Influencing Change: Women in Leadership

This symposia will create a discussion about the challenges and opportunities for finding and developing influential leadership roles for female students to make lasting change in their campus environment. I will share my experience as a brief case study for how a small group of motivated students can influence lasting change while developing high-levels of confidence in one’s own leadership capacity. Through an interactive brainstorm session, attendees will explore existing structures and propose new avenues for development to provide leadership development for female students as well as bettering the campus climate and culture for all students. The intended target audience is individuals who are currently mentoring current or future female student leaders or those who would like to develop such mentoring avenues.

Women in Leadership, Influence, Change, Campus Climate, Leadership Development

**Introduction**

While more than half of all university students are female, C-Suite leadership roles are still mostly filled by men. With the goal of preparing female students for leadership roles in the future, there are many opportunities found on many campuses that can prepare women for future leadership roles (Collings, Conner, McPherson, Midson,, & Wilson, 2011).This symposia would create a discussion about the challenges and opportunities for finding pathways to allow female students leadership roles and opportunities to make lasting change in their campus environments. The intended outcome of the session will be to brainstorm existing structures and propose new structures that could be developed on campuses to provide leadership development for female students as well as better the campus climate and culture for all students. The intended target audience is individuals who are currently mentoring current or future female student leaders or those who would like to develop such mentoring avenues.

In this symposia, I would share my personal experience as a case study, of how a small group of students can influence change. That change began with the creation of a Women in Leadership Committee on campus where students (both male and female) gathered to discuss the gaps in services offered on campus was the spark that influenced a positive change on campus. This group gathering also propelled a larger discussion about high-level issues that needed an open dialogue to resolve. This group hosted panel discussions, forums and educational activities to raise awareness about issues specific to women on our campus. Later, this group implemented projects, developed by academic courses in partnership with the Title IX Office, to create promotional campaigns to raise awareness and improve the quality of life of female students.

Simultaneously, Women in Academia was formed by women faculty who saw a need to offer better mentoring and networking to reach tenure status and further develop skills required to take-on larger leadership positions successfully. A short time later a campus climate survey was taken and systematic changes addressed issues facing females on campus–both faculty and students. One of those recommendations was to provide a Women’s Center on campus to fill in gaps in services for females in the campus community.

In the span of 6 years, many positive changes have come forth through the leadership of women on campus that will provide a more beneficial campus climate while also allowing females to influence these initiatives. This presentation should allow others to see what resources exist currently within their campus community that could lead them to influence further change while provided real-life leadership opportunities for female students.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Empowering female leaders on campus to have a positive impact on the campus–in either a micro or macro level–not only improves a woman’s confidence in her leadership skills but also has the potential to make positive impacts campus-wide for all students. All leadership experiences are not mutually beneficial. By contrast, female students in leadership roles who were focused solely on completing tasks tended to have lower levels of self-esteem associated with leadership ability and less impact on lasting change (Moran, 2015). Understanding how we can better mentor and teach leadership principles to women on campus will improve the opportunities for women to have confidence in professional leadership roles (Haber, 2011).

Recognizing that female leaders tend to focus on developing leadership skills in areas that differ from their male counterparts will help in designing effective leadership mentoring specifically of women. For example, Haber (2011) found that female leadership style and approach was different than the authoritarian male counterparts in that women more often sought to strengthen relationships, create efficiency in task-oriented behaviors, value and promote empowerment while emphasizing both purpose-driven work and balance.

**Overview**

In this open discussion I would provide a brief overview of how I collaborated with existing campus resources, such as the Title IX Office, to bring additional resources to campus in a few years including a Women’s Center, Women in Leadership Committee, and Women in Academia. I would highlight how these structures not only created leadership opportunities for students, faculty and staff but they’ve also improved our campus community and climate in a relatively short amount of time. The conversation would then open to others to share what resources are available, what gaps exist, how students can help facilitate change, and to provide recommendations for overcoming challenges. The goal is to provide a brainstorming and problem-solving discussion to show pathways for successful strategies to provide women on campus opportunities to serve, lead and grow as leaders while improving the campus climate and culture.

**Session Description**

The opening of the presentation would highlight the research showing the value of women gaining leadership experiences during the college experience. It would also include a 10-minute explanation about the ways I’ve helped mentor students to improve access to leadership opportunities and to create lasting social change in my own campus community with limited resources. This portion would highlight the challenges faced, obstacles overcome and the positive impacts that continue to come forth as a result of the great influence which came from a small group that sparked the change. The remaining 50-60 minutes would include an open discussion about the opportunities and challenges that exist in providing leadership opportunities to female students. Others would offer possible solutions to individual challenges while sharing best practices to help others who may be in different stages of creating leadership experiences for female students.

**References**

Collings, S., Conner, L., McPherson, K., Midson, B., & Wilson, C. (2011). Learning to Be Leaders in Higher Education: What Helps or Hinders Women’s Advancement as Leaders in Universities. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *39*(1), 44–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143210383896>

Haber, P. (2011). Iron Sharpens Iron: Exploring the Experiences of Female College Student Leaders. *Advancing Women in Leadership, 31*(1), 86-101. <https://doi.org/10.21423/awlj-v31.a75>

Moran, J. (2015). An Examination of Self-Esteem's Impact on the Leadership Behaviors of Female Undergraduate Student Leaders. The Keep: Eastern Illinois University.