I wonder why they don't come to me."

Students also had to learn to separate their personal and professional lives. They found themselves working with friends on student government business. Sometimes, they had to disagree with a student but wanted to maintain the personal relationship. One student said that "On a small campus, I work with friends. I need to draw the line. When I have to confront them, I try to make a line between being a friend and being SGA president."

All of the students interviewed expressed challenges with time management. They took their student government responsibilities seriously, but still wanted to maintain their grades, prepare for their career and graduate school, and maintain social lives. One student found that there was never "enough time to stay on top of things." The students wanted to take time to do everything and were challenged that they sometimes had to make sacrifices.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Leadership is considered a desirable outcome of the college experience, regardless of how leadership is defined (Astin & Astin, 2000). In this qualitative study, female student government presidents were asked to describe their experiences as leaders of their institutions' student governance bodies. Each woman shared how she has

benefitted from serving as president, as well as the challenges she has faced. The women described factors affecting personal and professional development, as well as interpersonal relationships.

Many of the benefits associated with college experiences occur outside of the classroom (Bray, 2006). Because these experiences affect students, more information regarding their impact could be beneficial to administrators, faculty, and staff.

Institutions of higher education allocate resources to student involvement. Part of this involvement includes student governance.

Students who pursue student government office choose to spend their time and energy on that activity. That time and energy could be focused on different areas, including work, academics, or other student activities. While they may benefit from student government involvement, they are also putting effort into the role. One student expressed that effort by saying "I'm definitely glad I've taken this opportunity. It's been a lot of work."

If college and university leaders choose to encourage the involvement of all students, including male and female students, they would benefit from knowing how this involvement affects students on their campuses. Women define leadership differently than men (Kezar, 2000; Romano, 1996). Learning why female students choose to lead, and what they want to gain from the leadership experience, would allow higher education leaders to make better informed decisions regarding resource allocations. When the appropriate resources are allocated, desired goals and outcomes can be achieved.

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