LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG TRADITIONAL-AGE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Leadership skills are a necessary part of the preparation of community college students for university transfer or employment. However, the development of leadership skills for traditional-age community college students can be challenging based on generational traits and issues related to the community college context. The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of leadership and personal development of leadership skills among traditional-age community college students. After collecting data through interviews with thirteen traditional-age community college students, general inductive analysis was utilized to investigate the perceptions and experiences related to leadership development. By using the leadership identity development theory as a theoretical framework, analysis resulted in the themes Defining Leadership, which included leadership identity, influence, qualities of effective leaders, and qualities of ineffective leaders; and Developing Leadership, which consisted of the impact of others, impact of personal experiences, and perceptions of personal leadership development. Participants reported varied movement through the leadership identity development model based on both the examples of others and personal experiences. Millennial generational traits were both beneficial and challenging to leadership development, as was the context of the community college. Performing arts students also exhibited a more developed leadership identity than did participants involved in athletics. Community college faculty, staff, and administrators can find relevance in these findings as they continue to assist students in developing leadership skills. Additional research in organizational-based leadership development, as well as continued research on the impact of experience in leadership identity development, is needed.

Keywords: Millennial generation, community college, student leadership development, leadership identity development theory, general induction analysis
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Chapter One: The Research Problem

Community college students face many challenges as they prepare to graduate with associate degrees and technical certificates, to transfer to universities, and to seek employment. Among the challenges students face are the development of academic, technical, and social skills, including leadership abilities (Dugan & Komives, 2007). The current generation of traditional-age students is known for traits that could both help and hinder their ability to develop key leadership skills while attending a community college. Community colleges also meet with challenges in assisting students with developing leadership skills. This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of leadership among traditional-age community college students.

Statement of Problem

The problem of practice under review for this study was that traditional-age community college students are at a disadvantage when seeking employment or transferring to a university due to a lack of leadership skills. The development of leadership skills in college students is crucial as it promotes both personal development (Urso & Sygielski, 2007) and early career success (Hu & Wolniak, 2010; Hu, 2011). Many students choose community colleges due to the low cost and proximity to home (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2010); however, community colleges face challenges of their own as they attempt to engage students to develop leadership skills. As community colleges are taking responsibility for the preparation of greater numbers of potential leaders (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005), there is a need to better understand the perceptions of leadership and personal development of leadership skills among these students.

Among the students choosing community colleges to further their education are traditional-age students, ages 18 to 21 attending college directly out of high school. The
characteristics of these students can be seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage to the development of leadership skills. Traditional-age college students are described as high-achieving, confident, and team-oriented (Howe & Strauss, 2000; 2007) as well as over-scheduled, overly-nurtured, and self-entitled (Elmore, 2010; Sax, 2003; Tulgan, 2009). The Millennial generational traits of high expectation and achievement serve as evidence that current traditional-age community college students have great potential for leadership, yet many have not had the opportunity to develop leadership skills.

While leadership skill development for community college students is crucial, student leadership development is often not a priority because of other pressing issues. Community colleges are often ineffective in helping students develop leadership skills for several reasons, including a focus on underprepared learners, the short student attendance time, and student engagement challenges. First, the primary mission of most community colleges includes helping academically-underprepared students become college-ready through developmental education (Boroch et al., 2010). Although academic remediation to achieve college readiness is often the focus of community colleges (Mendoza et al., 2009), disadvantaged students need additional engagement opportunities to fully take part in the collegiate learning experience. For example, Barbatis (2010) indicated with research involving students in developmental education that several keys to helping developmental students succeed emerged, including both social involvement and academic integration. While developmental education is an important priority for community colleges, the focus on college readiness for underprepared learners prevents many community colleges from helping students understand, improve, and engage their own leadership development.
The second reason that community colleges can be ineffective in helping students develop leadership skills is that the one- to two-year format of most community college academic and technical programs inhibits the development of leadership skills. In a longitudinal study of students’ leadership behavior, Posner (2009) found university seniors who had participated in a leadership development program their first year of college showed more developed leadership behavior than their peers who had not participated in the program. This study, as with much of the research conducted on student leadership development, considers the impact of four or more years of leadership study, development, and practice on student ability and behavior (Eich, 2008; Gehret, 2010). Adversely, community colleges generally have only one or two years to help students effectively develop leadership skills. Without stronger leadership development at the community college level, students are left waiting to start learning and developing leadership skills until transferring to a university or entering the job market. This, in turn, puts community college students at a disadvantage and reduces the number of active student leaders on community college campuses.

Finally, student leadership development is often hindered due to a myriad of student engagement issues common to many community colleges, including students who are employed full- or part-time, who live off campus and commute to classes, and who have family responsibilities (Kim, Sax, Lee, & Hagedorn, 2010). Students often choose a community college as an opportune possibility for higher education because it accommodates personal issues, such as employment (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005b) or caring for a family (Gibson & Slate, 2010). Research has shown that involvement in college activities (Miller et al., 2005) and interactions with peers and instructors (Miller et al., 2005b) are key factors to student success. As community colleges seek to provide the skills necessary for students to succeed (Milliron &
Wilson, 2004), leadership skill development provides opportunities to engage students in meaningful, impactful ways (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

This lack of leadership development among traditional-age community college students is significant in several ways. For students, leadership offers the opportunity to develop an understanding of “themselves, others, and the world around them” (Eich, 2008, p. 186) and to develop leadership competencies which “will be increasingly essential in the United States and around the world” (Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003, p. 46). Developing leadership skills while in college provides traditional-age students with the cultural capital to seek leadership positions as they enter the workforce. Furthermore, colleges “have a responsibility to position leadership development as a central component of student learning” (Dugan, Garland, Jacoby, & Gasiorski, 2008, p. 488).

Colleges reap benefits when providing opportunities for student leadership skill development. Students in leadership positions represent college organizations to the administration and larger college community (Miles, 2010) as well as representing the college to outside entities (Brady, Elnagar, & Miller, 2010). Peer leadership also helps extra- and co-curricular programs within colleges to succeed by allowing the programs to be more in tune with the interests and needs of the student population and by providing comfortable support for less experienced students (Haber, 2011).

While community colleges are challenged to help students develop leadership skills, the importance of leadership skills to student success is clear within the available literature. Whether students are attending a community college in an academic program to obtain an associate degree or to prepare for university transfer or in a technical program to prepare for
employment opportunities, the ability to exhibit leadership skills will be imperative to their successes in the academic, extra-curricular, and employment settings they will encounter.

First, developing leadership skills at a community college enables transfer students to be more prepared for leadership opportunities that they will encounter at a university. Given that the bulk of research on student leadership development is related to university settings, transfer students can anticipate many opportunities to further develop and practice leadership skills while attending a university. Within the academic setting, leadership training is often incorporated into courses, majors, and programs to ensure that students will have the skills necessary upon earning a baccalaureate degree and entering the job market. Research on academic leadership development includes nursing (Cox & Miranda, 2003), event management (Marcketti, Arendt, & Shelley, 2011), engineering (Cox, Cekic, & Adams, 2010; Sankar, Kawulich, Clayton, & Raju, 2010), and STEM disciplines (Micari, Gould, & Lainez, 2010).

In addition to their academic course of study, community college transfer students will have many opportunities to expand and apply leadership skills learned at a community college through extra- and co-curricular activities. Research on extra- and co-curricular student leadership opportunities at the university level includes varsity athletics (Grandzol, Perlis, & Draina, 2010), fraternities and sororities (Adams & Keim, 2000), campus recreational sports (Hall, Forrester, & Borsz, 2008), student government (Miles, 2011), and peer education (Voorhees & Petkas, 2011). Students entering the university culture as a community college transfer without any previous leadership experience could be considered at a disadvantage compared to university students who have participated all four years in these kinds of leadership activities.
As well as the need for leadership skills for students transferring to a university, community college students entering the workforce also need to develop leadership skills. Research conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (Leslie, 2009) indicates a deficit in the leadership skills most needed by organizations. Brown and Posner (2001) found a correlation between certain learning strategies and leadership skills, which indicates that students who have developed leadership abilities are more likely to have certain learning strategies associated with unfamiliar experiences. Developing a “learning mindset” (Brown & Posner, 2001, p. 279) is important for an individual to learn and to help an organization learn as well. Other leadership skills, including the ability to be “forward-looking” (Kouzes & Posner, 2009, p. 20), may not be available in non-leadership, entry-level positions. Students who anticipate and desire leadership positions in a career field may need to have the skills necessary to lead before entering that field.

As community colleges continue to adapt to changing stakeholder needs (Mendoza et al., 2009), preparing students for university transfer and entering the job market must include leadership skill development. Helping community college students effectively develop leadership skills serves the college and the student, as well as the transfer university and future employers. In addition to students, several audiences including student leadership development practitioners, community college personnel, potential employers, and transfer universities, will benefit from this study’s findings on the development of leadership skills among traditional-age community college students. First, data on this topic is now added to the greater collection of literature on college student leadership development. By focusing on traditional-age community college students, this study has helped fill a particular gap in that literature. Secondly, faculty, staff, and administrators at community colleges, this researcher included, can develop a deeper
understanding of the leadership development needs and experiences of students. The practice of helping students understand and develop leadership skills as part of the community college experience can now be better informed by the perspectives of students. The students themselves benefit due to the enhanced knowledge of the practitioners who work with them and the ability for those practitioners to serve as advocates for students’ needs. Finally, as students’ leadership development at the community college level is enhanced, transfer universities, employers, and communities benefit as former community college students have the skills to become leaders within those environments.

Research Questions and Sub-questions

The purpose of this interpretive study was to explore the perception of leadership and personal development of leadership skills among traditional-age students attending community college.

Research Questions

In order to best comprehend how students understand and develop leadership skills, the following research questions guided this study:

- What perceptions do traditional-age community college students have about leadership?

  Sub-questions:

- How do traditional-age community college students define leadership based on their experiences?
- What relevance does leadership hold for traditional-age community college students?
- How does the community college environment impact leadership skill development?

The impact of the characteristics of being traditional-age and community college students on the participants’ understanding and development of leadership skills was the focus of the
primary research question. The study represents an exploration into the interaction of these three constructs. The sub-questions led to more profound explanations of how traditional-age community college students perceive leadership and develop the skills associated with leadership. The first sub-question directed much of the inquiry into how participants understood leadership in terms of the most meanings. Since the inquiry was based in the participants’ experiences, their definitions of leadership were key to an exploration into their perceptions of leadership and the development of leadership skills. The second sub-question provided opportunities for inquiry into the significance of leadership within the experiences of the participants. The final sub-question focused on the impact of the community college setting on participants’ leadership understanding and abilities.

**Summary and Organization of the Study**

The following doctoral thesis presents a theoretical framework utilizing the leadership identity development theory, which considers both the personal and social development of leadership skills and provided a lens to better understand the perceptions of the traditional-age student and the impact of the community college context. A review of current literature on the three constructs of traditional-age students, community college students, and student leadership skill development follows. Next, the research design for the study, including issues related to methodology, validity and credibility, and protection of human subjects, will be explained. Following the research design, the findings and analysis of those findings are included. Finally, the impact of the findings is discussed.

**Leadership Identity Development Theory**

A theory seeks to explain a phenomenon in a way that creates a mental model and challenges the thought process of the researcher. A theoretical framework provides the
researcher with structure and guidance in areas from defining key terms to developing a methodology to interpreting context (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). In qualitative research, a theoretical framework guides the study, providing a lens with which to view the study and situate the context (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). The intent of the qualitative emerging research process is to come to an understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012), which is enlightened by a theoretical framework.

The following section will describe the theoretical lens utilized to examine the problem of practice of the perception and development of leadership among traditional-age community college students. When considering an appropriate framework for exploring the phenomenon of traditional-age community college students’ leadership skill development, the leadership identity development theory provided guidance for this inquiry. The leadership identity development theory explains how students identify and understand their own leadership skills as well as what influences students’ development of leadership skills. The theory provides a conceptual framework to better understand how students perceive leadership as well as how they develop an understanding of leadership skills while attending community college.

The leadership identity development theory was developed as part of a grounded theory qualitative study (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005), which revealed a six-stage development process. The six stages of leadership development include awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identified, leader differentiated, generativity, and integration/synthesis. The progression through the steps begins with the recognition of the existence of leaders and continues with the understanding of leadership and the engagement in leadership as part of an individual’s identity (Komives et al., 2005).

The six stages of leadership development are described as follows:
• Awareness – characterized by the “early recognition that leaders exist” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 606).

• Exploration/Engagement – characterized by “intentional involvement, experiencing groups, and taking on responsibilities, though not generally in a positional leadership role” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 606).

• Leader Identified – characterized by the perception “that groups were comprised of leaders and followers” and the belief that “leaders were responsible for group outcomes” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 606).

• Leader Differentiated – characterized by the recognition “that anyone in the group could do leadership” and the awareness “that leadership was also a process between and among people” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 606).

• Generativity – characterized by an active commitment “to larger purposes and to the groups and individuals who sustained them” and an articulation of a “personal passion for what they did” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 607).

• Integration/Synthesis – characterized by “a time of continual, active engagement with leadership as a daily process – as part of a self-identity” as well as increase in “internal confidence” and “congruence and integrity” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 607).

As students transition from one stage to another, leadership experiences define their understanding and their engagement in the practice of leadership. Experiences in each stage include both thoughts about leadership and behaviors that exhibit a developing and changing viewpoint of leadership. The transitions between the stages are marked by a shift in thinking,
including a reflective consideration of the completed stage without the abilities required for the next stage (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006).

The six stages of leadership development provided the ideal framework for classifying both the level of current leadership identity as well as the movement through the stages for the traditional-age community college students who participated in this study. The stages were vital to understanding leadership development since the identification of a student within a stage indicated how the student perceived leadership. Additionally, explanations of how participants understood and engaged in leadership while in the community college context was indicative of the impact of that setting on leadership development.

Within the leadership identity development model, the development of leadership identity is treated as a process that is created by the interaction of the self with the group. The influence of the group provides contextual support for the creation and maturation of leadership skills (Komives et al., 2005). Therefore, the leadership identity development theory considers the development of leadership understanding and skills based on both self-identity and the identity of the group in which a student participates.

The impact of both the individual on the group and the group on the individual emphasizes the cyclical nature of the leadership identity development theory. Through participation in group processes, students learn both about themselves and the group, which, in turn, leads to a continued understanding of leadership through the engagement with others and the building of one’s own self-confidence. Considering leadership understanding and development in terms of the relational effect of influence was crucial to the understanding of leadership as well as the development of skills related to leadership among students.
Additional work published by the same research team indicated that the leadership identity development model provides an ideal intersection between student leadership skill development and relational leadership, since it considers the influence of others on the enhancement of a student’s leadership skills (Komives et al., 2006). This recognition that leadership occurs within a context was imperative to an understanding of how students at a community college perceive leadership. The context impacts what occurs in the different stages in the model as well as the ability to transition between stages (Komives et al., 2006).

The impact of context on leadership development is made clear through the use of the leadership identity development theory in different research environments. Qualitative research conducted with the leadership identity development theory includes studies on the impact and challenges of leading lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college student groups (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005) and identity-based campus organizations (Renn & Ozaki, 2010). Both studies incorporated concepts of leadership self-identity with relational leadership to better understand the experiences of student leaders based in a particular contextual setting. Additional research utilized the leadership identity development model to better understand the role that high school leadership experiences play in college student leadership skill development (Komives & Johnson, 2009). Information on the model published in practice-oriented literature aimed at student leadership development directors and other campus activities professionals suggests using the leadership identity development model to assist student leaders as they develop both relational and leadership skills and transition throughout the stages (Longerbeam, Komives, Owens, & Osteen, 2006; Ganio, 2011).

For this study, the leadership identity development theory offered a lens through which to understand how traditional-age community college students perceive leadership as well as their
own leadership skill development. The theory provided a framework to organize and conceptualize the study. The six steps of leadership development postulated by the model have clear explanations of the individual understandings of leadership, the development of the individual’s view of self as leader, and the influences of the group involved (Komives et al., 2006). The cyclical nature of the leadership identity development model contextualized the college student leadership experience by connecting the concepts of the individual, the group, and leadership understanding.

Of particular importance to understanding this problem of practice was situating the development of leadership understanding and skills within the community college setting. The leadership identity development theory gives particular credence to the context including the impact of the group on the individual’s understanding of leadership. This group impact on the individual served to explain how leadership is understood by students as well as how leadership skills are developed. While some community colleges have leadership development programs, those without such programs may not have any formal leadership development opportunities. Furthermore, students not participating in formal leadership training are still in need of leadership skills. It is within these contextual factors that traditional-age community college students in this study experienced movement among the stages of the leadership identity development model.

Furthermore, by considering the stage at which a traditional-age student enters college from high school, the model provided an even deeper contextual understanding of how traditional-age community college students develop leadership skills. Since the experiences a student has in high school impact leadership development while attending a community college (Komives & Johnson, 2009), the leadership identity development theory provided a way to trace
the evolution of a student’s leadership skills. Given that research indicates that leadership development is a lifelong process (Murphy & Johnson, 2011), the impact of the community college environment was indicated by the growth of leadership understanding and skills while a student is attending. As traditional-age students seek to develop the skills necessary to succeed either in the job market or as a university transfer student, development of leadership skills was indicated by movement among the stages.

This framework presented both a model to organize the inquiry as well as a pattern with which to analyze the leadership understanding and experiences of students. Utilizing the framework to organize inquiry included efforts to develop research questions and methodologies. To understand the problem of practice, the leadership identity development theory influenced how the research questions were approached as well as how interview questions were developed. The leadership identity development theory also provided guidance for the development of methodologies, including an interview protocol which investigated what experiences have influenced students’ leadership identity development.

The leadership identity development theory further served as an analysis tool, particularly in terms of the six stages in the theory’s model. By classifying students’ experiences into the six-stage model, ideas were cultivated about how traditional-age students’ leadership skills are being developed while attending community college. Furthermore, the ability to recognize movement among the stages isolated points of leadership understanding and development through points of transition for students. As a tool for analysis, the model also integrated the importance of the contextual influence on leadership development.

There are several reasons the theoretical framework of the leadership identity development theory provided ideal guidance for understanding leadership skill development
among traditional-age community college students. The leadership identity development theory approaches leadership as both a personal and a social construct which finds its meaning in the experiences of those who participate in leadership as well as the impact of the context upon the individual. Additionally, the leadership identity development theory recognizes the importance of personal change as a result of leadership. Finally, this theory seeks to create a structure to understand leadership as well as a framework to develop leadership skills.

The leadership identity development theory provided the best option for considering the development of leadership skills among traditional-age community college students. The stages in the leadership identity development theory offered a unique lens through which an investigation into the problem of practice was developed. The framework created by the leadership identity development theory enhanced the understanding of the perception of leadership among traditional-age community college students. As is evidenced by the previous description of the leadership identity development theory, it provided an ideal framework to study the understanding and development of leadership among traditional-age community college students. The following section will explore the literature available on the constructs of age, context, and leadership as they apply to the problem of practice.

**Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The ability to understand leadership and develop the skills to lead is increasingly important for college students as they prepare to seek employment and enter the workforce. It is essential to organizations seeking to hire college graduates that they are prepared for the expectations of the workplace and for potential promotion opportunities that require leadership abilities. The purpose of this study was to understand the perception of leadership and personal development of leadership skills among traditional-age students attending community college.
Current traditional-age students, generationally classified as Millennials, possess many of the traits that could help them develop leadership skills, such as being high-achieving and team-oriented. Alternatively, Millennials also exhibit traits that could inhibit the development of leadership skills, such as self-entitlement and underdeveloped interpersonal skills. Colleges have educated and organizations have hired older Millennials with mixed success in building on those traits with potential to encourage leadership skills.

As Millennial students engage in the collegiate environment, their perceptions of themselves as leaders and the opportunities to practice leadership both impact and are impacted by their context. Students of this generation continue to choose community colleges in growing numbers in order to seek academic transfer to a university or prepare for entrance into the workforce. Given that over half of current traditional-age students choose community colleges to begin their educational career, these colleges must become increasingly responsive to student needs.

The following review of current literature focuses on the three constructs prominent in this study – traditional-age students, the community college context, and student leadership development. Considering the intersection of these three constructs (see Figure 1), including the places of overlap and contradiction, provides insight into the areas of interest.

Figure 1 Interaction of Constructs
The purpose of this literature review goes beyond summarizing current knowledge to creating foundational knowledge to understand the problem of practice (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). The study was informed by surveying, interpreting, and analyzing available literature. In an effort to create such a foundation in the scholarship and current literature to understand the problem of practice described, an evaluative inquiry has been conducted.

In order to collect and analyze the existing scholarship for this literature review, several questions guided the inquiry. What characteristics of traditional-age students are pertinent to the development of leadership skills? What characteristics of the community college context impact student leadership development? What is currently known about college student leadership development? How can the synthesis of the literature on the constructs of traditional-age students, the community college context, and student leadership development inform the study?

The following review of literature is organized by considering each component of the study, including current traditional-age college students, the community college context, and student leadership skill development, followed by the implications for the analysis of scholarship.

**Traditional-age College Students**

As previously explained, currently enrolled traditional-age college students are generationally considered Millennials. In an effort to better understand the traits associated with Millennial generation students, research on both positive and negative generational traits can be considered. Howe & Strauss (2000) refer to Millennials as the Next Great Generation in landmark research in which they identify seven core traits: special, sheltered, confident, team oriented, achieving, pressured, and conventional. Work by the same authors follows Millennials’ impact on colleges (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Research indicates that generationally, Millennials...
are academically driven (Sax, 2003; Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007), technologically savvy (Elam et al., 2007; Wilson, 2004), and community minded (Williams, Beard, & Tanner, 2011). Compared to previous generations, Millennials are found to be more socially active (Sax, 2003) and confident (Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010). These positive attributes include traits such as team orientation and confidence that could contribute to the development of leadership skills among the members of the Millennial generation.

While some research focuses on the positive generational attributes of Millennials, other research emphasizes the problematic and negative traits many associate with this generation. Millennials are considered academically driven and confident; however, these traits are often associated with self-entitlement and narcissism in college students (Elmore, 2010; Lippmann, Bulanda, & Wagenaar, 2009; Twenge, 2006). Pre-college achievement among Millennial students is clouded by lowered academic standards, no-fail policies (Carifio & Carey, 2010), and declining academic commitment (Sax, 2003). Elmore (2010) finds that the stress associated with the expectation of high performance has left this generation overwhelmed and unable to deal with the pressure. Not coincidentally, rates of psychological distress among college students are increasing (Keup, 2008). High levels of technological connectedness have left Millennials with limited academic literacy (Bauerlein, 2009) and underdeveloped relationship skills (Elmore, 2010). While Millennial students have key traits to develop leadership skills, the negative manifestations of those traits, such as self-entitlement and weak interpersonal skills, may be the very things that prevent the development of leadership skills among members of the Millennial generation.

Millennials have generally participated in groups, but research indicates that the commitment and involvement required to develop leadership skills may be lacking. What
originally seemed like a surge in social and community activism by this generation has now been identified by some researchers as resulting in little follow-through. Sax (2003) explains that a generational increase in volunteer participation peaks the year before entering college, but trends show a general decrease in commitment to social activism. Many Millennial students have experienced community service as part of their high school requirements, but fail to translate an understanding of and desire for community involvement into actions (Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008). Twenge (2006) points to increased apathy and cynicism that promote a victim mentality and alienation among the members of this generation. From these explanations, a need for engaging this generation is clear, but methods to keep them engaged are less clear.

Generally, parents of Millennials take an aggressive role in their children’s education, serving as planners and supervisors in many areas of their lives well into the college years (Elam et al., 2007; Monaco & Martin, 2009). The same population Howe and Strauss (2007) refer to as sheltered and special, Elmore (2010) calls overprotected and overserved. For example, scholarly research aimed at adapting academic and student services to Millennial student needs includes information on coping with increasing parental involvement and expectations (Keeling, 2003; Keup, 2008; Williams et al., 2011). As a result of intense parental attention before college, Millennial students tend to seek out attention and communication more intensely from professors than previous generations (Varallo, 2008). Colleges have made adjustments in areas of academic (Lippmann et al., 2009; Stewart, 2009) and student services (Keeling, 2003; Keup, 2008) to accommodate both positive and negative traits associated with the current generation of traditional-age college students.

As Millennials attend college and move into careers, the generational traits impact both collegiate and workplace cultures. Millennials already in the workforce continually create new
trends impacting everything from management to technology (Winograd & Hais, 2011). The Millennial generation traits of high achievement continue into career as advancement, rapid promotions, and pay increases are identified as top employment priorities (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). Just as colleges continue to make adjustments to manage Millennial traits, multi-generational workplaces are reinventing processes and expectations around this generation (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010; Tulgan, 2009). Research indicates that Millennials in workplace leadership roles favor the use of technology and collaboration, but more research in the area of Millennial leadership styles is necessary to truly understand the implications of Millennial generation traits (Murray, 2011). As can be ascertained from Millennials already in the workplace, this generation’s traits may impact their abilities to understand and develop leadership skills.

The research indicates that the Millennial generation traits exhibited by traditional-age community college students impact how they might understand and develop leadership skills. For example, although traditional-age students are high-achieving, they are also self-entitled. Millennials are accustomed to working as part of a team, but overly attentive parents often prevent them from taking on leadership roles. This scholarship indicates that, while the potential exists for Millennials to be excellent leaders, they are not often given the opportunities consistent with the development of leadership skills. Furthermore, the ability for community colleges to expose students to leadership opportunities may be impacted by Millennial characteristics.

**The Community College Context**

In addition to understanding traditional-age students as members of the Millennial generation, identification as students at community colleges provides insight into their potential for leadership skill understanding and development. Community colleges are the choice of
approximately half of all first time college students, (Milliron & Wilson, 2004) many of whom are seeking technical training to enter the workforce or transfer courses to move on to a university.

Students at community colleges defy demographic stereotypes; however, there are some student-types that attend community colleges more consistently. Community colleges are the choice of many underrepresented student-types and serve large numbers of students of non-traditional age and first-generation students (Gibson & Slate, 2010). The low cost and proximity to home draw increasing numbers of students (THECB, 2010), including traditional-age Millennials, who are described by the Rappaport Family Foundation as significant to the community college population (Ruiz-Healy, 2013). For all of the diverse groups of students, time spent at community colleges can provide engagement that promotes the skills necessary for success beyond college (Milliron & Wilson, 2004).

Student understanding and development of leadership skills can be impacted by several aspects of the context of the community college, including the nontraditional student types, a lack of upperclassmen, and the opportunities community colleges provide to academically-challenged and first-generation students. Community college students could be considered nontraditional based on several different types of characteristics according to Kim, Sax, Lee, and Hagedorn (2010). One approach considers nontraditional status based on age, particularly students over 25 years of age, or on length of delay between completing high school and entering college, typically more than four years. Other approaches include part-time enrollment, full-time employment, having dependents other than a spouse, or being a single parent. Utilizing these and other student characteristics, approximately seventy-five percent of community college students would qualify as nontraditional.
Given the high number of students in the community college context that could be considered nontraditional, community colleges are likely to be affected by this phenomenon. As colleges react to growing numbers of students, traditional and nontraditional, provisions made to accommodate these students may mean a reallocation of resources toward services and activities more geared to nontraditional students. Whether it is on-campus child care or changes in class scheduling to accommodate employed students, all community college students are impacted by the growing number of nontraditional students.

One example of the impact of nontraditional student characteristics on the community college context is the prevalence of commuter students, which impacts the ability of community colleges to help students develop leadership skills. Miller, Pope, and Steinman (2005) report that community college students are not typically involved on campus. Community college students tend to study off campus, lessening interaction with peers and college personnel and encouraging more dependence on family (Miller et al., 2005). Research indicates that commuter students dependent on family report significantly lower leadership self-efficacy than their independent commuter student counterparts (Dugan et al., 2008). Although community college students utilize on-campus resources, such as technology, to their benefit (Miller et al., 2005), the lack of engagement among the members of this generation puts them at a higher risk for attrition (Gibson & Slate, 2010). Students who commute to community college campuses to take classes are less likely to become engaged in campus activities and, therefore, are less likely to assume a leadership role within a campus organization or program. The lack of participation then prevents the practice of leadership as a component of leadership skill development.

Furthermore, since the purpose of community colleges largely focuses on the first two years of college, collegiate leadership development among community college students can be
considered in the primary stages. Research on college student leadership skill development focuses on upperclassmen, which community colleges typically lack due simply to the one or two year structure of certificates, associate degrees, and freshman and sophomore level transfer courses. The concentration of student leadership research on upperclassmen through student activities (Ferrari, Cowman, & Milner, 2010), varsity athletics (Grandzol et al., 2010), and even graduating seniors (Posner, 2009) excludes community college students. In recent years, some attention has been paid to the experiences of community college student leaders (Brady et al., 2010; Jain, 2010; Miles, 2010). Although 45% of students completing degrees at four-year institutions were previously enrolled at two-year institutions, the available scholarship focuses on the leadership development among university students (Ruiz-Healy, 2013).

Finally, opportunities for leadership development and practice may be limited because of the academic and social preparation of many community college students. One of the primary missions of community colleges is the preparation of underprepared and disadvantaged learners for college-level work and eventual completion of a workforce program or transfer of courses to a university (Milliron & Wilson, 2004; THECB, 2010). While community colleges can provide opportunities for extra-curricular student leadership skill development through student life (Frost, Strom, Downey, Schultz, & Holland, 2010), more academic options, such as honors programs (Brady et al., 2010), are often unavailable to students in developmental education. Research indicates that disadvantaged student groups such as first generation students show the same advantages after two years of community college education as students with college educated parents (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003), so there is potential for leadership skill development among underprepared and disadvantaged student groups. Developing leadership as an element of the cultural capital necessary for students to succeed as
they transfer to four year universities or enter the workforce is an imperative part of fulfilling the community college mission.

The same characteristics that make community college students unique make the development of leadership skills and abilities for those students unique as well. The impact of the context of the community college on leadership development is in many ways dependent upon the students who attend community colleges. Whether it is the prevalence of commuters who are less engaged on campus or it is a lack of upperclassmen to model leadership behavior, community colleges are shaped by their students. The ability of community colleges to help students develop leadership skills can potentially be diminished by the very students who need the skills. Yet as the first stop in higher education for many students, community colleges are charged with preparing students for the next step in their educational or employment journey.

Leadership Skill Development among College Students

In addition to considering the characteristics of traditional-age and community college students, research on leadership skill development can be examined. Leadership development is defined in the research as “every form of growth or stage of development that promotes, encourages, and assists in one’s leadership potential” (Eich, 2008, p. 179-180).

Literature suggests that the primary focus of student leadership research is based in four-year university settings. An analysis of selected texts finds information available about the influences of leadership opportunities prior to college attendance, leadership skill development at community colleges, leadership skill development at all college levels, and the implications for leadership skill development for students and colleges. While the focus of the problem of practice is community colleges, investigation into all areas of college student leadership skill
Influences of Leadership Opportunities before College. As suggested by the leadership identity development theory (Komives & Johnson, 2009), students’ leadership skill development in college may be impacted by previous leadership opportunities. These previous leadership involvements include all of those experiences leading up to opportunities available to community college student leadership development. Murphy and Johnson (2011) advocate the validity of the study of an entire lifespan of leadership development in order to understand the development needs of adults. This research indicates that early development factors, such as genetics, temperament, birth order, and parenting styles, can impact an individual’s leadership development as early as the preschool years. Furthermore, education, sports, and practice serve to further develop leadership skills prior to college attendance.

The influences of high school and generational experiences provide an indication of leadership development potential in students. First, high school students are more likely to attend college, across all demographics, if they participate in leadership activities in their high schools. The impact of high school leadership activities to influence collegiate leadership increases among Hispanic students whose first language is not English, especially if they are attending a two-year college (Lozano, 2008). Komives and Johnson (2009) found that while high school leadership opportunities contribute to continuing leadership self-efficacy, high school students involved in too many organizations did not see the same results. They hypothesize that when students are involved in too many organizations, they are unable to fully develop skills in any one particular area.
Generationally, current traditional-age students come to college with experience in a wide array of extra-, co-, and non-curricular activities. This generation, while valuing teamwork and achievement, has also been stretched thin with involvement (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Research may indicate that while they are accustomed to participating in many activities, leading has been a skill they have been too busy to refine. While experiences prior to college may influence an individual’s leadership development, students attending community colleges are further impacted by the opportunities or lack thereof available within that context.

**Student Leadership Opportunities at Community Colleges.** Student leadership skill development among community college students is less represented in current literature than student leadership skill development at four-year universities. However, research does indicate positive implications of student leadership development among community college students.

Community colleges serve students in technical programs for workforce preparation and academic programs which translate to the first two years of collegiate credit. As explained previously, community college students often face challenges ranging from preparation to engagement which can create disadvantages. Urso and Sygielski (2007) promote a view of opportunity within the community college setting, leading to enhanced engagement and leadership skill development. Once enrolled, students at community colleges encounter opportunities for leadership development, including leadership development programs, student government associations, interest- and identity-related clubs and associations, and religious, civic, and social organizations (Urso & Sygielski, 2007). Participating in leadership development programs can help community college students increase self-confidence, self-awareness, and understanding of personal identity (Lloyd, 2012).
Among the research on student leadership development, several options can provide leadership development and practice for community college students. One example of leadership opportunity available at some community colleges is within an honors program, which allows students to mentor and lead by example (Brady et al., 2010). Although some community college students are from traditionally underrepresented student groups or are academically underprepared, opportunities for student leadership exist in several forms at some two-year colleges. Research indicates that student leadership can provide personal growth opportunities for women student leaders of color (Jain, 2010). Furthermore, clubs dedicated to individuals with unique challenges address concerns for disadvantaged students while allowing them to develop relationships with other challenged students and to cultivate leadership skills (Resendes Chinn, 2009).

Miles (2010) shows that student government organizations serve as a way for students to become involved on campus and develop decision-making and problem-solving abilities in addition to other leadership skills. Students involved in student government organizations at both the four- and two-year collegiate level report that transitioning to leadership roles can be difficult as they discover how to lead and handle responsibility (Miles, 2010/2011), but leadership roles in these organizations help students learn from experience, try new things, and develop communication skills (Miles, 2011). These opportunities are particularly important as student government is often available to all students enrolled at community colleges and can promote both engagement and leadership.

While the above information does examine student leadership development opportunities at community colleges, the limited nature of this research speaks to a lack of scholarship on the topic. This deficiency in the literature, described in a report produced by the Rappaport Family
Foundation (Ruiz-Healy, 2013), can in turn impact the practice of student leadership development in the community college context. Practitioners working with community college students have a limited capacity to build practice based in scholarship. Throughout the search of current literature in the community college context, it remains unclear whether the lack of literature about student leadership skill development at community colleges is a result of the lack of leadership skill development in this particular environment or a result of neglecting the community college context for research in leadership development.

**Student Leadership Opportunities at all College Levels.** The amount of literature focused on the concept of student leadership skill development at four-year universities is more plentiful and advanced, given the presence of upperclassmen, time for students to mature, and even varsity athletics. Since these experiences may or may not be provided at two-year colleges, they offer a source of comparison for student leadership skill development opportunities between two- and four-year colleges.

At many universities, leadership development programs give students the chance to improve leadership skills and knowledge through training, practice, and maturity (Connaughton et al., 2003; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Gehret, 2010). Student leadership development programs are available as interdisciplinary programs as well as within majors or extra-curricular activities. These kinds of programs are observed by Eich (2008) to have a positive effect on student learning and leadership development. Cress et al. (2001) found that every student participating in these types of leadership programs can enhance their leadership abilities.

Although these types of programs are growing in number, Rosch and Kusel (2010) suggest that there is a great deal of ambiguity in the field and that higher education institutions
should be more deliberate with student leadership development. Furthermore, phenomenological research conducted with student leaders of color in leadership programs found that the student leaders did not find their experiences to be validated by the programs in which they participated (Arminio et al., 2000).

One example from existing literature is a curricular-based leadership program within a business major. Students completing a leadership development program through a business school in their first year of college exhibited greater leadership behaviors in their senior year and greater leadership behaviors than their peers who did not participate in the program (Posner, 2009). These results indicate positive implications for four years of experience in a leadership program; however, in order for leadership development programs to impact Millennial students, research indicates that leadership must be taught with experiential learning strategies that are meaningful to Millennials (Arensdorf & Andenoro, 2009).

Leadership experiences required as part of a student’s major, typically in upper-level courses at four-year universities, also provide students with leadership skill development opportunities. Several studies present data on the impact of leadership studies within academic majors. For instance, researchers find that students’ leadership self-efficacy and abilities were positively impacted by participation in an event management course (Marcketti et al., 2011).

Additionally, senior nursing students at a university participated in community outreach through practicing leadership in a leadership development module (Cox & Miranda, 2003). Efforts are also documented to include leadership skill development within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs through peer-learning programs (Micari et al., 2010), course design (Sankar et al., 2010), and experiential learning (Cox et al., 2010).
Peer leadership programs, available at some colleges to underclassmen, also allow students to gain the tools necessary for leadership through their college career and beyond (Voorhees & Petkas, 2011). At some colleges, undergraduate students teach or tutor fellow students, sometimes individually and sometimes in larger groups (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). These types of peer leadership opportunities allow students to gain experience, increase commitment, and sustain student ownership of college programs (Haber, 2011).

Additional opportunities also exist at the university setting for students to develop leadership skills. Experiences are available in Greek organizations, as well as religious, academic, and areas of personal interest (Logue, Hutchens, & Hector, 2005). Identity-based peer groups allow students to get comfortable in an environment before attempting leadership positions, allowing them to learn more about both leadership and social identity (Renn & Ozaki, 2010). Research conducted with undergraduate students in a campus recreation sports program discovered several themes, including balancing roles as well as developing skills such as problem solving, decision making, and communication (Hall et al., 2008).

Intercollegiate athletics also provide leadership opportunities to some students. Although merely participating in sports does not necessarily encourage leadership development, serving as a team captain, which is normally done as an upperclassman at a four-year university, does give students a chance to learn and practice leadership skills (Grandzol et al., 2010).

The key to much of the available scholarship centers on the tenet that student engagement positively impacts capacity of students to develop leadership skills and develop leadership self-efficacy (Hu, 2011). The research available on student leadership skill development at all levels of college indicates that the process is generally a positive one for students, improving communication skills, providing practical experience, and instilling confidence. The review of
the literature also suggests a variety of means for students to learn about and practice leadership skills. However, evidence reveals the majority of opportunities exist primarily at university settings.

**Implications**

By considering the current body of literature on traditional-age students, the community college context, and leadership skill development, it becomes evident that a gap exists where the three constructs interact. While these three constructs have each been investigated individually or in pairs, the combination of all three opened a unique area of inquiry for this study.

While the literature informs work on each of the areas individually, limited information is available with the goal of enhancing the opportunities for traditional-age community college students to understand and develop the leadership skills necessary to succeed. This analysis of current scholarship reveals that this study was vital to investigate the perceptions and development of leadership skills among traditional-age community college students.

**Summary**

The preceding literature review covered the three primary constructs of traditional-age students, the community college context, and leadership skill development investigated in this study. The key traits of traditional-age students and the challenges within the community college context impact the development of student leadership skills. Understanding how Millennial generation traits impact leadership understanding and development within the community college context is key to preparing students for the challenges they will face upon transferring to a university or entering the workforce. The following section will describe the methodology for this qualitative study.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The purpose of this interpretive study was to explore the perception of leadership and personal development of leadership skills among traditional-age students attending community college. The following chapter will include a discussion of qualitative research and the general induction approach utilized for the study. A description of the study site and participants will follow. Positionality, data collection, and analysis will be explained next. Finally, study limitations, trustworthiness, and the protection of human subjects for the study will be described.

Methodology

Since the research questions for the study focused on the perceptions of leadership among traditional-age community college students, a qualitative approach provided the necessary design to examine insights on the phenomenon by exploring the issue at a personal level. Qualitative research honors the experiences of the participants and allows their words to define their own reality (Creswell, 2012). In this study, traditional-age community college students’ words interpreted their perception of leadership and experiences developing leadership skills. By conducting this study with a qualitative design, leadership development among traditional-age community college students was considered from the perspective of the study participants, acknowledging the reality in which each participant has come to understand leadership.

The paradigm that drove the qualitative inquiry is described by Creswell (2007) as social constructivism and by Burrell and Morgan (2001) as interpretivism. This paradigm relies on the participants’ views of the phenomenon being examined. Understanding is created by participants explaining their own experiences and world view as a method of interpreting their own social reality. Asking participants to bring meaning to their own experiences allows the researcher to make sense of the context and the participants (Creswell, 2007), both of which are
key constructs in this study. In conveying their own understanding of leadership, participants in
this study both constructed and communicated meaning. Through these rich, thick descriptions
(Merriam, 2002), the researcher was able to interpret the phenomenon according to the
participants (Creswell, 2007); in this case, how traditional-age community college students
understand and develop leadership skills.

This study was conducted utilizing a general induction approach. Thomas (2006)
explains that the purposes for using a general induction approach to collect and analyze data
include summarizing raw data, generating clear connections between the data and the research
questions, and creating a structure with which to understand the phenomenon described in the
data. A general induction approach is meant to allow the findings of the research to emerge from
themes in the data, moving from the more specific to the general (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). General
induction research and data analysis is used commonly in the health and social science
disciplines, but provides insight into many different fields of study (Thomas, 2006). The effort
to look for patterns among rich, thick descriptions to better understand a phenomenon makes the
general inductive approach common to many fields.

Individual life experiences are the primary source of data for qualitative research
(Polkinghorne, 2005), which, in the case of a general inductive approach means that participants
and their descriptions of their own experiences provide the data for the study. As a method of
interpreting participants’ experiences, general induction relies on the words of the participants as
the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this study, the data collection was conducted through
interviews with participants whose experiences included the primary constructs of traditional-age
students, the community college context, and opportunities for leadership skills development. It
was through the participants’ explanations of their perceptions of these constructs that their meaning is created.

In order to understand experiences within a particular context, general induction calls for the researcher to organize participants’ descriptions and narratives into a more understandable structure through the use of data analysis. Inductive data analysis is primarily the practice of identifying patterns (Merriam, 2002) through the use of coding for themes. The use of the interview transcripts as the primary data source required coding to be an ongoing process as various codes, themes, and models were identified, processed, and understood by the researcher.

In this study, a general inductive approach enabled the researcher to understand leadership development among traditional-age community college students through the sharing of their experiences. The meta-understanding created by utilizing general induction involved both the participants’ understanding of leadership and their own skill development as well as their understanding of why and how they perceive leadership as they do. This ability to allow participants to both share and interpret their own meaningful experiences put the emphasis on this data as the source of knowledge for the study. Furthermore, as the use of participants’ words as the data opened the study to interpretive understanding, the focus on the constructs of traditional-age students, community college context, and leadership skills with the use of the leadership identity development theory framework provided boundaries to anchor the study while still allowing the words of the participants to guide the inquiry.

**Site and Participants**

The research site for this study was a community college in Texas where the researcher is a professor. The college consists of two campuses, of which the primary campus served as the research site. Residential students who participate in a variety of campus activities compose the
dominant student type at the primary campus. Campus activities include intercollegiate athletics, performing arts, and various other opportunities for engagement. While this site does have several opportunities for student engagement, it does not provide a formal leadership development program. The gaps in the literature are primarily based in students within the community college context not participating in a formal leadership development program, which describes the students at the proposed study site.

Since the leadership experiences in question center on context and population, those are the primary considerations for participants. Criterion sampling included traditional-age Millennials attending a community college. Millennial is the generational designation for individuals born between 1982 and 2002, also known as Generation Y or iY (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials are currently anywhere from their early teens to early thirties in age, which includes non-traditional age college students, both younger, dual-credit high school, and older, returning students. This study only included traditional-age community college students between the ages of 18 and 21, since non-traditional students, either younger than 18 or older than 21, may have had leadership experiences primarily impacted by environments other than the community college, such as high school, workplace, or military. Students in their second year at a community college were decided to likely have enough leadership development experiences to provide ample data through an interview.

Beyond criterion sampling, maximal variation sampling (Creswell, 2012) was the sampling strategy utilized to choose participants to understand perspectives from narratives on leadership skill development from a variety of different types of students for this study. As Patton (1990) explains, when study participants’ experiences may be very different, maximal variation sampling seeks to find valuable and meaningful commonalities among that variety.
Maximal variation revealed compelling stories with shared experiences as well as important differences among diverse types of students.

Several participant characteristics were identified as appropriate criteria to create a maximal variation of study participants. A varied sample that included males and females as well as diverse ethnic representation was important to gain a wider perspective of community college student leadership development. Also, at the proposed study site, student groups based in extra-curricular activities and personal interests provided sampling categories to reach maximal variation. Traditional-age students who participated in intercollegiate athletics (volleyball, soccer, football, basketball, softball, baseball, and athletic training), performing arts (band, dance, theatre, and cheerleading), student government, and the honor society, as well as commuters who do not participate in extra-curricular activities, were considered for sampling. Age and community college attendance were the primary criteria, and previous leadership experience was not considered.

The research process began with choosing and seeking permission from the study site. Once the site approved the study, the researcher sought and received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University (Appendix A). After these approvals, the process of recruiting participants began. In order to avoid any ethical issues related to students as a possible vulnerable population, only students who were not in the courses taught by the researcher at the time of the interviews were recruited to participate in the study.

Since maximal variation was a priority, the researcher sought to engage participants from each organized activity. Access to a population that would support a maximal variation sampling was accomplished by a series of gatekeepers who are familiar with students through extra-curricular activities. Students who were familiar to the researcher were identified as
potential participants. Additionally, coaches, directors, advisors, and faculty members were able
to identify potential participants that would provide diverse perspectives on student leadership
development. As participants fitting the sampling criteria were identified by the researcher,
personal contact was made by e-mail (Appendix B) to explain the study and ask them to agree to be interviewed. As participants agreed to be interviewed, arrangements were made via e-mail and text messages to set up a time convenient for each participant to be interviewed.

Table 1 provides a list of participants using their pseudonyms, the activity for which they were contacted, and any additional activity participated in while attending community college. The list is organized by order of interview. Of the possible student organizations from which to sample participants, two organizations did not have any students who fit the criteria for the study. No student was chosen from the agriculture judging team since there were none that fit the sampling criteria as all were in their first year of community college attendance. Additionally, no students were interviewed from the student government association because of limited participation. All active members were either over the required sampling criteria age of 21 or were currently students in the researcher’s courses.

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<th>Table 1 Participant Information</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participant Pseudonym</td>
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<td>Katherine</td>
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Participants’ privacy was protected throughout the process of arranging the interviews and conducting the interviews. Interviews were conducted in a private room at the college library. As participants agreed to be interviewed, a date and time were agreed upon, and the location was sent via email or text message. Text messages were also sent as reminders the day before or the morning of the interview. At the beginning of each interview, the research process and the rights of the participants were explained. The researcher clarified what participants were agreeing to and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant signed the informed consent document (Appendix C) before the interview began, and a copy was made for each interviewee.

Criterion and maximal variation sampling provided the researcher with the appropriate variety of participants to attend to the research questions associated with this study. Thirteen participants provided ample data to investigate the leadership development among traditional-age community college students with a general induction approach. There was a variety of understanding, but also similarity among the participants’ responses, which led to themes among the data from the interviews.

**Positionality**

A basic characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher serves as the primary instrument for both data collection and data analysis (Merriam, 2002). As both the collector and interpreter of the data, a researcher’s experiences and expectations are relevant to understanding that data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher for this study holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in communication. She has taught communication courses at universities and community colleges for close to two decades, working with a variety of types of students during that time in both academic and extra-curricular capacities. Additionally, she has worked in
administrative roles, including course and program level assessment, college-wide accreditation, and institutional effectiveness, all of which gave the researcher a wider viewpoint of the expectations and requirements for a multitude of college activities and services.

These experiences provided the researcher with knowledge of the community college context and the students who attend there, in addition to creating some of the questions that led to this study. Generational changes and the need for leadership development were both issues initiated by interactions with the researcher’s students within the context of the research site and other college environments. Although leadership is a topic sometimes incorporated into communication studies, the researcher did not conduct leadership training or advise a leadership program. However, having worked with students in extra-curricular settings, including an honor society and student activities, the researcher has developed a special interest in the ability of students to lead.

Since this inquiry was based in the experiences of the traditional-age community college student participants, the values and biases of both the researcher and participants impacted the collective understanding created by their responses. Identifying the subjective possibilities of the human as the research instrument, it was important to recognize the possibility of bias while still appreciating the interpretive nature of qualitative design. Honoring the perspective of each participant was the primary goal of the researcher. Within the interpretive approach, the methodologies prepared the researcher and her results for interpretation while still providing validity to the findings.

As Rubin and Rubin (2012) explain, individuals with a personal connection to the researcher are more likely to be motivated to participate in the study by sharing their experiences. Furthermore, students who see the potential for the researcher to serve as an
advocate for them are likely to feel more comfortable disclosing their experiences (Creswell, 2012). As a professor at a community college, knowledge of the context and the students provided a useful initial understanding of the participants which assisted in sampling, access, and data collection. This understanding also assisted the researcher in interpreting the results and finding meaning in those interpretations.

Several personal and professional experiences created beliefs and biases about leadership among college students. Having participated in leadership as a college student and as a young professional, the researcher believed that leadership was crucial to the success of students both in college and the workplace. That belief was confirmed by Hu (2011), Hu and Wolniak (2010), and Urso and Sygielski (2007). Furthermore, having taught at community colleges for most of her teaching career, the researcher valued the community college student experience while still recognizing the potential shortcomings within that context. Finally, the descriptions of Millennials by Howe and Strauss (2000, 2007) mirrored the experiences of the researcher and her students as generational changes impacted her teaching practice. Even with these biases, the researcher entered this study with intellectual curiosity and the ability to put findings above personal biases. As the study participants shared their perspectives and experiences, the researcher developed new understandings and interpreted the data with these understandings at the forefront.

Data Collection

The collection of data was accomplished through thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. The interviews were composed of a series of open-ended questions from an interview protocol, which served to guide the interview process, as suggested by Creswell (2012). Interviews for this study used a protocol (Appendix D) with a series of core
questions and potential probing questions used for the purpose of eliciting participants’
descriptions about their leadership development experiences. The collection of data through
interviews is key to a general induction analytical approach as the meaning created by the
descriptions of participants is the primary data source (Merriam, 2002). Interviews were
scheduled to last approximately one hour, with some being as short as 15 minutes and others
taking close to an hour, depending on the experiences and descriptions of the participants. The
interviews were conducted in a library conference room at the research site. Interview
transcripts were given to each participant after their interview to allow them to be sure the
descriptions were accurate and complete.

The interviews were recorded using a handheld recording device which created an audio
file for each interview. The recording process and plans for confidential data storage were
explained to each participant as part of the informed consent process. As suggested by Creswell
(2007), the researcher also took brief notes of reflections, summaries, and conclusions as part of
the interview process.

Participants’ interview data were confidential, and participants were provided anonymity
throughout the data collection, storage, and analysis. Data in the form of audio files and
interview notes were stored at the researcher’s home. Electronic versions were stored in a
password-protected computer, and paper copies were kept in a locked cabinet. The interviews
were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Audio files were made available to the
transcriptionist as a shared file to which only the researcher and the transcriptionist had access.
Participants were assigned a pseudonym, and the key to the participants’ names was kept in the
locked cabinet at the researcher’s home. The researcher was the only person with access to the
information that would have identified the participants through the data collection process.
Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and checked by participants, they were read over several times by the researcher to enable an in-depth understanding of the data as suggested by Elo and Kyngas (2008). This reading allowed the researcher to become acquainted with the data and develop meaning within each participant’s experiences and perceptions. Thirteen interview transcripts provided substantial data, all of which had layers of meaning, particularly based in the experiences of the participants and the context of the research site. These preliminary readings allowed both familiarity and reflection by the researcher, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), and began the data analysis process.

Thomas (2006) explains that the process of inductive analysis is one based in the coding of the raw data to seek both commonalities as well as important differences. The key to this coding is in allowing “research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). In order to accomplish this analysis, the interview transcripts were uploaded into MaxQDA software program for coding.

Saldana (2013) describes a code as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). For this study, data was coded first with an initial coding process and, secondarily, with a focused coding process. Initial coding breaks down the data into parts with provisional codes, and focused coding categorizes the most significant initial codes (Saldana, 2013). These initial codes were words or phrases which broke down the text into segments of meaning. From there, significant codes were clustered into categories and themes, as described by Thomas (2006), in a focused coding process. Areas of similarities among data codes as well
as those different from the others were identified and utilized to create categories and themes which represent areas of corresponding and overlapping meaning within the data related to leadership understanding, development, and experiences.

After the initial and focused coding was completed, the researcher utilized the codes, categories, and themes to complete the descriptions of the participants’ perceptions and experiences of leadership development. From the coding process, the general induction analytical approach identifies and describes the themes relevant to the research questions (Thomas, 2006) to report the findings. Thick description, including participant quotes, was used to describe participants’ perceptions of leadership development.

**Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is the generalizability to other populations and contexts given that this study was conducted with only traditional-age community college students, most of whom were affiliated with specific organizations. However, the sample size, which included several different student types does provide some insight into different types of populations.

Additionally, Creswell (2007) points out the importance of clarifying the researcher’s position for the reader to explain its possible impact on the study. Since qualitative research includes interpretation of the data by the researcher, it is important to recognize any researcher bias to assist the reader in understanding the decisions made in the analysis process. As a professor at the proposed study site, the researcher’s experience with the participant population provided additional insight into some of their attitudes, values, and behaviors, but might also have created biases about the topic, context, and population of the study. Through objective inquiry and intentional meaning seeking, the researcher was able to undertake the research
focused on the research questions and the goals of the study. By orienting the reader to the
to the experiences of the researcher, the impact of the researcher’s experience with the participant
population on data analysis is better understood. Member checking, an external audit, and using
participants’ words in the analysis also minimized the voice and bias of the researcher as the
participants’ interpretations of their own experiences were placed as the focus of the study.

**Trustworthiness**

Validation of the data analysis for this study was carried out in several forms. Member
checking (Creswell, 2012; Thomas, 2006) was conducted by providing each participant with the
transcript of his or her interview to inspect the data for accuracy and to ensure that their
descriptions were complete and realistic. This validity check can benefit the researcher and the
study, but also the participants as they continue to learn from the communicating of their own
experiences (Bloom, 2002). Additionally, an external audit by an individual with knowledge of
the participant population offers trustworthiness and validity to a study’s findings (Creswell,
2012). For this study, a former faculty member at the study site was asked to assess the findings
of the researcher based on knowledge of the participant demographic and context. This peer
review found the findings to be consistent with the reviewer’s knowledge of the sampling group
and the context of the research site. Finally, participants’ experiences relayed in rich, thick
description add validity by allowing the researcher and readers to connect to the data and
findings (Creswell, 2007). Data analysis and reporting of the findings included quotes from
participant interviews. By reporting the findings through the words of the participants, the
validity of the researcher’s findings were effectively supported (Merriam, 2002) for the reader.
Protection of Human Subjects

The protection of the human subjects on this study was of utmost importance to the researcher. The study design required the researcher to interview traditional-age community college students in order to conduct a general induction analysis. Several ethical issues related to this study were considered, including participant anonymity and informed consent by participants. Permission to study the participants as described was granted by the site chosen for the study and the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at Northeastern University. The importance of participant confidentiality was upheld in the proposed study. As part of the IRB approval process, procedures were followed to protect participants’ anonymity and confidentiality. Among these procedures was the use of pseudonyms in the place of participants’ names. All identifying information was secured at the researcher’s home in a password-protected computer and locked cabinet.

Informed consent was obtained from participants to help them fully understand both the intent and content of the research being conducted. The informed consent process included an explanation of how participants’ confidentiality was protected, as suggested by Creswell (2007). Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the right to withdraw from the study at any time, the right to anonymity throughout the research process, the potential benefits of an enhanced understanding of the subject, and the potential for administrative advocacy at the beginning of each interview. Participants were asked to sign an understanding of these rights and given a copy of these rights. Every effort to respect the participants’ rights and the research site throughout the interactions was attempted by the researcher.

It must be recognized that since the researcher serves as a professor at the study site, there was the potential for power imbalances to exist between the researcher and the study
participants (Creswell, 2012). However, only including participants who were not taking classes with the researcher at the time of the study removed the possibility of a power imbalance based on any potential for coercion or undue influence. Creswell (2007) points out that as a qualitative study, participants have control over the interview and research process, which allows them to make choices about whether or not to participate as well as what to disclose. Also, acquiring a stronger understanding of traditional-age community college student leadership development at this particular site created the potential for advocacy for their needs as students. This benefit was explained to the participants as part of the informed consent process. As Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest, every effort was made to treat participants ethically by showing them respect, honoring promises regarding confidentiality, removing pressure for participation, and causing no harm as a result of participation in the study.

**Conclusion**

This study was designed with a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm. Criterion and maximal variation sampling were utilized to select traditional-age community college students to participate at the research site. The interviews produced data in the form of the participants’ own words and perceptions, which was analyzed with a general induction approach. Themes developed as a result of initial and focused coding. The study participants’ own words informed the researcher and created a better understanding of their perceptions of leadership and their experiences of leadership skill development. The researcher sought validity through member checking, an external audit, and the use of rich, thick description in the reporting of the findings. Participants were protected through a series of measures, including an informed consent process, anonymity of the participants, and careful storage of the study data.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of leadership and personal development of leadership skills among traditional-age students attending community college. Analysis of data collected through interviews generated two themes: Defining Leadership and Developing Leadership. Each theme encompasses several categories. Defining Leadership is composed of Leadership Identity, Influence, Qualities of Effective Leaders, and Qualities of Ineffective Leaders. Developing Leadership includes the Impact of Others, the Impact of Personal Experiences, and the Perceptions of Personal Leadership Development. This chapter will discuss each of the themes and categories with examples from the interview data.

Defining Leadership

Each of the participants in the study responded to interview questions with answers that included not only what leadership is to them, but how they see it in others and how they apply the same principles in their own lives. Through their responses, participants indicated an emerging definition of what leadership is, not only in their own experience, but also recognizing it in the examples of others. These explanations provide insight into how traditional-age community college students understand leadership and the relevance it has for their development.

As these students discussed leadership, they recognized leaders in their lives as well as experiences they have had that gave them an understanding of leadership. As part of the discovery process of the interview, participants described examples and experiences in terms of the impact on their own lives and leadership identity. Although one interview question specifically asked participants to define leadership, each participant’s definition of leadership expanded as they discussed their examples and experiences. The theme of Defining Leadership
developed as a result of the participants’ continual discovery process which occurred during the interviews.

While not all participants perceived leadership to be defined in the same way, all of the participants discussed ways in which they understood leadership. Additionally, participants had differing viewpoints on what makes leaders effective or ineffective. Finally, participants responded to their own leadership in distinctive ways in terms of development and relevance.

Participants’ perceptions of leadership included defining leadership in terms of how leaders are identified, the influence created and exerted by leadership, and the qualities of effective and ineffective leaders. Therefore, the four categories under the theme of Defining Leadership are Leadership Identity, Influence, the Qualities of Effective Leaders, and the Qualities of Ineffective Leaders.

Leadership Identity

Each participant in the study described identifying characteristics of leaders. Whether it was a part of their description of their own or of others’ leadership, the traditional-age community college students interviewed for the study perceived leaders to be identified based on their own experiences and perceptions. While participants had differing ideas of what constitutes leadership, they all were able to share some perceptions of what leadership entails.

First, some participants pointed out that leadership is not about age or gender, but is instead about developing the skills necessary to lead. David indicated that “it doesn’t matter age or gender or race or anything,” and Brandi suggested that leaders “don’t fit a certain profile.” Although Candy explained that leadership responsibilities can be “assigned to somebody,” other participants believed leadership to be a natural ability. Katherine specified that “some people just have leadership characteristics.” David explained, “I think leadership is more of a capability
that everyone has, but some people have it a little bit more innately,” and that “the same people tend to pop up over and over” as leaders.

Secondly, leaders stand out and can be identified by how they carry themselves and how others react to them. Jesse stated that leadership attributes include “the way they think, the way they go about things.” Candy explained that “it’s pretty easy to tell” who the leaders are, as did Bradley who concurred, “You can kind of just tell.” Crissy asserted, “I think you can always tell a leader out of a group, because there’s something about them that stands out.” Brandi suggested that leaders “carry themselves a different way.” Travis expressed similar perceptions by saying a leader is “the person that stands out to be more than just a regular person, that goes the extra distance.”

The way that leaders are identified is also indicative of how others respond to them. Taylor explained that a leader can be identified based on “the way the people they are leading react to them,” further clarifying, “If you’re a good leader, they react with kindness or they react with like you start something and they follow. If you’re a bad leader, they may not follow.” Katherine’s experiences have also taught her to identify leaders based on the reactions of others: “Typically, when I meet new people…I can sometimes see, they’re probably in charge of the whole thing. They don’t have the title of leader, but everybody just does what they do.”

While there were different viewpoints on the identification of leaders, most participants did describe some perceptions of leadership identity. These explanations of leadership identity indicate a developing understanding of leadership and of those who lead among the study participants. This understanding included recognition of the existence of leadership as well as the perception of how it occurs. Participants’ perceptions also included opinions about whether leadership is innate or learned. Additionally, participants understood the impact of the responses
of followers on leadership. These insights indicate that participants have had enough interactions with leadership, either as a follower or a leader, to develop personal beliefs and interpretations of what leadership means and how it is identified.

Influence

In addition to identifying leaders, participants recognized the ability of leaders to influence others. The category of influence that emerged from the data revealed that participants recognized that leaders have influenced them, the assertion that others will follow a leader, and the knowledge that the actions of the leaders affect their followers.

First, participants recognized the influence that others had upon their lives. Brandi exemplified this idea when discussing her brother’s impact on her education: “It actually just made me want to do better and get school done with.” Candy also described the influence of the head athletic trainer on athletes, student trainers, and other students at the college:

He will take a group of people, whether it's a baseball guy and a football guy, or random people and he'll say -- like they'll come to him and ask him anything whether its athletic training, about school, about fishing, it doesn't matter…And it's just so crazy to me that like random people--like sometimes the [dance team] have come in and talked to him and they're not considered like athletes, so the trainers don't really work with them. But he’ll sit down and give them any answer they need at any time. It's so like crazy to me that like one person could have such an influence on so many different people.

Beyond the perception of the influence of others, several participants also recognized that others follow their lead. Katherine was very aware of her influence, relating several instances that others followed her lead. Whether it was her friends making choices about recreational activities, fellow band members asking for her assistance, or others coming to her for advice, she
acknowledged her impact on others but was unclear as to the reason. Katherine elaborated that “when I’m in a group of people, sometimes I find people following me, and I really don’t know why.” Kristina explained, “So I guess you hold a lot of weight trying to be a leader. You have to be careful with what you do and don’t do. Because other people are always watching you.”

Experiences, primarily within extra-curricular activities, gave many of the participants an enhanced understanding of how this influence can affect others. Candy realized through examples of others and her personal experiences that “no matter what I do, like I can affect anyone.” Taylor considered herself a role model, and Travis saw his leadership role as a motivator: “Just in the classroom on the field, off of the field, just in everyday life, just being a motivator and getting people to strive in what's good in life.”

One of the primary explanations for how this influence unfolds was leading by example. Regina saw in a high school classmate the ability to lead by example, utilizing her experiences. Collin recognized the influence of role models in his life and translated that to leading by example: “Let your play do the talk. Work hard and play hard and good things will happen and maybe that will make someone want to play hard and work hard and have the same success.” Maggie saw this leadership by example in her experience as well and elaborated, “I'm one of the people who believe in follow through example -- show through example rather than words. And if you're good at something, people usually respect you.” Beyond leading by example, Jesse advocated using a leadership role to affect others more proactively. He explained, “Leadership shows people how they should be living their life.”

Kristina interpreted the need for being a role model to higher expectations for leaders. She revealed, “You have to be a good role model. You can't be -- you can't want to be a leader
and you're not doing the right things.” The impact of others, including these role model leaders, is also discussed later in the analysis.

The category of influence consisted of the recognition of the influence of leaders, the understanding that others will follow a leader, and the acknowledgement that leaders’ actions impact their followers. These perceptions indicated recognition that influence is an integral part of leadership. However, for some participants, influence created additional leadership demands. The participants described the impact of influence in terms of higher expectations of themselves. For some participants, influencing others was acknowledged and accepted as a part of leadership responsibilities. For other participants, this created pressure to make good choices and set a good example for others. While participants understood the nature of leadership to influence, some participants were challenged by this aspect of leadership. The expectation that others will model the behavior of leaders led participants to consider the qualities that effective leaders do and should have.

**Qualities of Effective Leaders**

As part of the descriptions of both themselves and others as leaders, participants identified the qualities of effective leaders. Throughout the course of the interviews, it became clear that different experiences made certain qualities more or less important to participants. All participants described effective leadership in terms of what they had seen in others. Some were also able to apply the concepts to themselves and their own leadership experiences. These effective leadership qualities included both personality traits of leaders as well as the behaviors associated with leaders.

First, participants described leaders as having certain personality traits associated with responsibility, confidence, other-orientation, and sociability. Kristina expressed the importance
of being responsible, particularly in regards to being a team captain: “I won't say it's hard, but it takes a lot of responsibility to be a leader. I think a lot of things fall on your shoulder when you're being a leader.” Collin’s description of “doing what you're supposed to” when describing an exemplary teammate corresponded with that perspective. Crissy mentioned the importance of leaders showing initiative and effort and agreed with Bradley that a leader must first learn to lead him- or herself before leading others.

Confidence was also a trait that participants identified as important to the ability to lead. Regina described leaders as “usually not scared to say what they feel or like when something needs to be done, they're not scared to say it.” Kristina indicated that leaders must be “confident” and “brave.” Jesse provided an example of leadership as courageous and further illustrated this when he explained that he had learned “to work under pressure.” David explained that leaders must look confident to enhance their credibility, and Crissy described leadership in the terms of this confidence:

Being able to be headstrong and able to say this is right, this is what we should be doing. And when everybody else is like no, you know, I don't agree. But that person sticks to what they believe and can do it.

Taylor and Maggie both advocated the importance of patience in leadership, while others described similar traits, such as David’s unselfishness, Kristina’s encouragement, Brandi’s cheering up, and Candy’s showing teammates how things are done. Several participants also associated leadership with helping others. This other-orientation was the focus of much of how these students both saw leadership in others and participated in it themselves.

The other-orientation was extended by the perception that effective leaders are outgoing and personable. Bradley portrayed a leader as “someone who is very outgoing. They're really
involved with what they do.” Candy agreed that “a leader has to be outgoing.” Throughout the course of the interview, David mentioned traits related to sociability, advocating the importance that leaders develop “people skills.” And, Katherine described a positive leadership experience by saying “we stick together and we have good attitudes towards each other.” For Collin, this connecting to others strengthens the team because leaders are “more about the group than themselves.”

In addition to leadership traits, participants depicted leadership behaviors including taking control of situations, appropriate communication, honesty, and honor as qualities of effective leaders. Participants described the ability of leaders to be able to step up and take charge of situations when necessary. Brandi explained that leaders “take charge. They always know what to do.” Candy said that while leadership roles can be assigned, “I think it's more along the lines of like you take it upon yourself to step up in front of a team or a group of people to basically lead them or like show them the ropes.” David agreed, “I think it's more of a when they actually step up and lead.”

In addition to leaders taking charge, several of the participants, including Regina, Collin, Kristina, Candy, and Bradley, spoke of the ability of leaders to “speak up” and “be vocal.” Some of these participants described communication in terms of the behavior of effective leaders and others as a skill they were developing. Brandi suggested that she “should probably learn how to talk to people by next year” when she transfers to a university, and Maggie pointed out that both listening and communicating with others will be useful leadership skills for her to develop. David reported having developed communication skills as part of his community college experience, as did Katherine.
Maggie explained that communicating with others is important because “people want to know what's going on.” Additionally, Taylor pointed out the value of a leader to be able to praise and criticize others appropriately. Although Katherine described herself as a “quiet” leader, she was able to describe what she has learned about the connection among communication, praise, and improvement among followers:

So when you're a leader…you have to be sure to criticize them in the right way, sandwich the compliment, tell them what they need to fix. And compliment them again. It makes them feel good. [That is] what I think anyway, that they really need to give their group confidence and give them good criticism, constructive criticism, and just make sure that they're appreciating their people because if not, they're not going to work together well and not really going to excel in what they're doing.

While communication is an important behavior of an effective leader, participants also pointed out the value of trust in relationships. Regina explained that there are “trust issues there, too, that are kind of built in with being a leader.” Travis clarified the significance of honesty in leadership, “One of the main things that I learned over the past couple of years was honesty. Like people aren't going to trust someone and look up to a leader if they're not honest with them.” Maggie connected this honesty to respect because “it's easier to respect someone when they're completely honest with you.”

Collin extended the explanation of honesty to honorable behavior: “I learned how important it is when you're looked up to, to actually do the things right because if you're not, the people underneath you aren't.” Jesse agreed that leaders should “just do the right thing and what you're supposed to be doing.” The morality associated with a leader’s behavior was portrayed by
Brandi when she described teammates who “lead us in the right direction.” Kristina made the same connections between the behavior of leaders and their followers:

You can't want to be a leader and you're not doing the right things. So, to be a leader, you have to be on the right path like in doing your school work, you're not getting in trouble, all that good stuff.

The category of Qualities of Effective Leaders concentrated on leadership traits, including responsibility, self-confidence, other-orientation, and sociability, as well as leadership behaviors, such as taking charge, appropriate communication, honesty, and honorable actions. Generally, the study participants focused on positive aspects of leadership, incorporating the qualities of leaders that require boldness, connectedness, and respectability. Based on the leadership examples of others and their own leadership experiences, all thirteen study participants included some of the qualities of effective leaders; however, none of the participants included all of the qualities. Further, there was not always agreement in the data as to which qualities must be present or were most important to successful leadership. Whether participants described the positive qualities in terms of an example or their own personal experience, they also acknowledged the importance of the development of these qualities in their own leadership.

As traditional-age students in their second year at a community college, the participants’ descriptions show a developing understanding of leadership through the influence of others and personal leadership experience. The ability to describe effective leadership qualities was a result of their interactions with others, both as leaders and followers, which provided them with unique and personal perspectives. Furthermore, the positive leadership qualities expressed by the study participants exhibit a variety of influences and experiences that can be attributed to the varied backgrounds of the participants. The effective leadership qualities were based in the
participants’ backgrounds, but also were presented as positive qualities that each of the participants would value in their future leadership experiences.

**Qualities of Ineffective Leaders**

In addition to recognizing the qualities of effective leaders, participants described some of the qualities of ineffective leaders. Much like the qualities of effective leaders, participants’ perceptions were based on their experience watching others lead and, for some, were applied to their own leadership experiences. Some of the qualities of ineffective leaders were reluctance to lead, being mean or negative, and unethical behavior.

First, participants found in themselves and others an unwillingness to lead, primarily because of shyness, which made leaders ineffective. Regina, Katherine, Bradley, and Kristina admitted to struggling with shyness which impacted their ability to lead. Kristina explained that she preferred to watch others lead because she did not think she was an effective leader: “I'm shy. I don't like to talk. I'm nervous. I get kind of shaky.” Katherine described herself as “a very timid, shy girl” when she began leading a group in high school. She felt inadequate and used a soft-spoken leadership style, which she maintains even though her confidence in her leadership abilities has increased.

Another quality of ineffective leaders the participants expressed was being unnecessarily mean. Jesse thought that most leaders treated their followers badly, but found the behavior an ineffectual method of leadership: “If you're going to be a leader, why lead your like followers sternly? No one is ever going to want to follow someone who has attributes that make you want to hurt them.” Katherine agreed and found similar negative responses from followers:

And in all honesty, when you're a leader of any particular group, if you're going to be really rude about it and really negative, nobody's going to want to follow you. And the
group's not going to work together well because they're not going to feel like they're really being appreciated.

Collin found that in his sport, leadership behaviors included what he termed being “mean.” He shared an example of a teammate who exhibited the behavior, which encouraged teammates to behave appropriately. He explained that this leadership style was necessary and vocal. Other participants found this vocal severity unappealing. Kristina found this an ineffective leadership behavior because “I don't like yelling -- not really yelling at people, but telling people what to do. Because some people could take it the wrong way.” Maggie described a coach that was a positive example of leadership who taught her that “yelling is not always the best way to handle things because he hardly ever yelled at us.”

The final ineffective leadership quality discussed among participants was unethical behavior. Regina expressed her experience watching others lead:

Because sometimes watching others will lead you in the wrong direction….When other leaders do stuff, maybe they're leading you. But something you're not supposed to be doing so you'll get in trouble or you'll get like a warning or something.

Maggie found some of her coaches to behave in an unethical manner by both hypocrisy and hoarding information:

They're really hypocritical. They'll like yell at you for doing one thing and go around and do it or -- they -- the biggest annoyance is they never give you enough information which, to me, sounds like in history like dictators -- they hoard information so you don't know anything.

The category of Qualities of an Ineffective Leaders focused on a reluctance to lead, being mean, and unethical behavior. Only a small portion of participant responses specifically pointed
to the negative characteristics of leaders, particularly in comparison to the positive characteristics discussed. Participants included these qualities of ineffective leadership either as descriptions of leaders they had observed or qualities in themselves they believed prevented them from effective leadership. Whether considering the examples they had observed or their own personal leadership experience, participants maintained a relatively positive perception of the role of a leader and their development of leadership skills. Although participants were not entirely positive, their explanations of both effective and ineffective leadership qualities exhibited multi-dimensional perspectives that accompany a more developed and complete understanding of leadership. The comparatively small number of negative leadership descriptions indicates both an effective understanding of what leadership entails as well as a positive perspective on leadership.

Each of the categories under the theme of Defining Leadership – Leadership Identity, Influence, Qualities of Effective Leaders, and Qualities of Ineffective Leaders – were proliferations of examples of others and experiences of the participants. These examples and experiences have impacted each participant as they continue to understand and develop their own leadership identity.

**Developing Leadership**

As part of the interview process, participants were asked about examples of leadership as well as their own leadership experience. Their responses conveyed perceptions of their personal leadership development. This leadership development was attributed to both the impact of individuals in their lives who served as both positive and negative examples of leadership, and the leadership opportunities and experiences of the participants themselves.
As an extension of defining leadership, participants described the impact of watching others lead and fulfilling the leadership role in terms of how those experiences helped them understand and develop leadership skills. Participants shared primarily positive examples of leadership and participation in leadership activities, which changed their perceptions of their own leadership development.

Participants reported that their own leadership skill development was based primarily on the examples set by others and the opportunities provided to lead. The three categories for the theme Developing Leadership were the Impact of Others, the Impact of Personal Experiences, and the Perceptions of their Personal Leadership Development.

**Impact of Others**

Participants’ descriptions of their perceptions of leadership included the impact of other individuals on how they understood leadership as well as how those understandings applied to their own personal leadership development. The examples of influential leadership included teachers, coaches and directors, family members, religious leaders, teammates, peers, and even professional athletes. All of the participants were able to identify examples of leadership, although the reason and amount of the impact of others on leadership development varied. Many of the previously mentioned qualities of effective leaders were associated with the examples participants described.

Ten of the thirteen participants reported that either coaches, teachers, and/or family members were the primary examples of leadership before attending college. While there were two participants who indicated peers were influential leaders during that time, adults in positions of authority were predominantly identified as having influence over participants. As a participant who saw a family member as her greatest leadership example, Katherine described
her mother as strong, independent, and caring, which led her “to become the person I am today.” Kristina explained the influence of her parents:

They always would tell me like how important going to college is and how school is very important…and they always will lead me to do the right things…because I guess they've been through that experience before. So they don't want me to do what they did. They want me to be better than what they were.

Others described adults in their high school setting as influential leaders. Candy was impacted by a relationship with her high school coach because “I could go to her for like anything.” David also saw one of his high school teachers as having a positive influence over how he understood leadership because “he'd done a lot in his life…so it was just like when something went bad, he never freaked out.”

Alternately, only five of the thirteen participants reported professors, coaches, or church leaders to be their primary leadership influence while they were attending community college. Jesse learned to go with his instincts from his theatre director who “knows what he's doing.” Bradley pointed out that his professors act as leaders during group discussions or to help students. Maggie and Candy had very different experiences, but were both impacted by adults in positions of authority. Maggie admitted that she “never really paid attention to anything” about leadership until she got to college and learned what she “didn't want to be” by watching her coaches. Candy relayed positive examples from the head athletic trainer, but also described a peer who assisted her academically. Similarly, Regina described local church leaders who came to campus to “take their time to come and lead us in worship... But they want to help lead us -- try to lead us in the right direction.” She added that a college student “led us a couple of times, so he had to kind of like get confidence to be a leader.”
Unlike their examples of leadership before college, the majority, eight of the thirteen participants, described peers to be their primary influence while they were attending community college. Kristina, Collin, Taylor, and Brandi all described teammates who provided positive examples of leadership during their time attending community college. Kristina was impacted by a teammate’s “encouraging words to like help people if they're feeling down.” Brandi found peer tutors and teammates who encouraged her to be helpful and “lead us in the right direction.” David and Katherine were impacted by peers in leadership positions, particularly the drum major of the band who was described by David as someone who “gets things done” and by Katherine as knowing “what he was talking about.” Travis and Crissy both described peers who, while not on their teams, were influential in making decisions and behaving appropriately.

All but one of the participants explained the impact of others on their leadership development in very personal terms, describing relationships with leaders they had personally followed. The one exception was interestingly the only student not currently involved in an on-campus activity. Bradley, a general population student, related the impact of a professional athlete on his understanding of leadership: “His leadership qualities were tremendous. They were very, I don't know, just something about him just, I don't know, made me look up to him.” While the remainder of the participants had current and personal influences, Bradley was reliant upon what he could see about leadership at a distance.

These influential leadership examples provided insight into the changes of leadership perception from high school to college as well as the impact of participating in campus activities to how a traditional-age community college student perceives leadership. The transition from high school to community college attendance changed the participants’ sphere of influence from primarily adults to peers. Additionally, students who participated in campus activities identified
influence among personal relationships, while the study participant who did not participate in campus activities related influence elsewhere. Therefore, community college attendance and campus activity participation both impacted the participants’ perceptions of leadership and their own leadership development.

Additionally, there were overwhelmingly positive responses to questions about examples of leadership before and during participants’ community college experience. Family members were described as teaching positive qualities, such as honesty, independence, compassion, strength, and even time management. Coaches and teachers were characterized by helping students succeed. Peers were encouraging and were often described in terms of opening participants’ world views. For example, Taylor’s admiration for the leadership example of her friend and dance team officer focused on the ability to see multiple points of view:

She's like really understanding and she sees all points of views for every situation. So if there's a bad point of view, good point of view, different points of view, she knows exactly what to do with those situations. I really admire that.

While most of the participants described how these examples helped them to understand and develop positive leadership qualities, two participants highlighted how negative examples impacted their leadership development in positive ways. Brandi explained that her brother dropping out of school impacted her decision to work hard and stay in school: “I just realized how difficult everything could be if you just drop out.” Maggie provided the other example of learning from a negative example by describing her interaction with her coaches as “it's the way I don't want to be here or the coaches I don't want to have.” While both Brandi and Maggie had negative responses to these influential leaders, their reactions were both constructive in terms of
what they had learned and how that further developed their understanding of leadership and their own leadership development.

Although there were several different viewpoints of the impact of others on leadership development, the participants revealed the importance of relationships to understanding leadership and developing the skills necessary to succeed. Participants reported a modified understanding of leadership upon entering college as they were more influenced by peers than family members or coaches. The only participant who did not specify a personal relationship as his primary leadership influence was also the only participant who did not participate in a campus-related activity. Finally, participants were overwhelmingly positive about the interactions with those seen as impactful in their leadership development, resulting primarily in learning more about themselves and developing leadership skills.

**Impact of Personal Experiences**

In addition to the impact of others upon leadership development, participants discussed the impact of participating in leadership activities on their perception and development of leadership skills, generating the category of the Impact of Personal Experiences. All of the participants identified some type of leadership experience of varying degrees. Additionally, the experiences were generally described as positive and educational. Throughout the explanations of the impact of personal experiences as leaders, participants illustrated both a developing understanding of leadership as well as learning occurring as a result of participating in leadership activities.

Most of the study participants reported some leadership experiences before college, including responsibilities such as athletic team captain, church leadership, Junior ROTC, high school newspaper, class officer, Future Farmers of America, employment, and among family
members. Regina, Maggie, Candy, Jesse, Katherine, David, Taylor, and Crissy all held official leadership roles in high school sports or activities, some of whom had multiple leadership roles. Taylor shared that she had several opportunities to lead in high school as lieutenant of the dance team, editor of the school newspaper and yearbook, a participant in an overseas ambassador program, and a member of her church youth group. About these experiences, Taylor said,

I had so much experience before in high school that if a certain situation came up now, that I would know exactly what to do. And I think that because of what I went through being a leader in high school, that like helped me convert over to being a bigger leader.

Bradley described a less formal role as the linebacker on his high school football team as “the quarterback of the defense,” which required that he be vocal to help his team. Travis agreed that he had taken leadership roles while participating in high school athletics. Brandi and Collin expressed the least formal leadership roles, but acknowledged that they led by example and by helping teammates. Kristina saw her influence with her nieces and nephews as an important leadership role, and she tried “to lead them in the right direction.” Candy described her relationship with her sister similarly, explaining her protectiveness “because I didn't want her to make some of the same mistakes I made.”

These varied leadership experiences prior to college attendance provided participants with a multitude of opportunities to practice leadership as well as experience the leadership of others. Furthermore, the recognition of previously defined influence within leadership set the precedent for how participants perceived leadership once in a college setting.

Leadership experiences while attending community college were most often conveyed by participants as less formal than high school, and focused on leading by example, influence over peers, and assisting coaches and directors. Maggie relayed an experience of exhibiting good
sportsmanship, helping an opponent up after a rough play, which she believed to provide a positive example for her teammates. Class group discussions compelled Bradley to take a leadership role because “somebody's got to say something.”

Kristina did not consider herself to have much leadership experience, although she described herself as the team mom: “They usually call me like I'm the mother of the team because I take care of everybody else off of the court.” Crissy explained the necessity to influence her teammates, particularly in the academic arena: “So it's kind of making me look bad if half of my team don't show up to class and I do… I feel like I'm kind of responsible for that a little bit.” Travis found his leadership role both on and off the football field, describing his influence over his teammates:

We had a few guys acting up in the classroom and it was a little old lady teaching in class. And I just got to the point where I was sick of it. And so I -- it had been happening for a while and I finally just popped off to them in the middle of the class and just told them to just calm it down. It's not what we needed to be doing.

In addition to influencing peers and teammates, participants conveyed opportunities to assist coaches and directors through their participation in activities. Collin pointed out that he and a teammate “stepped up and just took on the role of making sure everything happened” by preparing equipment and holding teammates accountable. Regina explained that as an athletic trainer, “we should be able to do stuff how we did them -- or how [the head and assistant athletic trainers] showed us how to do them as freshmen and they want us to take charge.” Candy utilized time off the court with an injury as an opportunity to practice leadership skills: “I would help [the coaches] make up the practices and stuff. And … the girls would like come to me during the game” with questions.
While several participants indicated informal participation in leadership activities, only one participant reported no leadership activities while attending community college. Although she indicated that leadership was “very important” to participation with a team, Brandi replied to a question about leading in college, “I honestly can't say that I have.”

At the opposite end of the spectrum, four participants reported formal leadership opportunities while they attended community college, which gave them authority and responsibility. The college’s band director asked Katherine to be a member of the band’s leadership team as she completed her freshman year. Her responsibilities during her sophomore year included being co-drum major, helping plan marching band camp activities, and assisting the director with organization and communication. Taylor explained that her role as dance team captain was crucial to team operations because “even when [the dance team director] is there, stuff doesn't get done. And that's because what I do is different from what [the dance team director] does.” Jesse’s leadership role was assigned when “my theater director gave me the opportunity to be like a manager over all of the other kids that are in the group right now.” However, he described himself as too quiet and taken for granted by his peers in the theatre department. David was assigned running the stage during a music festival hosted by the college. He explained the leadership experience:

It was a lot of telling people just grab this many chairs. Don't think about it. Which I feel kind of like it's not the best -- I feel like it's a little like an immature form of leadership, because it's not -- there's nothing really there. I'm just telling them what to do. But at the same time, it was the best for the situation.

Each of these four participants provided explanations of how their perceptions about leadership were impacted by the opportunity to participate as leaders. Whether it was Jesse’s
realization that components of his leadership style were ineffective or David’s insight about situational leadership, the participants’ descriptions indicated a developing understanding of leadership through participation.

With one exception, the study participants were able to identify varying degrees of leadership experiences while attending community college which impacted their perception of leadership as well as develop their leadership abilities. Furthermore, the data suggested that participants who had official leadership roles prior to community college attendance were likely to lead while attending community college, whether they were assigned leadership responsibilities or they assumed the role within their peer group. Finally, the four participants who were given official leadership roles while attending college were developing leadership understanding and abilities as part of those roles.

**Perceptions of Personal Leadership Development**

The final category under the theme of Developing Leadership was produced as participants described their leadership development experiences. The process of discovery as participants both responded to questions and continued to cultivate their own understanding of their experiences produced interesting perspectives of how leadership skills are developed and how these changes continue to change perceptions about leadership.

All of the study participants found leadership to be important for various reasons. Regina found that participating in leadership helped her “know I needed to improve and what I needed to not improve.” Furthermore, she found it important for her to use her leadership skills because “a lot of students, they kind of have leadership skills but they don't want to use them.” Collin and Candy both pointed out that leadership became more important in the community college setting
because it is necessary to bring different types of people together. Collin described this as “new people, new team” and Candy said

In high school, everyone like grows up together in your city and your town. Everyone is comfortable with everyone. But if you go to college, you get people from different states, different countries, different complete -- like there’s people from Texas in towns that I never even heard of here. And like it’s just a whole new mix of people. And so it's like more important for you to step up and be like, hey, like here I am. You can come to me for anything or I will help you with this instead of like just being in your comfort zone of the people you grew up with.

The diversity of peers and interactions present in the community college setting led some participants to find the need for leadership. While it was important to diverse interactions within teams, the importance of leadership to academics was not consistent. Travis, who had completed his collegiate athletic career in community college and was preparing for academic transfer to a major university, explained that leadership within academics and athletics “definitely goes hand-in-hand.” Bradley, who did not participate in any college activities, conveyed that he had learned that leadership is important outside of sports, particularly as he entered college “because of what it means. Your education is everything.” Although Brandi had an exemplary academic record, she found leadership to be irrelevant to academics because “I guess I'm just quiet and I just -- I just do my work.” Collin agreed with this independent vision of academics: “I wouldn't really say [leadership is important], because education is by yourself.” Both Brandi and Collin explained that they would be transferring the following fall semester to play their respective sports at a university. Participants who did not have campus activities upon which to focus seemed to recognize the importance of leadership to academics while some of the participants
who were more focused on their campus activity were less likely to acknowledge that connection.

Kristina’s explanation of the significance of leadership focused on maturity: “I think it's more important because like you're getting older, you're not -- you're not young no more. You're getting more mature. So you see things in a different way than how you did before.” Travis explained that he found his leadership development to be “definitely more important” because he was “definitely growing more as a person. I think leadership has helped me in that, getting older, getting wiser.” Maggie agreed that leadership was “obviously” more important because “I'm getting older.” This perception of leadership development as a facet of age and maturity was discussed by several of the participants.

David explained that leadership had become more important since “I'm using it more because I need to,” due to the changes associated with the differences between high school and community college. David related, “In high school, they like to herd you around and so you know, you just kind of do what you're told. But here, you have a lot of freedom but with freedom comes responsibility.” Crissy expounded on the change in perspective that accompanied attending college:

Because in high school, it seems like other people are kind of responsible for you, like your parents. Your teachers care a lot more. But in college -- college is go on out there.

So you have the ambitions of being a leader.

Not only did participants indicate that leadership had become more important while attending community college, it would be equally crucial to successful future endeavors. Collin expected to find others with leadership skills upon transferring “since they got to that level, they
were probably leaders themselves.” Brandi agreed that “I kind of will already have that [leadership] role thrown on me” when she transfers to a university.

Beyond the time spent in college, Crissy anticipated that her career in social work will require her to “lead by example because it's children.” Collin also predicted that “being a leader will help in the work field.” Taylor agreed that as a teacher she will use the leadership skills she has learned “in a different way but the same, kind of.”

As for how the participants best learned these necessary leadership skills, perceptions were split. Travis, Kristina, Crissy, Maggie, and Brandi learned leadership primarily by watching others. Travis found that adults influenced him to lead and showed him how to lead: “I've seen more older people lead, my adults. And seeing them being leaders makes me want to be a leader. And so that someday, I'll be just as good a leader as I was as they are.” Kristina found learning from observation necessary “because I'm not really good at telling people what to do.” Crissy learned by watching others because “I feel like you really have to know how to follow someone to lead.”

Regina, Candy, and Bradley felt like they needed to participate in leadership to truly develop those skills. Candy found that “by doing it myself, I've learned so much more.” Bradley agreed that participating in leadership helped him understand “who I am as a person.” Regina pointed out that she found it necessary to lead “because sometimes watching others will lead you in the wrong direction.”

Taylor, Katherine, Jesse, David, and Collin learned most by both watching others lead and participating in leadership themselves. Taylor’s influences and experiences both taught her about leadership, although she felt she leaned “more toward actually doing it” because “I'm a hands-on learner.” Katherine learned how not to lead by watching others, but “after being a
leader myself and after trying different methods to lead practices or to lead certain things, that really helped me to learn what processes or what methods or what kind of leadership worked better at certain times.” David exemplified the importance of both watching and participating in leadership:

> When you watch other people do it, you learn kind of some techniques…But then when you do it yourself, it kind of builds on it in a way that watching someone will never be able to accomplish. You have to -- when you do it, you internalize it and it becomes more real, I guess. But you can only watch someone and learn so much.

David further illustrated that being in charge of loading the band equipment for football games helped him understand that leadership “was not some divine thing that some people are born with and others aren’t. It feels something that you could just do and then become.” And some of the participants did find themselves becoming leaders. Katherine had “definitely learned what kind of methods worked better with what kind of group of people.”

As each participant discussed the importance and how they came to develop leadership, their perceptions of themselves as leaders became evident. Whether it was Taylor exclaiming “I love being a leader” or Brandi explaining “I'm probably not a leader,” the participants shared perceptions of their leadership development. Kristina believed that she did not “have that much to say about me being a leader.”

The Perceptions of Personal Leadership Development category focused on how participants were impacted by both examples of others and personal leadership experiences. Participants found leadership experiences to help them understand themselves and operate within diverse groups. The focus on maturity was somewhat cyclical given that some participants recognized the expectation of leadership with age while others connected leadership experiences
with added personal maturity. Finally, there was not consensus on how participants best learned how to lead, but all of these participants recognized personal leadership development through watching others lead, leading themselves, or both. These perceptions of leadership exemplify a growing and developing leadership identity for many of the participants.

The theme of Developing Leadership consisted of the categories of the Impact of Others, the Impact of Personal Experiences, and the Perceptions of Personal Leadership Development. Each of these categories emerged from the data as explanations of how participants understood the leadership development process as well as their own personal leadership development.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of leadership and personal development of leadership skills among traditional-age students attending community college. An analysis of the thirteen participant interviews generated two themes, each with multiple categories. The first theme of Defining Leadership included Leadership Identity, Influence, Qualities of Effective Leaders, and Qualities of Ineffective Leaders. The second theme of Developing Leadership was comprised of the Impact of Others, the Impact of Personal Experiences, and the Perceptions of Personal Leadership Development.

Within the first theme of Defining Leadership, participants described identifying characteristics of leaders, such as having necessary skills, standing out in a group, and reactions from followers. Additionally, participants recognized the ability of leaders to influence others. This influence was applied to participants’ experiences as well as acknowledging influence over others and the resulting impact. Several of the participants related the importance of influencing others through leadership by example. The influence described by the participants was particularly important in terms of making a positive impact on those influenced.
Beyond the influence of a leader, participants shared qualities of effective leaders including both traits and behaviors. Leadership traits that participants found important were responsibility, confidence, other-orientation, and sociability. Additionally, participants found taking control, appropriate communication, honesty, and honor as effective leadership behaviors. These effective traits and behaviors were contrasted to qualities of ineffective leaders which included reluctance to lead, negativity, and unethical behavior. Although none of the participants listed every quality of effective or ineffective leadership, these responses indicated an emerging understanding of leadership.

Elements of the second theme of Developing Leadership focused on how participants viewed the impact of others as well as the impact of their own personal experience. The effect of adults was found to be reduced while attending community college in comparison to while attending high school. With the exception of the participant who was not involved in campus activities, all of the participants described learning about leadership from people with whom they had personal relationships.

Leadership experiences were also found to be impactful, guiding students to a deeper understanding of themselves as leaders. While many of the participants held official leadership positions in high school, fewer held these types of positions in the community college setting. With four exceptions, leadership experience at the community college setting was informal and focused on leading by example and influencing peers. Among the four participants with official leadership responsibilities at the community college level, all had also held leadership roles in high school.

Finally, participants’ perceptions of the importance of leadership and their personal leadership development were revealed. All participants found leadership to be important to
success, with much of that significance placed on the connection between leadership and the expectations that come with maturity. While participants were split on the best method of learning how to lead, their responses indicated a developing sense of personal leadership identity.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to foster an understanding of the perception of leadership and personal development of leadership skills among traditional-age students attending community college. A general induction approach was utilized to explore a variety of perspectives from participants. As the purpose of the study was to explore the understanding and development of leadership skills, the leadership identity development theory was employed to serve as a lens for understanding the processes associated with leadership. Through the thorough analysis of the data produced through interviews with participants, the two themes of Defining Leadership and Developing Leadership developed.

This chapter seeks to discuss the findings by first considering each of the themes in relation to current literature. Next, the implications for the findings will be discussed with an emphasis on the practice of developing leaders among traditional-age community college students. Finally, recommendations are made for future research in the areas of leadership development as part of community college students’ identities.

Defining Leadership

The traditional-age community college students who participated in this study revealed varied perceptions about leadership. All of the participants recognized the existence of leadership and were able to define what leadership meant to them. Furthermore, they acknowledged influence as a component of leadership. Additionally, each of the participants
identified various qualities of effective and ineffective leadership, although none of the participants provided an encompassing viewpoint of those qualities. Participants’ perceptions were based on the impact of others as well as their personal leadership experiences. These perceptions demonstrated a developing understanding of leadership both in terms of how it occurs among others as well as how they participate in leadership. The participants’ responses also indicated varying degrees of comprehensive understanding of the expectations of leadership.

As Rosch and Kusel (2010) explain, defining leadership beyond the basic and common “an individual’s influence on a group in order to reach a goal,” (p. 29), can be difficult, even for those who study the phenomenon. The ambiguous nature of leadership, combined with the complexity of how to develop the skills associated with leadership, can prevent individuals and institutions from creating meaningful approaches to leadership development. Although research indicates that participation in leadership activities helps college students develop leadership skills (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001), these broad definitions of leadership do not examine how individual perceptions of leadership impact development of leadership skills.

The leadership identity development theory provides a model for understanding more specific interpretations of leadership and definitions provided by this study’s participants. Within the leadership identity development theory (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006), individuals move among stages of leadership identity development beginning with the awareness that leadership exists and that involvement in group activities often includes influence by leaders. Later stages of the model include trying leadership roles, learning group skills, and committing to personal leadership development. The ability of participants in this study to define leadership and recognize the vital component of influence within that reality is a
key factor in understanding their perception of leadership as well as the relevance that it holds for them currently and in the future.

All of the participants in this study revealed at least a minimum level of leadership perception as described in the leadership identity development model with many explaining a much more in-depth understanding of leadership based in personal experiences. While some study participants expressed less relevance for leadership in their current educational and extra-curricular situation, the consensus among them was that leadership skill development would be imperative to obtain future goals. By considering this within the lens of the leadership identity development model, it can be established that all of the study participants had developed at least the most basic level of awareness of leadership with some moving much further within the model. Furthermore, the potential for all participants to move further within the model becomes evident when considering their belief that leadership skill development is necessary for future success.

Although all of the study’s participants defined leadership, each of them came to that understanding based in their personal experiences. The definition provided by each participant had developed because and was a reflection of what they had seen in others as well as how they saw themselves in leadership roles. Research that developed the leadership identity development theory documented the evolution of the definition of leadership based on experiences that allowed participants to see themselves as leaders, thus further developing their definition of leadership (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005).

The current study reflects similar findings as participants with more developed leadership skills were able to define leadership in ways which reveal a more integrated leadership identity. For example, emulating the leadership of others and leading others outside of their immediate
leadership role group are just some of the ways that some of the study participants exhibited a developing leadership identity. Furthermore, some study participants demonstrated a very developed leadership identity as they defined leadership in terms of contextualization and dynamic processes. These qualities of understanding and defining leadership represent the most developed of the stages of the leadership identity development model.

Study participants’ perceptions of the definition of the leadership were also impacted by their generational perspective. Arensdorf and Andenoro (2009) advocated that the best way for Millennials to develop leadership is to combine leadership concepts with opportunities to practice: “In order for [Millennial] students to learn leadership, they must ‘do it’” (p. 20). These researchers promote leadership skill development through observation and experiential learning.

As participants in this study attested, they generated their understanding of leadership, including how they defined leadership, both by watching others lead and by participating in leadership themselves. This correlates with Millennial traits which include high levels of connectivity combined with high levels of achievement. Having likely been raised in communities where teamwork and cooperation were emphasized (Howe & Strauss, 2000), Millennials are expected to have had both opportunities to watch a variety of others lead as well as opportunities to lead themselves. It was through these experiences, as members of the Millennial generation, that participants’ definitions and perceptions about leadership were formed.

Finally, the definitions of leadership provided by the study participants were impacted by their attendance at a community college. Students have opportunities to engage in many ways during community college attendance. The experiences produced as part of these student engagement opportunities help community college students develop leadership skills (Urso &
Sygielski, 2007). However, unlike most of the research on community college student leadership which focuses on student organizations such as student government (Miles, 2010; Wilson, 2004) or honors programs (Brady, Elnagar, & Miller, 2010), the primary engagement opportunities in the current study were collegiate athletics and performing arts.

Because of these opportunities, the study participants provided definitions of leadership that were predominantly shaped by participation in athletics and performing arts while attending community college. The responses varied by participant as to what relevance leadership held through their participation in these activities. However, all of the participants cited either examples of others or opportunities to participate in leadership within those areas which changed and developed their perceptions about leadership.

The theme of Defining Leadership provided insight into the perceptions of traditional-age community college students not only about how they defined leadership, but also the relevance that leadership held in their current situations and in their future. Through the lens of the leadership identity development model, participants’ perceptions revealed that all study participants were at least in the lower stages of leadership identity with several reaching the more developed stages. Furthermore, the participants’ status as members of the Millennial generation explains the emphasis on the combination of both observing others and participating in leadership. Finally, participants represented a unique viewpoint as community college students who participate in athletics and performing arts as the primary formation of their definitions of leadership.

**Developing Leadership**

Beyond the ability to define leadership, participants in the study were candid about their own personal leadership development. The explanations focused on the impact of others and of
their own personal leadership experiences on their leadership development. Progress within the leadership identity development model is more diverse among the participants when considering how the understanding and relevance of leadership has been impacted by the influence of others and opportunities to participate in leadership.

As described above, all of the study participants fulfilled the earliest stages of the leadership identity development theory by disclosing the perception that leadership existed and involved influencing others. Later stages of the model acknowledge leadership development occurring when individuals build self-confidence and establish interpersonal efficacy as leadership becomes more a part of an individual’s self-identity (Komives et al., 2005). Some participants in the current study can be described as being in the most advanced stages of leadership identity, fully embracing leadership roles and actively working to improve their leadership skills. As these participants described their perceptions of leadership development, a movement from viewing their leadership identity as dependent and functional to independent and integrated occurred. These students had made choices to progress through leadership development by first understanding it and by later committing to it.

This study’s data indicated that participants’ leadership development began prior to their attendance at a community college. Komives and Johnson (2009) consider the role of high school experiences in college student leadership development. Utilizing the leadership identity development model, researchers found that “high school leadership experiences play a central role in contributing to college leadership outcomes” (p. 37). Although some of the participants in this study participated in formal leadership activities while attending community college, much of their leadership experience was in the high school setting. These high school responsibilities
included more diverse leadership opportunities than the primary experiences of performing arts and athletics represented in the study.

Furthermore, findings from this study indicate that those who participated in formal leadership roles while in high school were more likely to have formal leadership positions at the community college level. Research shows that leadership development actually occurs across the lifespan of an individual (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). This viewpoint contextualizes the importance of continued leadership development for students while attending community colleges. Unlike the current study, this perspective considers leadership development from an entire lifespan; however, the expectations correspond with much of the data from the current study about the factors that influence leadership development in early adulthood.

Murphy and Johnson (2011) include parents, education, sports, and practicing leadership with their early leadership development factors. Furthermore, these researchers point out the impact of contextual factors such as generational membership on leadership development and effectiveness. Beyond those factors, effective leadership experiences lead to enhanced leadership identity and self-efficacy.

Data from the current study support this lifespan leadership development perspective. Generationally, the study participants’ status as Millennials was a factor in their understanding of leadership. The focus on elements of leadership development that supported their generational traits of high parental involvement, community-mindedness, and high achievement was evident in responses that cited influential adults as early leadership influences and the importance of leadership to their future success. Participants in this study reported the influence of their families, teachers, directors, coaches, and peers on their understanding and development of leadership skills. These factors, combined with opportunities to practice leadership, shaped
participants’ perspectives on leadership. Additionally, the correlation between formal high school leadership roles among study participants and the likelihood of participants to have formal leadership roles while attending community college supports this research.

A key component of leadership development among study participants was the opportunity to participate in leadership. Although each participant related experiences in leadership at some level of their education, some participants were more able than others to base their leadership development on personal experience. The participants who were less likely to identify themselves as leaders were also the participants who had the least personal leadership experiences. Within the leadership identity development model (Komives et al., 2005), this represents an understanding of leadership that is somewhat external and unintentional. These participants were comfortable in the awareness, exploration/engagement, and parts of the leader identified stages of the leadership identity development model, but had not advanced beyond those early markers of development. This lack of advancement was due primarily to a lack of leadership participation, a lack of self-confidence, or a lack of relevance. While these participants understood concepts related to leadership, they were more likely to rely on the examples of others for leadership because of their lack of leadership experience.

Alternatively, study participants who had the most developed leadership identities also demonstrated the most leadership experience. The most advanced stages of leadership development within the model include a more integrated, internal, and intentional response to leadership opportunities (Komives et al., 2005). Participants who described their leadership in these terms were able to do so in a large part due to their personal leadership experience. Contrary to their less advanced peers, these students had practiced leadership, exhibited confidence, and saw relevance in the development of leadership skills both during their
community college attendance and in the future. These more advanced participants were not only able to define leadership with more understanding, perception, and relevance, but they were also able to relay how their participation in leadership impacted their leadership development. While these participants were able to explain the impact of others on their leadership development, their participation in leadership had enabled them to integrate those examples with their own experiences to create a more mature leadership understanding.

The findings support a correlation between leadership identity and leadership experience, however, it is unclear if those who lead more often see themselves as leaders or if those who see themselves as leaders choose to lead more often. More likely, this study supports a cyclical view of leadership development in which participants transition to new and more complex stages of leadership development as part of a developing understanding of self and group. This reflexive process, described by Komives et al., (2006), provides an explanation for the changing self that accompanies the emerging leader described by several of the study participants as well as the impact of the context on leadership identity development.

Although it does not answer one of the study’s research questions directly, one finding in this study expounded on the perceptions of leadership by traditional-age community college students and the relevance that it holds for them. Data collected from diverse student types fell into categories that focused primarily into intercollegiate athletics (baseball, basketball, football, soccer, softball, volleyball, and athletic trainers), performing arts (band, cheer, dance, and theatre), one student from the honor society who was also in the band, and one student unaffiliated with an organization. From these categories, study participants involved in performing arts groups reported more opportunities for formal leadership than participants in athletics or the participant not affiliated with an organization. Participants who were active in
band, theatre, and the dance team described active leadership, such as drum major, manager, captain, and other responsibilities. While participants from the athletic groups were able to identify leadership opportunities, they were less demarcated and formal.

This finding corresponds with previous studies on student leadership development in athletics and in performing arts. Brewer (2009) found in a qualitative study that university marching band drum majors serve as peer leaders who extend the leadership vision of the band director. These opportunities to lead help college students develop leadership capabilities, including understanding influence, respect, and responsibility. Additional research found that the experiential learning provided in performing arts can help “students develop the critical thinking and leadership skills necessary in building and sustaining successful professional careers” (Kindelan, 2010, p. 31). Responses in the current study correspond with this finding. Participants who are active in band, theatre, and dance exhibited more leadership experience, which correlated to deeper understanding, more comprehensive definitions, and more personal relevance of leadership. Performing arts participants in this study demonstrated the most developed leadership identities.

Alternatively, research indicates that athletics are an often underutilized opportunity to help students develop leadership (Gould & Voelker, 2012). Although players are sometimes identified as team captains, this does not necessarily require leadership behaviors. These authors cite a lack of intentionality and an unwillingness to give up control by adult leaders as two of the primary reasons that competitive sports are often not effective at helping students develop leadership skills. The current study is also in agreement with these findings. Most participants who associated with intercollegiate athletics understood and had examples of leadership, but
some were unable to identify personal leadership roles. Furthermore, it was from this group that participants were most likely to have a less developed leadership identity.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Creswell (2012) identifies one of the purposes of educational research as improvement within the practice of education. One of the purposes for this study was an enhanced understanding of community college student leadership development to extend to better practice in developing student leaders. Among the stakeholders that can benefit from the findings of the study are community college administrators, staff, and faculty who work with students in leadership development. Traditional-age students benefit from enhanced leadership skill development while attending community college to prepare them for expectations as they transfer to a university or seek employment. Several recommendations for different stakeholders for improved practice can be made based on the findings from this study. These recommendations include the importance of providing good examples of leadership and providing opportunities to lead for community college students of all areas of involvement. Additionally, carrying out the development of traditional-age community college student leadership skills with intentionality is imperative to the effectiveness of that work.

Participants in this study provided examples of leaders who had impacted their understanding and development of leadership. These leaders helped them define leadership, including the awareness of influence as a component of leading and the qualities of effective and ineffective leaders. Furthermore, the examples of leaders presented by the participants impacted their own leadership identity, affording them observational knowledge about how they wanted to lead and how they did not want to lead. The importance of these examples to an individual’s leadership identity development cannot be understated. Thompson (2006) found in a study on
leadership development that “interactions and experiences with faculty, administrative support staff, and peers” (p. 348) had the greatest influence over college students’ beliefs about leadership. For that reason, it is vital to community college student leadership development to provide positive examples of leaders both within areas of participation, such as athletics and performing arts, and within other educational settings. Just as the participants in this study cited leadership examples of family members, coaches, teachers, church leaders, and peers, community college students need continued and additional examples of effective leaders during enrollment.

Programs that engage students with faculty advisors and mentors outside of their organizational activities of athletics and performing arts would encourage community college students to interact with influential leaders outside of their normal sphere of influence. These kinds of programs could serve purposes related to mentoring as well as academic advising and student services. This would supply students with a more diverse leadership example set, altering the current situation of the coaches and directors being the only leadership influence for some. Additionally, these programs would not interrupt, but instead enhance, common community college student engagement issues such as developmental education and non-traditional student types. As stakeholders in student and college success, appropriately trained faculty, staff, and administrators could become originators of student leadership development in addition to the beneficiaries of these skills.

Not only do students need examples of effective leaders to encourage the development of their leadership understanding and identity, they must also have opportunities to lead. This can be difficult in contexts such as community colleges where students are often either disconnected from student life or very connected through activities such as intercollegiate athletics or
performing arts. Gould and Voelker (2012) advocate a changing focus that lessens the dominance of adults in order to cultivate leadership among students. In order for students to practice leadership, adults “must be ready to give up some control and allow them to participate in meaningful decision-making, take on real responsibilities, and become agents in their own development” (p. 40). Opportunities to lead are vital to the development of leadership understanding and identity for community college students.

Participation outside of the students’ primary organizational activities is crucial to creating these leadership development opportunities for community college students. More opportunities for students to accept leadership can be created to encourage them to participate in diverse activities. Student government, honors organizations, peer mentoring, and other student activities can promote occasions for community college students to solve problems, make decisions, and take leadership responsibilities. These kinds of activities also afford students with additional leadership examples, both formal and informal. As students are given opportunities to lead, they not only take more ownership of their own leadership identity development, but also of the community college context in which they are a prime stakeholder.

Finally, intentionality is the key to helping students find and develop their leadership potential. Formal leadership development programs are the most extensive version of intentional leadership development. However, these programs are less likely to be found at community colleges, where the emphasis tends to be on helping academically underprepared students to become college ready through developmental education. Additionally, they serve only a limited number of students. For contexts such as the site of this study, it is more likely that intentional leadership development can best be enacted through organizations such as intercollegiate athletics and performing arts, which reach more students. Beyond participation in these
activities, students could be challenged to take on leadership responsibilities such as decision-making, problem-solving, and vital group communication processes in other arenas. As students are given these opportunities and develop their own leadership identities, they will also provide leadership examples to other students who can utilize that influence in their own leadership development.

Additional student engagement and leadership development needs are presented by general population students who are not connected with athletics or performing arts. Unaffiliated students require opportunities to engage with adults and peers as examples and to develop leadership skills. Incorporating leadership development opportunities within courses and programs would afford opportunities to all students. Previously mentioned programs that engage students with advisors and mentors, as well as student activities open to all students that challenge them to develop leadership skills, would encourage all students, including those unaffiliated with a campus organization, to develop stronger leadership identities.

Furthermore, these leadership opportunities should be geared to encourage positive Millennial characteristics. Arensdorf and Andenoro (2009) include experiential learning, high expectations, the use of a variety of teaching styles, and the use of creativity as crucial methods of engaging Millennial students in leadership education. Additional research recognizes and advocates the utilization of technology and collaboration by Millennials as leaders (Murray, 2011). Keeping in mind the generational traits and needs when engaging Millennials in leadership development opportunities will allow them to connect to becoming leaders as well as enhance the relevance of leadership to their success.
Recommendations for Future Research

This study addressed leadership development among traditional-age community college students. While the findings of this study shed light on these constructs, further research is required to advance the understanding of how traditional-age community college students understand and develop leadership skills. Several recommendations can be provided for future research in the area of traditional-age community college student development.

Additional research should be conducted on both community college athletics and performing arts programs to understand their impact on participants’ perceptions of leadership and the relevance it holds for their participation in these programs and success beyond. A study focusing on one organization or activity with multiple traditional-age community college members as participants would provide insight into how different types of organizations impact leadership identity development. Given that the current study involved participants with varying viewpoints from several organizations, focusing on a single organization would provide further data as to how the organization impacts participants’ leadership perceptions.

Considering different populations would also provide insight in the development of leadership skills among community college students. Generational impact on these findings indicates that participants of different generations might understand leadership and develop associated skills differently. Since community colleges attract students of both traditional and non-traditional age, there are differing age populations to consider. Other populations that could be considered are students who are affiliated and those who are not. With only one unaffiliated student in this study, there is potential for enhanced understanding of how organizational affiliation impacts leadership development beyond the findings in this study.
A finding in this study that also has potential for extended research is the connection between participants’ leadership identity and leadership experiences. While the leadership identity development theory explains that leadership experiences encourage a developing leadership identity, the order of this development seems to have a cyclical nature. It is unclear from the findings of this study if those who self-identify as leaders seek more leadership opportunities or if leadership opportunities encourage leadership identification. More research on how those constructs correlate would help guide practitioners as they promote leadership development and provide leadership opportunities for students.

**Conclusion**

Considering the findings of this study within the context of current literature provides more insight into the leadership development of traditional-age community college students. Findings indicate that this study’s participants experienced different levels of leadership identity development based primarily in examples of others and leadership participation. The understanding and relevance of leadership to participants was impacted by common Millennial generation traits and by the community college context. The traditional-age community college students who participated in the study exhibited the ability to define leadership as well as demonstrated varying levels of leadership identity development. Participants with formal leadership participation before community college attendance reported more formal leadership roles while enrolled in community college. Additionally, those participating in performing arts exhibited a more developed leadership identity than those who participated in intercollegiate athletics.

Recommendations for practice include providing examples of effective leadership as well as opportunities to lead for traditional-age community college students. Intentionality in
leadership development practices is also an important component of the practice. Future research should focus on the differences between leadership development between performing arts and athletic programs. Also, research is needed on other populations such as different generations and student affiliations. Finally, the connection between leadership identity and leadership participation is an area of recommended future research.
References


http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/files/dmfile/StrategicPlanforTexasPublicCommunityColleges2.pdf


http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748


http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0035


Appendix A – IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
Date: February 21, 2014      IRB #: CPS14-02-06
Principal Investigator(s): Kimberly Nolan
                                  Angela Hughes
Department: Doctor of Education Program
                      College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
                   Northeastern University
Title of Project: Leadership Development among Traditionally-aged
                       Community College Students
Participating Sites: Cisco College
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: FEBRUARY 20, 2015

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randell Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B – Recruitment E-mail

Study: Leadership Development among Traditionally-aged Community College Students

Dear Student,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study on leadership development among traditionally-aged community college students. The purpose of the study is to find out what community college students think about leadership and what they have learned about leadership while attending a community college. This is important because leadership skills are important to a student’s success when transferring to a university or getting a job. There is not a lot of research about how community college student develop leadership skills, so the goal is to learn more about that.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are between the ages of 18 and 21 and are in your second year at a community college. You provide a unique point of view about leadership development at a community college. If you decide to participate in this study, you will receive more information and will sign an informed consent form. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

To participate in the study, you will be interviewed about your experiences and perceptions about student leadership development at a community college. The interview will take about an hour and will be at a location you feel comfortable such as the library or the student union building. Later, you’ll be asked to look over the transcript and be sure everything is clear. The interview will be audiotaped, transcribed, and parts of it will be used in the research findings. You will be given a pseudonym so you can feel comfortable sharing your experiences.

If you have any questions, you can contact me at hughes.an@******.edu or at ***-***-****. You can also contact my research advisor, Dr. Kimberly Nolan, at k.nolan@******.edu or at ***-***-****.

Angela Hughes
Doctoral Student, Northeastern University
Appendix C – Participant Informed Consent

**Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education Department**  
**Name of Investigators:** Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Principal Investigator; Angela Hughes, Student Researcher  
**Title of Project:** Leadership Development among Traditionally-aged Community College Students

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<th><strong>Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study</strong></th>
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<td>We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.</td>
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<th><strong>Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?</strong></th>
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<th><strong>What will I be asked to do?</strong></th>
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<td>If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview. The interviewer will ask you questions about leadership and your experiences while attending a community college.</td>
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<th><strong>Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?</strong></th>
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<td>You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will take about one hour.</td>
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<th><strong>Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?</strong></th>
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<td>There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts anticipated by participating.</td>
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<th><strong>Will I benefit from being in this research?</strong></th>
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<td>There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help community colleges better understand how to help students develop leadership skills.</td>
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### Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. All participants will be given a pseudonym and only the researcher will know which participant is matched with which pseudonym. Any information with your name on it, such as interview transcripts, will be kept at the researcher’s home in a locked cabinet. Audio files will be deleted after the study is completed and signed consent forms, anonymity identifiers, and interview transcripts will be kept in this location for three years after completion of the study and then those things will be destroyed.

### Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have [as a student, employee, etc].

### Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Angela Hughes (**-***-****; hughes.an@******), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Kimberly Nolan (**-***-****; knolan@******) the Principal Investigator.

### Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

### I agree to take part in this research.

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Appendix D – Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about yourself?
   [Prompts: Where are you from? What semester are you in at this college?]

2. What do you think leadership is and how do you know if someone is a leader?
   [Prompt: Can you tell me if you think you are a leader?]

3. Can you describe someone who was an influential leader in your life before you came to college?
   [Prompt: What kinds of things did you learn from having that example?]

4. Describe some ways you participated in leadership before you came to college.
   [Prompt: How did that impact how you understood leadership?]

5. Give me some examples of leadership you have seen while you have been at college?
   [Prompt: What have you learned about leadership from those examples?]

6. Can you tell me about a time when you acted as a leader while you have been at college?
   [Prompt: What did you learn about leadership from that experience?]

7. Can you explain how important is leadership to your education or your extra-curricular activity?
   [Prompt: Has leadership become more or less important during your time here at college?]

8. Can you tell me why you chose to come to a community college?

9. What kinds of leadership skills would you say you have developed since you have been at college?
[Prompts: Do think you’ve learned more by seeing others lead or by participating in leadership? Why is that?]

10. What are your plans when you leave community college?

11. Describe how you think you’ll use what you know about leadership when you leave this college.

   [Prompts: What leadership skills do you think will be important after you leave? What will you need to know when you transfer? What kinds of leadership skills will you need when you get a job?]

12. Is there anything about developing leadership skills that you would like to add?