Understanding Commuter Student Self-efficacy for Leadership


Abstract: Although students who live off-campus comprise over 85% of today’s college enrollments (Horn & Nevill, 2006), the body of research on this group is far smaller than that on residential students. Researchers regularly treat commuter students as a homogenous group and largely ignore the significant within-group differences that characterize the population (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). One way to look at the diversity within this group is to study commuter students living in the home of a parent, guardian, or other relative (i.e., dependent); and commuters who live on their own or with others (i.e., independent) (Roe Clark, 2006). This study used data from the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership to examine within-group differences between dependent and independent commuters on the key college outcomes of leadership self-efficacy (Astin & Astin, 2000). Leadership self-efficacy refers to one’s confidence in his or her capacity to lead (Murphy, 2002), and often makes the difference as to whether one actually does lead. The study also examined unique predictors of leadership efficacy for each population. Results reflected statistically significant within-group differences with independent commuters indicating a greater sense of leadership efficacy than their dependent commuter peers. The same three environmental variables emerged as the most significant predictors of leadership efficacy for both groups: socio-cultural conversations with peers, positional leadership roles in college organizations, and employer mentoring. These were complemented by additional predictors unique to each population. The research supports the assertion of commuter student diversity and provides insights into how educational practice can best support their development of self-efficacy for leadership.

Research Questions:
1) Are there significant within-group differences in commuter students’ self-efficacy for leadership?
2) To what extent do environmental influences in college predict commuter students’ leadership efficacy, and do predictors differ by commuter population (i.e., dependent versus independent)?

Findings:
• Independent commuters reported a significantly higher leadership efficacy mean than dependent commuters.
• Pre-college factors play a significant role in commuter students’ leadership self-efficacy in college.
• When looking at demographic factors, Asian American/Pacific Islander students and women showed significantly lower self-efficacy than their peers; on a different note, leadership self-efficacy increased with age.

Sample:
• 11,864 students; 5,932 dependent commuters and 5,932 independent commuters
• 62% female and 38% male
• 32% students of color
• 3% lesbian, gay, and bisexual students; 11 transgender students

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For more information regarding the MSL, please visit our website at www.leadershipstudy.net
Findings (cont.):

- Positive Environmental Predictors for Leadership Self-efficacy

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Commuters</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Socio-cultural conversations</td>
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<td>• Leadership positions in college organizations</td>
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<td>• Mentoring relationships with employers</td>
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<td>• Formal leadership programs (short/moderate)</td>
<td>• Employment off-campus</td>
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<td>• Membership in off-campus organizations</td>
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Implications for Practice:

- Commuter students cannot be treated as a homogeneous population; independent and dependent commuters are different and experience the collegiate environment differently.
- Institutions need to be aware of and intentionally address the unique leadership self-efficacy needs of Asian American/Pacific Islanders and women.
- Socio-cultural conversations showed the strongest relationship with leadership self-efficacy; therefore leadership educators should integrate opportunities for these conversations through various leadership programs.
- Leadership educators need to remain cognizant of catering leadership programs to commuter populations, being sensitive to their schedules and competing life priorities.
- Short and moderate length programs may be more effective in meeting commuter student needs.

Further Resources:
National Clearinghouse for Commuter Programs (NCCP) - [http://nccp.nsuok.edu/](http://nccp.nsuok.edu/)
National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs (NCLP) - [http://www.nclp.umd.edu/](http://www.nclp.umd.edu/)