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An Examination of Mentoring Relationships and Leadership Capacity in Resident Assistants

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THE LEADERSHIP CAPACITY OF RESIDENT ASSISTANTS can be impacted by many experiences, including involvement in mentoring relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine if and how resident assistants' leadership capacities are influenced by participating in these relationships. A sample of 6,006 resident assistants was analyzed using data from the 2009 Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership. An adapted version of Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome college impact model was used as the conceptual framework, and the Social Change Model of Leadership was used as the theoretical framework. Overall findings revealed that resident assistants who participated in mentoring relationships exhibited significantly higher leadership capacities than those who did not, regardless of the mentor-protégé demographic factors. Also included are implications for practice and future recommendations.

. . . mentored resident assistants had significantly higher scores than did non-mentored resident assistants on all dependent variables, including leadership capacity (socially responsible leadership and leadership efficacy).

Mentoring literature has focused primarily on mentoring functions, cultivating mentor-protégé relationships, and the desired behaviors of mentors (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001). Mentors as teachers, educators, or managers have been charged with building the skill sets of their protégés, a process that provides both socialization (shared experiences or culture) and internalization (learning by doing) through a more formalized learning lens (Swap et al., 2001). This view of the mentoring process takes into account the fact that there are many types of mentors (faculty, career, student affairs, senior faculty, peer) and protégés (students, junior faculty, organizational members, employees, peers) who engage in formal and informal capacities with both task and relationship outcomes. Mentoring is a mutual exchange and is relational in nature. This opens up a broader interpretation of who can mentor and who can serve as a protégé (Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012; Kram, 1983).

MENTOR-PROTÉGÉ DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Mentoring relationships do not occur in a vacuum; they are influenced by intergroup power relationships and can be very complex (Ragins, 1997). Demographic factors—including race, gender, and sexual orientation—should be taken into consideration in mentoring relationships and exchanges: "Competent mentors are sensitive to issues of sex, gender socialization, gender identity, and sexual orientation but they avoid assuming that these factors alone predict important mentoring needs, relational styles, or professional concerns" (Johnson, 2006, p. 165). Mentors should also be mindful of creating safe and inclusive environments for their protégés. Though potential protégés may express a preference for a mentor of the same race or ethnicity, research indicates that cross-race mentorships can be as helpful, valuable, and satisfying as same-race mentorships:

> Diversified mentoring relationships are composed of mentors and protégés who differ on one or more group memberships associated with power in organizations . . . . diversified mentoring relationships are not intrinsically better or worse than homogeneous relationships; each has costs and benefits. (Ragins, 1997, p. 489)

The key takeaway is that the mentor-protégé exchange is mutual and relational regardless of any demographic similarities or differences. The focus of the present study is on resident assistants and the mentors that they identified as being most significant.

RESIDENT ASSISTANTS AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

The use of student staff in housing began in the Colonial colleges (Winston & Fitch, 1993). Because behavior problems stemmed from young men who lived in close quarters with little area to socialize, American colonial faculty had to assume the parental, authoritative role of providing "custodial care," serving *in loco parentis* in order to maintain acceptable conduct (Winston, Ullom, & Werring, 1984). As residence life became more of an established functional area, a more holistic and less punitive approach was employed when working with students in the residential halls (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1984), which resulted in the need for paraprofessionals to live with students. Paraprofessional staff allowed professional staff time to address bigger concerns: fostering academic and student affairs interactions through educational programs (Ender, 1984; Kennedy, 2009).

The study of leadership can be traced all the way back to Aristotle (Northouse, 2010). How leaders have been viewed has changed significantly over the centuries, and an awareness of the philosophical evolution of leadership is necessary to understand major epistemological frames. Leadership theory has evolved from a positivist paradigm of universal truths and single, right ways to a naturalistic, socially constructed view (Dugan & Komives, 2010): "The evolution of leadership theory reflects a complex movement from leader-centric, management-oriented, and individual achievement-focused approaches to those characterized by social responsibility, developmental concern, and process orientations" (Dugan,

2011, p. 53). This movement distinguished between industrial and postindustrial theoretical paradigms, and the emphasis has evolved from focusing on the leader to cultivating leadership development to benefit society.

The Social Change Model of leadership (SCM) provides a framework for individuals and groups to engage in leadership and learn from one another to enact change through a non-hierarchical model rooted in a postindustrial framework (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon 2007; Skendall, 2012). Starting in 1996, this model was widely distributed throughout the higher education community (Astin & Astin, 2000; Cilente, 2009; HERI, 1996) as a way to represent leadership as a process as opposed to a position.

. . . student affairs professionals, including housing and residence life administrators, have various opportunities to establish mentoring relationships with RAs and to help build their confidence in their abilities as leaders. Although there were some benefits to the type of mentor and/or the gender and race match of mentor-protégé pairings, the main finding was that any type of mentoring relationship is crucial in the development of resident assistants' leadership capacities.

Research has been conducted on mentoring and socially responsible leadership and leadership capacity, but efficacy has not been addressed, and few studies have focused on the leadership capacities and mentoring experiences of resident assistants. None have included consideration of the demographics of the mentor-protégé pairings and of the impact of mentoring outcomes on resident assistants' leadership capacities. To address this problem, the purpose of this study was to examine how resident assistants' leadership capacities (socially responsible leadership and leadership efficacy) are influenced by being involved in mentoring relationships (e.g., mentoring for personal development and/or mentoring for leadership empowerment). The research questions in the study included the following:

1. Do resident assistants who participate in mentoring relationships exhibit significantly higher leadership capacities than resident assistants who do not, after accounting for control measures such as pre-college activities, race, gender, sexual orientation, and grade point average?
2. Is there a significant relationship between the type of mentor (faculty, student affairs, employer, or student) and resident assistant leadership capacity, after accounting for the aforementioned control measures?
3. Does the relationship between mentoring relationships and leadership capacity differ based on the race and gender match of the mentor-protégé pairing, after accounting for the aforementioned control measures?

THE INSTRUMENT

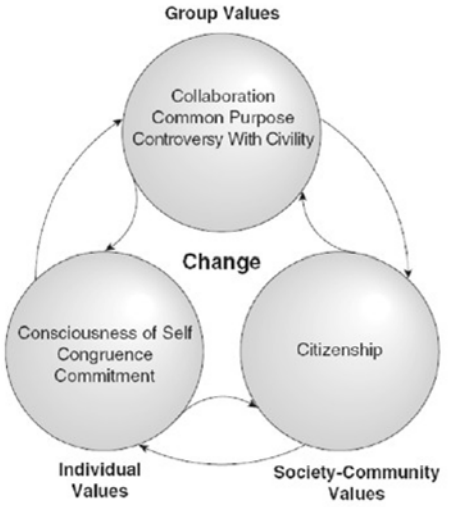
The theoretical framework of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) is the Social Change Model of leadership, which views leadership as a process, not a position. The SCM is values-based and includes "equity, social justice, self-knowledge, personal empowerment, collaboration, citizenship, and service" (HERI, 1996, p. 18), and it underscores personal and interpersonal dimensions of leadership (HERI, 1996; Tyree, 1998). It has two core principles. First, it is predicated on increasing students' levels of self-knowledge and capacity to collaborate with others. Second, leadership is tied to societal responsibility and demonstrated by creating positive change for the common good (Dugan & Komives, 2010; HERI, 1996). The Social Change Model has three interrelated perspectives: the individual, the group, and society/community (see Figure 1).

The Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership has been used to examine educational outcomes of the collegiate environment since 2006. The Social Change Model is the theoretical framework for the MSL study, while Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) model serves as the conceptual framework (see Figure 2). The MSL Survey has more than 400 variables, scales, and composite measures (Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership [MSL], n.d.) and uses the 71-item Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS) as the core scale. Data collection was conducted from January 2009 through April 2009; each participating institution selected a three-week period most conducive to their academic calendar for students to receive the survey electronically. (Data collection overview information can be retrieved from *http://leadershipstudy.net/design/data-collection-methods/*.)

The Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership's 2009 sample consisted of 35% (N = 118,733) of the 337,482 students who were electronically invited to participate; the resident assistant sub-sample size was 6,006. Resident assistants were asked if they had ever been mentored, and 95.6% indicated they had been mentored at least once (n = 5,741) while 4.4% indicated they had never been mentored (n = 265). Multiple regression analysis was conducted to explore mean differences across the dependent variables (eight SCM leadership constructs, socially responsible leadership, and leadership efficacy). IBM SPSS Statistics 22 software was used to conduct the analyses.

Figure 1

The Social Change Model of Leadership Development



Source: (Komives & Dugan, 2010, p. 115)

Figure 2

Astin's Input-Environment-Output Model with Variables of Interest

Source: (Early, 2014, p. 48)

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Through independent samples *t*-tests and regression the research compared group mean scores of mentored and non-mentored resident assistants on the Social Change Model individual, group, societal, and change constructs to better understand socially responsible leadership. Socially responsible leadership is the omnibus of all eight SCM constructs in a single variable. A better understanding of socially responsible leadership in addition to leadership efficacy provides a more thorough understanding of the study's dependent variable, leadership capacity. Each research question was analyzed in a single-block model including covariates (pre-college activities, major, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship/generational status, race, parents' education level, parents' income, grade point average) and the socially responsible leadership and leadership efficacy pre-tests along with a research-question-specific key predictor. The key predictor for the first research question was the mentoring variable.

Mentoring emerged as a strong positive predictor for all constructs of the Social Change Model and leadership capacity. Independent samples *t*-tests revealed that mentored resident assistants reported higher leadership capacity scores than did non-mentored resident assistants. Results of the regression analysis determined that mentoring significantly predicted all SCM constructs and socially responsible leadership. The significant finding for socially responsible leadership and leadership efficacy suggests that a mentored resident assistant is predicted to demonstrate significantly higher leadership capacity than would a non-mentored resident assistant.

The second research question examined mentoring outcomes as an environmental predictor of leadership capacity (socially responsible leadership and leadership capacity) through an ANOVA and regression analyses. The most significant types of mentor included faculty, student affairs, employer, and other student. It was hypothesized that student affairs profes-

sionals would serve as positive predictors of RAs' mentoring outcomes and leadership capacity scores. Resident assistants with student affairs mentors reported higher group mean scores on both mentoring outcomes than did those with any other type of most significant mentor. ANOVA findings revealed a main effect of the most significant type of mentor and mentoring for personal development and mentoring for leadership empowerment. Regression analyses included the finding that student affairs mentors significantly predicted mentoring outcomes for personal development and for leadership empowerment. Post-hoc analyses on mentoring outcomes revealed that RAs with student affairs mentors reported significantly higher scores on both mentoring outcomes than did RAs who identified faculty, employer, or other student as their mentors. Therefore, student affairs mentors significantly differed from faculty, employers, and other students on both mentoring outcomes.

Housing and residence life administrators should strive to interact frequently in both informal and formal capacities with resident assistants.

With larger sample sizes there may be statistical significance, but not practical significance; therefore, it is important to examine effect size in addition to significance. The effect size measures the size of the difference between two groups and is a measure of the practical significance of the difference (Coe, 2002). The effect size or Cohen's *d* is the difference between the means divided by the standard deviation. Two groups' means should differ by at least .2 standard deviations or more. Cohen (1988) stated $d = .2$ for a small effect size, $d = .5$ for a medium effect, and $d = .8$ for a large effect. The values for Cohen's *d* are reported in Table 1. For all variables the effect sizes are not large; however, the group means differed by at least .2 standard deviations, and the differences ranged from small to medium. The findings indicated that mentored resident assistants had significantly higher scores than did non-mentored resident assistants on all dependent variables, including leadership capacity (socially responsible leadership and leadership efficacy). This suggests that mentored resident assistants demonstrate higher leadership capacities than do non-mentored resident assistants.

The leadership capacity (socially responsible leadership and leadership efficacy) results were that the type of mentor is not a predictor of socially responsible leadership. Therefore, having a faculty member, an employer, or another student as a mentor does not differ from having a student affairs mentor when considering the effect on socially responsible leadership competencies. Pertaining to leadership efficacy, significant findings suggest that other students emerged as negative predictors of leadership efficacy in comparison to student affairs mentors. Therefore, RAs with student affairs mentors are predicted to exhibit higher

leadership efficacy capacities. These results suggest that student affairs administrators have the potential to impact protégés' confidence levels and to encourage them to create positive purposeful transformational change in their communities.

To address the third research question, I examined the Social Change Model constructs. A comparison of independent samples *t*-tests and regression analyses were conducted. Ragins (1997) identified an important research conundrum, arguing that studies on race and mentoring relationships have inconsistent findings because confounding variables have not been used as a measure of control. I used covariates for all research questions including pre-college activities, major, sexual orientation, citizenship/generational status, parents' education level, and grade point average in the model; race and gender as a measure of control were removed due to the personal nature of the question. The pre-tests for socially responsible leadership and leadership efficacy and the gender match and race match

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Standard Error, and *t* Values for Mentored and Non-Mentored RAs on Educational Outcomes

	Mentored RAs (*n* = 5,741)			Non-mentored RAs (*n* = 265)				
Leadership constructs	***M***	***SD***	***SE***	***M***	***SD***	***SE***	***t* Values**	**Cohen's *d***
Individual values								
Consciousness of self	4.03	.55	.009	3.77	.64	.013	-6.53	.44
Congruence	4.19	.57	.008	3.92	.72	.044	-6.13	.42
Commitment	4.32	.55	.007	4.03	.69	.042	-6.70	.42
Group values								
Collaboration	4.09	.52	.007	3.83	.65	.039	-6.71***	.44
Common purpose	4.07	.51	.006	3.81	.67	.041	-6.29***	.43
Controversy with civility	3.86	.46	.008	3.65	.54	.033	-6.35***	.42
Citizenship	4.02	.59	.008	3.67	.69	.043	-8.15***	.56
Change	3.85	.51	.007	3.71	.55	.034	-4.49***	.26
Leadership capacity								
Socially responsible leadership	4.03	.45	.006	3.77	.57	.035	-7.27***	.51
Leadership efficacy	3.27	.60	.008	3.06	.72	.040	-5.58***	.32

Note: ***$p < .0001$

. . . RAs with student affairs mentors are predicted to exhibit higher leadership efficacy capacities. These results suggest that student affairs administrators have the potential to impact protégés' confidence levels and encourage them to create positive purposeful transformational change in their communities.

variables were also included in the model. It was hypothesized that same-gender pairs would score significantly higher on socially responsible leadership based on MSL 2006 findings. Through regression analysis, race match and gender match for mentor-protégé pairings did not predict leadership capacity (socially responsible leadership and leadership efficacy). Therefore, gender match and race match mentor-protégé pairs do not differ from cross-gender and cross-race mentor-protégé pairs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings from this study can equip educators and potential mentors with evidence-based information on the benefits of cultivating the leadership capacities of resident assistants. These results also address both practical and scholarly implications often missing in research findings. The student affairs practitioners (hall directors, student organization advisors, leadership coordinators, fraternity and sorority advisors) that resident assistants learn from outside of the classroom, and the faculty they learn from inside the classroom, can have a direct, positive influence on RAs' leadership capacities.

This study offers not only a unique contribution to the MSL research agenda, but also insights into a new constituent audience: housing and residence life administrators. Since student success and collaboration with academic affairs are priorities at many institutions of higher education, this research could be helpful to hall directors, faculty associated with living-learning communities, and advisors of residential organizations (Residence Hall Association, National Residence Hall Honorary, hall government) who may serve as mentors to resident assistants. Findings from this study suggest that even one quality mentoring encounter is beneficial for RAs. In addition, mentored RAs scored significantly higher than did non-mentored RAs on each value of the Social Change Model, socially responsible leadership, and leadership efficacy. Additionally, RAs mentored by student affairs professionals scored higher than did those with any other type of significant mentor on both mentoring outcomes and leadership efficacy. Due to the nature of the profession, student affairs professionals, including housing and residence life administrators, have various opportunities to establish mentoring relationships with RAs and to help build their confidence in their abilities as leaders. Although there were some benefits to the type of mentor and/or the gender and race match of mentor-protégé pairings, the main finding was that any type of mentoring relationship is crucial in the development

of resident assistants' leadership capacities.

Housing and residence life administrators should strive to interact frequently in both informal and formal capacities with resident assistants because there is a measurable benefit. Findings from this study supported the assumption that gender match and race match mentor-protégé pairs do not significantly differ from cross-race and cross-gender mentor-protégé pairs on leadership capacity. This finding is very useful because there may be a limited number of racially diverse or non-binary gendered backgrounds for potential protégés.

. . . those who mentor resident assistants not only benefit the protégé but also others they encounter. This may increase retention efforts and student satisfaction with their collegiate experiences.

Therefore, being mentored by someone of a different race or gender is not disadvantageous; what is most important is that the resident assistant has been mentored. Any type of mentor including housing and residence life administrators on a college or university campus can impact a resident assistant's leadership capacity.

Institutions of higher education can also benefit from mentoring relationships with resident assistants. Stakeholders in higher education (administrators, faculty, students, alumni, donors) acknowledge matriculation, retention, and graduation of students as a priority (Tinto, 2006). Students who aid in these efforts are valuable; how they are developed and mentored is worthy of study. Therefore, those who mentor resident assistants not only benefit the protégé but also others they encounter. This may increase retention efforts and student satisfaction with their collegiate experiences (Astin, 1984).

EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH, PRACTICE, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Many leadership researchers have utilized the entire MSL sample, yet few have sought to seek replication of findings within sub-samples. This study was designed by the researcher so that it could be replicated for different subsamples or student group types (orientation leaders, fraternity/sorority members, student organization members) from the MSL data. In addition, this study utilized researcher-selected covariates of interest, though other researchers may choose to use the data in another way. For example, they may want to explore the most significant type of mentor or mentor-protégé race and gender pairings and students' major—such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) majors—as opposed to using major as a measure of control. This would be particularly interesting for majors with a predominance of one gender (Engineering) or race (African American Studies). Finally, other researchers may choose

different covariates for predictive purposes to combat confounding factors.

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations associated with this study related to the MSL's cross-sectional design. Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome model, the conceptual framework for the study, and the chosen covariates took pre-college experiences into account to examine the environment's influence on the educational outcomes. However, the study was not experimental research; therefore, cause and effect could not be determined. The use of retrospective questioning techniques in cross-sectional studies required students to reflect on their pre-college experiences and to self-report them; this is appropriate for this study because comparisons across institutions are not the intent. Instead, measurement of educational outcomes associated with individual students' leadership capacities is the intent. Although the MSL has data from many institutions and researchers can control for institutional selectivity and size, students' retrospective self-reported responses are unique to them and their collegiate experiences. Further, between-college effects tend to be poor predictors of student outcomes once one controls for pre-college activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Admittedly, resident assistants' roles and responsibilities may be relatively similar between institutions; however, the expectations of residence life and housing departments, hiring and evaluation processes, and training of these paraprofessionals may differ drastically. The mentor-protégé relationships and experiences were reported from the protégé perspective only. Finally, the mentoring that is being self-reported could have occurred one time; therefore, it cannot be assumed that there is a true mentoring "relationship" as opposed to a single mentoring encounter. Respondents reported the most significant type of mentor and their mentor's gender and race, yet there is no further context related to the mentoring relationship (duration of the mentoring relationship, including additional mentor demographics). This information could provide more insight into the mentor-protégé dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study examined mentoring encounters on college and university campuses, including the most significant type of mentor and gender match and race match of mentor-protégé pairings for resident assistants while controlling for confounding factors. However, there is much more to be learned about mentoring and leadership capacity. Ideally, more educators will conduct further research and more college students will engage in mentoring encounters. Findings from this research included that mentoring is a positive predictor of leadership capacity, and through mentorship resident assistants are equipped with the abilities and confidence levels to create change.

In the Social Change Model, the outcome variable is change. Civically engaged leaders, like resident assistants, can leave a lasting impact long after they graduate. These students have the potential to transform their communities and society by strategically creating positive, purposeful, and sustainable change. Bainton (2006) shared a useful analogy on transformational leaders by discussing the impact of boiling water on a carrot, an egg, and a coffee bean. When a carrot is boiled, it becomes soft. When an egg is boiled, the inside becomes hard. However, when a coffee bean is boiled, the bean transforms the water. When an RA engages in a mentoring relationship, she or he has an increased aptitude to serve as a change agent and transform their environments and communities for the better.

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Discussion Questions

1. How can student affairs professionals continue to seek out students who need to strengthen their leadership capacity in order to develop into socially responsible leaders?

2. Why do you think student affairs mentors significantly differ, according to the data, from faculty, employer, or other student mentors?

3. Other than the noted limitations, how do you think the results of this study would vary based on the institution type, size, or geographic location?

4. The results of this study showed that gender and race do not significantly impact the mentor-protégé relationship. Have you had a mentor or protégé that differed from your race or gender? What kind of learning did your identity differences help you facilitate?

5. Considering the positive correlation between mentorship and leadership capacity, what could your institution do to maximize mentor relationships in order to develop more leaders across campus?

   In what ways is your campus creating opportunities for mentor-protégé relationships?

   Are they intentional programs, or do they happen naturally?

   Is it based on a peer-peer relationship or student-professional relationship?

   Is there assessment happening to measure its effectiveness?

6. The study brings up the relationship that mentorship and leadership can have, specifically using the Social Change Model. How do you think leadership styles can influence the mentor-protégé relationship?

7. Referring to Astin's I-E-O model, what outcomes do you feel the mentor gains from the mentor-protégé relationship? How is the mentor affected and changed by this process?

Questions prepared by Krystal Cooper (Georgia Southern University) and Amanda McKnight (University of North Carolina at Greensboro)