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Non-Native English Speakers and the Development of Socially Responsible

Leadership during College

Abstract

This study used data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education to examine the leadership development of non-native English speakers during college. Results suggest that being a non-native English speaker is associated with significantly lower level of development in commitment, controversy with civility, and the overall measure of socially responsible leadership. Findings of this study build upon prior knowledge and highlight the important role of language background in shaping student leadership development.

Developing leadership capacity for college students is a fundamental goal of higher education institutions (Astin & Astin, 2000). With the ongoing pandemic and the growing awareness on racial injustice, promoting socially responsible leadership among college students is increasingly important. At the same time, college and university educators are endeavored to meet the needs of diverse student population. Research shows that student background continues to be a significant factor affecting college student development (Nuñez et al., 2016). In this study, we are interested in the impact of student language background on leadership development. Our research question is: *Does being a non-native English speaker affect student leadership development during college?*

Non-native English speakers are likely to be Students of Color, immigrants, or those born in the United Stated but speak another language at home (Liu et al., 2019; Nuñez et al., 2016). This group of students receives increased attention given their growing number in schools. According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), about one in five residents in the United

States speaks a language other than English at home. To date, there remains a dearth of knowledge regarding this student group at the college level (Nuñez et al., 2016). Even less is known about their leadership development. This presents a challenge to higher education educators and practitioners in meeting the needs of these students. One contribution of this study is therefore to expand our understanding on these students and provide important implications to promote the college success of this student group.

Leadership Development and NNES Students

Contemporary perspective considers leadership to be a process toward equity, social responsibility, and positive changes to the community (HERI, 1996). At the college level, this process values the importance of understanding the self and working with others. The discussion on leadership therefore includes not just student leaders, but learners from all background (Dugan & Komives, 2010). Existing literature suggests that the values and beliefs held by different student groups play an important role in shaping leadership development (Dugan et al., 2008). Yet generally speaking, the more students are engaged during college, the more likely they will obtain satisfactory leadership development. In one study, Hu (2011) found that scholarship awards can motivate students to engage during college and hence gain desired leadership development.

The limited available research on non-native English speakers suggests that due to family responsibilities and financial constraints, NNES students are less likely to attend and benefit from college compared to their peers (Nuñez et al., 2016). Because leadership depends on conveying ideas and working in teams, language background can be an important factor shaping college students' leadership development. If we consider leadership development to be a desired goal for students from all backgrounds, then including NNES students in the process is much

necessary. Additionally, NNES students possess rich cultural and linguistic elements. Considering the diverse voices and unique perspectives can enrich the understanding of leadership. It is also aligned with the underlining values of inclusion and diversity in higher education (Dugan & Komives, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

This study draws on linguistic capital and the Social Change Model (SCM) for theoretical guidance. According to Bourdieu (1977), the dominant language in a society is imbued with symbolic capital – linguistic capital. Individuals speaking the dominant language possess communicative codes that can help them better access legitimate resources. For those who do not speak the dominant language, their ability to gain desired resources and outcomes can be limited. The SCM conceptualizes leadership development as a processes of acquiring values and perspectives necessary for leading positive changes (HERI, 1996). It is designed for college students and posits that leadership is for all who desire to work with others and make changes. The SCM includes eight values in consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, citizenship, and change.

Research suggests that language background plays an important role in shaping college experiences (Liu et al., 2019) and that college experiences are closely connected to student leadership development (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Lewis; 2020). To this extent, language background could exert an influence over student leadership development. For NNES students, possessing limited linguistic capital means that they could encounter barriers in interacting with others and accessing resources. This can lead to fewer beneficial experiences and consequently hinder students' leadership development during college. This being said, NNES students could have a lower level of leadership development than their college peers.

Methods

Data and Sample

Data of this study is from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS). Funded by the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, the WNS is a large, multi-institutional, and longitudinal study that allows for the investigation of college students' experiences and outcomes. Participants in this study were incoming undergraduate students representing three cohorts – 2006, 2007, and 2008. While students from large institutions were randomly selected, those from small liberal arts colleges were all invited to participate.

Data Collection

The initial data collection occurred in the fall of student freshman year. Information collected included student language background, parental educational level, high school standard test score, and pre-college leadership capacity. Each student was surveyed again four years later regarding their in- and out-of-class experiences and leadership capacity. Of the 16,718 participants in the initial data collection, a total of 6,125 students completed the follow-up data collection. Useful data were collected from 4,389 participants including 268 NNES students and 4,121 NES students. Table 1 provides detailed student sample information.

[Table 1]

Variables

Dependent variables of this study were measured using the revised version of Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS; DeVellis, 2003). The SRLS measured leadership capacity within the context of the SCM. It included eight subscales, representing the values in consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, citizenship, and change. The instrument had a total of 68 items with an internal

consistency reliability of 0.85. Each subscale was measured using 6 to 8 items with reliabilities ranging from 0.78 to 0.90. The dependent variables of this study were the eight subscales plus the overall leadership capacity measured at the fourth year of college. The definitions of each subscale can be found here: https://www.wabash.edu/news/displaystory.cfm?news_ID=2647

Independent variable of this study was students' NNES status coded as 1 = NNES students and 0 = native English speaking students. Based on prior literature (Dugan et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2019), this study controlled a range of variables in student background, precollege experiences, and institutional characteristics. Specifically, these variables included sex, race, parental educational level, international student status, ACT or SAT equivalent score, institutional type, student cohort, and pre-college leadership measured using the SRLS. Research identified college student leadership development as being associated with student engagement (Dugan & Komives, 2010; HERI, 1996; Hu, 2011). Therefore, several college level experiences that could mediate the relationship between language background and leadership development were also considered. These variables included the frequency of interactions with faculty, diversity experiences, cocurricular activities, whether students worked on or off campus, college GPA, and two dichotomous variables indicating student major in arts and STEM.

Data Analyses

OLS regression was used to examine the total and direct effects of being a NNES student on leadership development. The total effects used reduced-form equations (Alwin & Hauser, 1975) and regressed each of the fourth-year leadership measure on NNES status, student background, precollege experiences including leadership capacity, and institutional characteristics. In the direct effects, college level experiences were added to each of the total

effects equation. Because precollege leadership capacity was included, all outcome measures in this study were *gains* in leadership development throughout college.

To control for the potential nested nature of the data within institutions in the WNS, the analyses used the *svy* procedure in the STATA package. All dependent variables were standardized prior to the analyses; therefore, the coefficient for being an NNES student was an estimated "effect size," or the part of a standard deviation to which NNES students were advantaged or disadvantaged in leadership development relative to their peers.

Results

Results in the total effects suggested that NNES students had less development in commitment than their peers; no other significant differences were found (Table 2). In the direct effects, the lower level of development in commitment remained statistically significant. Additionally, NNES students also had less development in controversy with civility and the overall leadership measure (Table 3). This may suggest that when college experiences were added, the negative influence of being a NNES student became intensified. The net disadvantage accruing to NNES students was 0.19 of a standard deviation for commitment, 0.17 for controversy with civility, and 0.18 for the overall leadership capacity.

[Table 2]

[Table 3]

Discussion and Implications

Guided by linguistic capital and the SCM, this study found that being a NNES student is negatively associated with leadership development during college. Such a finding expands our understanding and indicates that linguistic capital plays an important role in shaping student leadership development. Prior research suggests that due to language barrier and potential family

obligations, NNES students are less engaged in college than their peers (Liu et al., 2019; Nuñez et al., 2016). If this is the case, then the fewer gains in socially responsible leadership development associated with NNES students could be due to the lower level of engagement that these students have had during college.

Lewis (2020) indicates that college students may view leadership as hierarchical and goal-oriented rather than collaborative and driven by social change. Connecting to our study, it is possible that NNES students obtain different understandings about leadership given the cultural values and belief they possess. Findings of this study suggest that NNES students had less development in commitment and controversy with civility. One approach is therefore to help NNES students realize that they can make a difference in working toward positive social changes. They need to understand the importance of passion in serving the team and believe that differences in viewpoint exist and that such differences should be aired openly with civility.

Meanwhile, colleges and universities should consider student language background in the design and implementation of leadership education and training programs. To do this, colleges and universities need to avoid using 'Whiteness' and western standard to assess leadership experiences, and should instead conceptualize leadership from a multicultural perspective. Future research should continue to examine the cultural and linguistic elements that can enrich the concepts and practices of socially responsible leadership. If we are aimed at promoting socially responsible leadership for all college students, then including the voices of those from a different linguistic and cultural background is both necessary and important.

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Table 1

Student Composition and Descriptive Statistics

	N	Female %	Student of Color %	International Student %	Avg. Precollege Overall Leadership	Avg. Fourth-Year Overall Leadership
NNES students	268	61.9%	80.2%*	27.2%	3.95	4.14
NES students	4,121	60.5%	16.7%	0.4%	4.00	4.16
All students	4,389	60.6%	20.6%	2.0%	4.00	4.16

*The three largest racial groups were Asian (46%), Hispanic (20%), and White (20%).

Table 2

Estimated Total Effects of Being a NNES Student on Leadership Development

Variable	Conscious-ness of Self	Congruence	Commitment	Collabora-tion	Common Purpose	Controversy with Civility	Citizen-ship	Change	Overall Leadership
NNES student	-.124	-.113	-.151*	-.048	-.122	-.098	-.070	-.085	-.120
	(.082)	(.081)	(.075)	(.088)	(.105)	(.072)	(.093)	(.069)	(.087)
R-squared	.21	.13	.11	.13	.12	.15	.21	.21	.16

Note. N=4,389. Standard errors are in parentheses. *$p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$

Table 3

Estimated Direct Effects of Being a NNES Student on Leadership Development

Variable	Conscious-ness of Self	Congruence	Commitment	Collabora-tion	Common Purpose	Controversy with Civility	Citizen-ship	Change	Overall Leadership
NNES student	-.150	-.144	-.191*	-.090	-.146	-.166*	-.134	-.143	-.180*
	(.076)	(.078)	(.074)	(.088)	(.106)	(.072)	(.090)	(.071)	(.084)
R-squared	.25	.16	.15	.18	.19	.22	.29	.27	.24

Note. N=4,389. Standard errors are in parentheses. *$p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$