

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CLASS LEADERS

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2000  
M.S., University of Central Missouri, 2006

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Affairs  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

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## Abstract

Learning communities are considered a high impact practice. Most research has focused on the benefits for the students within learning communities. This study sought to explore what learning community leaders learn from their experiences in a learning community. The central research question was: *What do student leaders experience in a classroom learning community?*

A phenomenological qualitative research approach was used to explore this question. Twenty-five students who had recently been a leader of a learning community in a large lecture course at a Midwest landgrant university were interviewed. The participants reflected on their position as a class leader and described in detail their experiences. To analyze the data, significant statements from each of the transcripts were organized into meaning units. The meaning units were used to formulate two codes: (a) learning communities and (b) personal development. Seven themes emerged from the data: 1) environmental elements of a learning community, 2) responsibilities of a class leader, 3) class leader roles within a learning community, 4) caring relationships, 5) self-awareness, 6) vocation, and 7) impact.

Participants described learning communities as a small group of diverse students engaged in the process of learning. Participants emphasized the need for a safe learning environment, and an environment that leaders need to cultivate. Skills that were developed from learning community leaders' responsibilities include time management and small group facilitation and throughout the experience, leaders can look forward to the development of caring and long lasting relationships with students, other peer leaders, and faculty. Participants identified that being a learning community leader impacted one's affective, cognitive, and behavioral development, all of which resulted in one's self-understanding and self-confidence. The

experience of being a learning community leader shaped or affirmed future plans and goals and strengthened one's identity formation as a leader.

The study explored the experiences of undergraduate student leaders in the classroom. The findings of this study challenged institutions to rethink large lecture classrooms and consider integrating learning communities within large lecture classes while being intentional to provide the necessary resources and support to train peer teachers who would be asked to lead the learning communities.

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Major Professor  
Dr. Doris Wright Carroll

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## **Chapter 1 - INTRODUCTION**

In many of today's higher education institutions, enrollments and retention rates are dropping, academic departments are merging or being eliminated to save money, and many universities have experienced hiring freezes. Matt Melvin, Vice Provost of Enrollment Management at the University of Kansas (personal communication, April 16, 2006), indicated that flagship and land grant institutions have moved from being state supported to being state assisted. These realities provide opportunities for institutions to reevaluate the efficacy of current programs and to find new ways to create meaningful college experiences that will attract and retain students. Meaningful college experiences occur when students are engaged and involved. Engagement and involvement are closely linked to the integration of academic and social life, and holding a leadership position heightens one's engagement and involvement.

Faculty can play a significant role in promoting engagement across campus. When faculty and students collaborate within and outside of the classroom, student learning and student engagement increase (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2000; Tinto, 1997). Engagement is the extent to which students participate in educationally effective practices and the degree to which the university arranges productive activities for student learning (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). Practices that promote engagement on university campus include: (a) student-faculty contact, (b) cooperation among students, (c) active learning, (d) prompt feedback, (e) amount of time spent on projects, (f) high expectations, and (g) respect for diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Learning communities are considered a high impact practice and could be one way to create meaningful college experience to retain students.

## *Meaningful College Experiences*

Research on student development has confirmed that the college years are a critical period of students' personal, academic, social, and professional growth (Astin, 1985, 1993). A meaningful college experience can positively impact student development and enhance a student's quality of life (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Earning a bachelor's degree has been linked to improved cognitive, social, and economic benefits for students, which are passed on to future generations and enhance the quality of life for students, their families, and the communities in which they live (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008).

Student development theories give administrators, faculty, and staff a conceptual framework within which to analyze, identify, and address student needs, especially in the face of critical budgetary cuts. Such an evaluation process can lead to new programs and policies on a college campus that encourage positive growth in students and create meaningful experiences to help students establish identity or find purpose in their work (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors provide a general framework for understanding the development of college students: (a) developing competence, (b) managing emotions, (c) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (d) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (e) establishing identity, (f) developing purpose, and (g) developing integrity. Understanding the student development process enables universities to become intentional in creating programs and opportunities that assist students through the development stages.

### ***Student Involvement and Engagement***

The level of students' engagement and involvement influences an experience's meaningfulness for the student. Research regarding student involvement connects to research on student persistence and retention. Students who become involved with their colleges and departments have a greater rate of persistence than their uninvolved counterparts and indicate having favorable experiences during the college years (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1997). In addition, involvement is positively related to student learning and intellectual development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Alexander Astin defines student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 297).

Students have endless opportunities for involvement in extracurricular activities, but extracurricular life constitutes only part of the college experience. A full assessment of a student's college experience needs to consider both academic and social factors. The classroom is not a place where students always feel involved, especially large lecture-style classes that are often characteristic of introductory classes for first-year students (Tinto, 2000). A large lecture classroom neither adequately addresses the social needs of students, nor promotes the opportunity to easily establish peer relationships. In short, large classes do not often engender meaningful college experiences in which students feel engaged and involved (Tinto, 2000).

### ***Integration of the Academic and Social***

Learning environments that integrate academic and social systems have powerful implications for the learning and development of students and have been linked to increased student retention rates, higher satisfaction with the college experience, and student persistence (Kuh, 2001; Tinto, 2000). However, Ernest Boyer (1987) noted a distinct separation between

academic and social life on college campuses where the lessons learned in most residence halls have little connection to the classroom content. Current practices in residence life have made progress on merging the academic and social life of students through the development of content specific residential options anchored by colleges or departments. Engineering specific residence halls, business wings (one hallway of a residence hall), or agricultural cluster floors are examples of intentional residential structural realignments that blend academic affairs with student affairs. More can be done to integrate these elements in the classroom. The classroom environment, thus, should be understood as propitious to the integration of academic life and social life.

### ***Learning Communities***

The implementation of learning communities is one way that universities can achieve academic and social integration. Learning communities are deliberate efforts by faculty and student affairs professionals to integrate courses, link or cluster classes, and combine extracurricular experiences within a group of students to improve collaboration and shared experiences (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006). Learning communities incorporate active, collaborative learning to promote involvement in academic and social activities within and beyond the classroom (Hurd & Stein, 2004; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Successful learning communities require the cooperation and collaboration of students, faculty, and administrators (Astin, 1993; Boyer, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Huddleston and Unwin (2002) referred to this interaction as a partnership model or partnership movement. Learning communities allow students to explore academic content through multiple avenues (e.g., content facilitation, active learning exercises, small group discussions) while also providing an environment for ongoing, long-term social interactions (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Hurd and Stein (2004) noted that learning communities exist to: (a) promote intellectual communication between faculty and students, (b) make connections among courses, (c) bridge students' academic and social worlds, (d) increase student retention, (e) enrich residential life for staff, (f) give faculty new perspectives, and (g) promote greater interaction and its attendant benefits. These goals were linked to positive behaviors such as increased academic effort, openness to diversity, social tolerance, and personal development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Learning communities help students find peer groups, which facilitate student retention, academic success, and personal development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1997).

Learning communities provide unique learning environments in terms of form and function. Learning communities are categorized into four types: (a) small groups within large classes, (b) paired or clustered courses, (c) team-taught learning communities, and (d) residence hall based learning communities (Hurd & Stine, 2004). Large classes benefit from organizing students into small work groups, allowing students to discuss the course content and to develop peer relationships. Boyer inspired many different learning community models. Boyer (1987) wrote that a campus community should be a place where: (a) learning is central, (b) civility is affirmed, (c) persons are honored and diversity is pursued, (d) group obligations guide behavior, (e) individuals are supported and service is encouraged, and (f) where traditions are shared.

Paired or clustered courses offer students a similar academic experience (Hurd & Stine, 2004). In this model, the same students enroll in concurrent classes. For example, a college might elect to pair a college algebra course with an introduction to physics course, each having the same enrolled students. This allows the students to work with the same peers on both math and physics, providing many opportunities for peer relationship growth.

Team-taught learning communities provide students with opportunities to connect with faculty (Hurd & Stine, 2004). In this kind of learning community, multiple instructors from one department might team together to teach one sixteen-week course, allowing students to meet and work with several different faculty members in one semester (Hurd & Stine, 2004). Another advantage of team-taught learning communities is that they allow instructors to teach the content with which they are most proficient.

Residence hall learning communities are anchored by a common interest or theme, allowing students with shared interests a chance to live together (Hurd & Stine, 2004). Living in a residence hall established for students interested in community service is an example of a residence hall based learning community. Many colleges and departments have partnered with residence life to offer living environments arranged by academic major.

Lenning and Ebbers (1999) characterized learning communities in a manner similar to Hurd and Stine (2004). They can be: (a) students who are co-enrolled in two or more courses that are linked by a common theme, (b) cooperative learning techniques and group process learning activities, (c) on-campus living arrangements to create out-of-class interactions and supplementary learning opportunities, and (d) targeted groups such as underrepresented students, honors students, and students with similar academic interests.

Educators can be intentional in managing and building learning communities that fit the overall mission and institutional vision. Student learning and development must become the central focus for university administrators, faculty, and staff. Some faculty have been intentional about creating learning communities that foster group discussions, allowing students to have social conversations while still completing academic requirements. Other faculty have not been so accommodating. By implementing policies and practices that create and sustain powerful

learning environments, such as learning communities, universities will remain important to students. As student affairs professionals seek opportunities to build partnerships with professors and students, a blending of classroom learning and student life is critical.

### ***Leadership***

Astin's (1993) theory of involvement highlights the importance of student experiences to their cognitive and affective development. Involvement theory finds the specific type of student engagement and involvement experienced in student leadership to be especially instrumental to an experience's meaningfulness (Astin, 1993). Research supports that leadership experiences of students are directly proportional to the richness of learning experiences during their college years (Astin, 1985, 1993) and professional success after the college years (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007). Research on student leaders has indicated that leadership opportunities enhance students' conflict resolution skills and commitment to civic responsibility (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). In addition, Students in leadership positions want to be effective in accomplishing change, making a difference, or working with others (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007).

Student leadership opportunities can be categorized as positional or personal, and as ascribed or achieved (Daft, 2005). Whether a leadership position is personal, positional, achieved, or ascribed, an element of power is associated with the position. It is important for students to understand if they are exercising positional power or exercising leadership (personal power) when holding student leadership positions to understand their area of influence on their constituents.

Ascribed leadership positions are inherited or passed down from someone of authority (Daft, 2005). Positional leadership means having a titled leadership position in an organization



such as student government, Greek life, residential living communities, student organizations, and clubs (Astin, 1993; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Kuh, 2003). Positional leadership responsibilities are defined largely by an organization's policies (Daft & Lane, 2005). Other positional leadership opportunities include being teaching assistants, research assistants, and student ambassadors. These positions are the product of efforts by universities to involve students in learning, but these opportunities are limited and highly selective at large institutions. Personal power is based on a leader's special knowledge of personal characteristics and is referred to as expert power or referent power (Daft & Lane, 2005). Achieved leadership positions are earned through hard work, expert skills, or previous experiences.

While many students hold leadership positions, not all students who hold leadership positions understand the academic discipline of leadership. Leadership is defined as “an influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (Rost, 1991, p. 107). Andy Wefald, Assistant Professor for the School of Leadership Studies believes that three critical components are essential to all definitions of leadership: (a) a form of influence must be present; (b) followers, constituents, or subordinates must exist; and (c) a mutual goal, benefit, or purpose must be established (personal communication, Spring 2010). Without these three components, leadership definitions fall short of communicating the essence of leadership. From a developmental standpoint, many students believe they must be in positions of authority to exercise leadership but as can be seen from the Rost definition, leadership does not come only from positional power. Leadership can come from personal power. Differentiating between student leaders who exercise leadership from their

position, as opposed to exercising authority (e.g., providing direction, protection, and order), provides a framework to exploring student leadership experiences.

### ***Leadership Within Learning Communities***

For the university to succeed, it must create meaningful experiences for students. Research finds that student engagement and involvement are key to an experience's meaningfulness. As a result, colleges should invest in fostering student engagement and involvement. Student development research has identified learning communities as one way to engage and involve students, and leadership opportunities as another (Astin, 1993; Hurd & Stine, 2004; Kuh, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Leadership opportunities within learning communities present an even higher-impact, higher-meaning experience for students.

The present research centered on the experiences of student leaders within a learning community. Within the context of this study, a learning community is a small recitation or discussion session attached to a large lecture course (Laufgraben & Tompkins, 2004) that presents cooperative learning techniques and group process learning activities as led by student leaders. This study's analysis of student leader experiences benefit faculty and student affairs professionals by helping them to be prepared and equipped to set realistic expectations of their student leaders, in turn ensuring meaningful experiences for them as well as for their group members.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of this study was to determine what student leaders experienced in a learning community of first semester freshmen in an introductory leadership course. This study explored the experiences of student leaders within a learning community. Since few studies have explored

what student leaders experience in the classroom, a phenomenological study was used to examine this event. In a phenomenological study, individuals describe their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007) for the sake of creating meaning. At a macro level, this study explored a high impact practice of learning communities, and on a micro level, it examined the perceptions of peer leaders within the learning community. Using phenomenological research, learning more about the experiences of peer leaders will inevitably lead to more research questions that can better inform faculty, staff, and administrators on how to create, support, and sustain peer learning community leaders on a college campus.

### ***Research Focus and Question***

The focus of this research was to examine what student leaders experienced when leading a learning community. The researcher examined the lived experiences of student leaders in a classroom environment. The central research question asked: *What do student leaders experience in a classroom learning community?* Four secondary questions framed the inquiry:

1. What have class leaders experienced in the classroom?
2. How has your role as a class leader shaped your impressions of a learning community?
3. What have you learned from your experience as a class leader?
4. How has this experience impacted your college career?

### ***Significance of the Study***

Leadership programs across the country teach the academic discipline of leadership, but fall short on creating meaningful student leadership experiences in the classroom such as task delegation, facilitation, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving. Extensive research has focused on the benefits of extracurricular leadership opportunities on

college campuses such as student government (Kuh & Lund, 1994), residence life (Schroeder, 1999), Greek affairs (Kimbrough, 2005), and orientation programs (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986). Yet, research that focused on the actual leaders in these types of positions is limited.

Logue, Hutchens, and Hector (2005) found that the current literature on college student leadership showed leadership's positive impact on careers, academics, and personal development, but was limited in examining leadership issues and the impact of personal experiences. Findings of the present study could justify college administrators' use of extra resources (e.g., money, students, staff) to provide meaningful leadership experiences for students inside the classroom. By understanding student leader experiences, faculty and student affairs professionals become well equipped to set realistic expectations of their student leaders.

### ***Assumptions***

This study made several assumptions about student leadership. First, it assumed that students leading a group of their peers in a classroom environment were motivated primarily to help students learn and establish a learning community. Secondary motivations for leading a group included activities such as resume building, networking, and having fun. The student leader role examined in this study required the evaluation of student work, facilitation, and course lesson plan development that emphasized active learning exercises. These responsibilities created an environment wherein students worked closely with faculty and the class curriculum. Therefore, it was important to capture small group leaders' perceptions and lived experiences to inform faculty on best practices for preparing and developing student leaders.

Second, the study assumed that leading a group of peers had a significant impact on the leaders' own college experiences, interpersonal communications, and personal development. This assumption was credited to Logue, Hutchens, and Hector's (2005) phenomenological exploration of postsecondary experiences that found student leadership was significant in the participants' perceptions of the college experience as a whole and in their developmental processes, such as interpersonal skill development. In other words, participants expected that being a student leader contributed to a positive college experience and their leadership roles played a key role in their developmental process.

Finally, the study assumed that each learning community was unique because the individual participants within that community were unique. In other words, learning communities are contingent on the environment, readiness level of participants, and the degree to which the peer leader was prepared, confident, and an effective facilitator. Learning communities share common goals, student learning outcomes, and curriculum guides (Hurd, 2004), but the unique personalities of the individuals leading and participating combine to create different experiences within each learning community.

### ***Summary***

Research makes clear the value of combining in-class learning opportunities with out-of-class experiences (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Tinto, 1997), and learning communities within the classroom do just that: foster educationally purposeful experiences that extend outside the classroom walls (Kuh et al., 2005). Given that leadership is positively linked to learning (Astin, 2003), providing student leadership opportunities within learning communities makes the practice impactful. The positive benefits of student leadership

opportunities in learning communities cannot be ignored. Universities must be intentional about creating leadership experiences inside the classroom that allow students to develop their interpersonal skills through the discussion and teaching of course content.

This chapter's discussion of meaningful college experiences pertaining to student involvement, engagement, and leadership within a learning community has framed the importance of the present study's examination of the lived experiences of student leaders in a learning community. Chapter Two reviewed the relevant research on college impact, leadership development, and other student development theories pertinent to this study.

## **Chapter 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviewed the literature on college impact theories as well as literature that discussed concepts pertinent to college impact theories such as learning communities, peer groups, and leadership development. First, high impact engagement practices were reviewed. Next, three college impact models were presented and their contributions to the body of knowledge on student development were discussed: (a) Astin's IEO model and theory of involvement, (b) Tinto's model on student departure, and (c) Kolb's model on experiential learning. Then, a presentation of the significance of learning communities, peer groups, and high impact practices were examined for their relevance to leadership development.

### ***Research on College Impact and Student Development***

#### ***Importance of Student Engagement***

Students who are involved in educationally purposeful activities, such as learning communities, undergraduate research, student and faculty interaction, linked courses, co-curricular activities, service learning, internships, study abroad programs, and capstone seminars, take responsibility for their learning, leading to student investment and commitment for their college and education (Kuh, 2003). The research on college impact and student development identified student engagement as a key element in retention and graduation rates and concluded that engaged students were more likely to persist and graduate from college than non-engaged students. Research on college impact and student development measured student engagement by the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and activities (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). The research found that students developed habits that built their capacities for

continuous learning and personal development, and these skills are essential to a productive and satisfying life after college (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006).

Carini et al. (2006) examined whether the relationship between engagement and academic performance was conditional. Their study concluded that students with the lowest SAT scores benefited more from engagement than those with the highest SATs. Ability was measured by pre-college assessments and entering GPAs. The results suggested that engagement impacted lower ability students more than high ability students.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) focused on student engagement and found that a student's involvement and engagement in academic work were proportional to the student's level of knowledge acquisition and cognitive development. They reported that class size influenced a student's academic engagement, and found that larger classes led to reduced academic performance. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) determined that increased faculty and peer contact enhanced students' academic engagement and mitigated the negative impact of large class size on academic performance. Furthermore, they showed that faculty contact was positively related to influencing social values, community engagement and civic responsibility, and promoting racial understanding. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) discussed the importance of the frequency and quality of interaction between the student and faculty or peers. Both the quality of student effort and positive interactions with faculty and peers contributed to student learning and cognitive development.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) further hypothesized that students experienced positive cognitive and affective learning outcomes from enhanced diversity experiences. They noted that diversity experiences began with the intentional enrollment in ethnic or gender studies, continued with attendance of racial and cultural events and activities, and developed by socializing with



students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that future research on college impact and student development should focus on teaching, instructional approaches, and exposure to diversity.

Faculty can develop interactive instructional techniques to engage a student in the process of learning, but the student must make the decision to acquire knowledge and learn the course material. While programmatic and instructional interventions contribute to student motivation, interest, and involvement in a learning environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), the student still has to make the decision to engage in scholarly activity. Therefore, it is the shared responsibility of both the student and instructor to develop and participate in active learning opportunities in the classroom.

### ***College Impact Theory: Three Models***

In their meta-analysis of the major research on college impact, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) identified Astin and Tinto as major theorists who have contributed to college impact theory over the last three decades. Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1981, 1984) provided a context on how to view student learning. The theoretical framework for the current study was taken from these three theorists, and was enhanced by research on leadership development by Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005).

### ***Astin's Theory of Involvement***

The college years are a critical period of students' personal, social, and professional growth (Astin, 1985, 1993). Astin's (1984) theory of involvement revealed that: (a) involvement refers to both physical and psychological energy, (b) involvement occurs along a continuum, (c) involvement has both qualitative and quantitative features, (d) student learning and student development are associated with the quality and quantity of an educational program, and (e)

effective educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that practice to increase student involvement.

Astin (1993) measured student involvement in five areas: (a) academic involvement, (b) involvement with faculty, (c) involvement with student peers, (d) involvement in work, and (e) other forms of involvement including, but not limited to, playing sports, hobbies, reading for pleasure, volunteering, and watching television. Academic involvement was measured by the amount of time spent inside and outside the classroom on course content including assignments, projects, and study hours. Astin measured involvement with faculty in terms of hours per week spent with faculty outside of class, assisting faculty with teaching, working on a research project, or asking a faculty member to critique a paper. Involvement with student peers was measured by socializing with friends, joining a living group, holding an office, or working on class projects with a group of students. Involvement in work measured the number of hours students worked while also being a full-time student.

Astin's (1993) theory of involvement highlighted the importance of student experiences to their cognitive and affective development. Academic, faculty, and peer involvement were positively associated with student learning, academic performance, and student retention (Astin, 1993). A student's cognitive and affective development was impacted by the amount of time a student stayed in college (time of exposure) and the quality of the student's experience (intensity) (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) conducted a longitudinal study that assessed the impact of college experiences on student development, college maturation, and social change. Astin (1985) suggested that the leadership experiences of college students, including holding an office, being in a position of responsibility, or active membership within an organization, were linked to the amount students learn and their personal development. Crissman (2002) researched students

enrolled in first year seminars and discovered that the number of clubs and organizations to which a student belonged was associated with a student's decision to stay enrolled at the institution. This finding and the research on student persistence and retention supports Astin's theory of involvement, finding that involved students are more likely to graduate and reach their educational goals (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### ***Astin's Theory Applied: Involvement in Special Student Populations***

Research using Astin's theory of involvement has focused on special student populations including LGBT, peer leaders, and African American students. Renn (2007) studied fifteen LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgendered) student leaders and explored the relationship between student leaders and LGBT identity. She found that students who became involved in their LGBT student groups and held leadership positions were open about their sexuality on campus. As their level of involvement increased within the LGBT group, so did their involvement in other areas on campus. Involved LGBT students were more willing to be open about their sexuality outside their LGBT groups.

Gafney and Varma-Nelson (2007) examined the long-term effects of peer-led learning on former peer leaders. In a survey of 119 former peer leaders from chemistry, biology, and mathematics disciplines, results showed that learning and interpersonal communication skills resulted from their leadership experience. Students indicated a deeper understanding of their academic discipline and reported feeling more prepared to solve chemistry, biology, and math problems. Students mentioned that group activities provided an understanding of different teaching approaches, learning styles, and methods of problem solving. Students indicated an increased awareness of their own approaches to studying and learning. Students commented on enhanced skills in working with others (presenting material or leading a group), reported

increased confidence or patience in working with people, and described a new appreciation for differences among people in how they learn and understand concepts.

Flowers (2004) examined the effects of student involvement on African American college students' development. The sample consisted of 7,923 African American students and the results indicated that in-class and out-of-class experiences impacted student development in a positive way. While both in-class and out-of-class experiences impacted student development, academic experiences, such as time in the library, course learning, and personal experiences, led to higher level of student development than other involvement experiences in athletics, clubs, and time in the student union.

As indicated by the aforementioned research studies, Astin's (1993) theory of involvement has provided a framework to examine involvement among underrepresented groups of students at predominately White institutions. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) supported the theory that involvement increases racial equality and tolerance. Campus involvement increases student interactions with people from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### ***Astin's IEO Model***

Astin (1970, 1993) developed the input-environment-outcome (IEO) model as a conceptual framework for measuring college impact and evaluating educational programs. Inputs refer to the characteristics, traits, and attitudes that students have prior to college. Inputs include demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, academic achievement during high school, and pre-college social experiences. The environment includes specific programs, strategies, interventions, social influences, or educational experiences the student is exposed to during college years. The environment aspect includes programs, campus culture, people,

policies, and procedures that college students experience during college. Outcomes represent the consequences or results a student gains after exposure to inputs and environment. Outcomes included students' characteristics, skills, abilities, knowledge, values, and beliefs after they left college.

Astin's model provided a framework to assess the impact that an environmental experience has on college students' growth or development (Astin, 1977, 1993). Astin concluded that more research was needed to explore students' experiences with faculty, peer groups, and curriculum on college campuses. Astin's IEO model informed the current study about the importance of the environment. Within the context of this study, the environment refers to the learning community as an education experience for class leaders.

### ***Tinto's Interactive Model of Student Departure***

Tinto's (1975) classic research on student departure examined why college students do not persist through graduation. Tinto (1975, 1997) hypothesized that student entry characteristics, such as family background, socioeconomic status, race, gender, educational preparation, and individual attributes, influenced a student's commitment toward an institution and one's goals of graduation. If a student had insufficient skills and abilities prior to college and did not enroll in remedial courses to gain the necessary skills and competencies to be successful in college, the student would likely exit the institution. Braxton and Leigh (2000) supported Tinto's research and suggested that entry characteristics affected a student's departure decision to leave college.

Personal characteristics and a student's commitment to graduation affected a student's integration into the social and academic environments of the campus. Tinto's (1975) model of student persistence examined two main factors in the retention of college students: (a) social

integration and (b) academic integration. Social integration described the degree to which students become connected with the social atmosphere of the institution, forming peer relationships and being involved with co-curricular activities. Academic integration described the level of commitment or concern the student has for his or her formal education and willingness to interact with faculty. Therefore, the higher an individual's level of social and academic integration, the greater one's chances were for academic success and graduation from college (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993) found that students are most likely to persist through college when their experiences and expectations matched the campus culture and the campus interactions were viewed as positive. Student expectations and experiences are extremely important as students set academic goals toward graduation. Institutional commitment toward graduation affected the student's degree of integration into the academic and social atmosphere of a college campus (Tinto, 1993). When the expectations of the faculty were not met by students due to external commitments in the students' social system, students were most likely depart or leave the institution than to try and meet faculty expectations (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1975, 1993) described social integration as the degree of congruency between the student and social systems and viewed social integration as the extent to which the student shares similar attitudes and values of peers and faculty, supported through formal and informal structures within the campus community. Accordingly, informal peer groups, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty and administrators were seen as measures of social integration.

Tinto (2000) placed high importance on the classroom and mentioned that it may be the only educational experience that students have in common. He viewed classrooms as small

communities within a university, which were non-engaging for first-year college students. Non-engaging classrooms lead to isolated learners, an atmosphere where learning became a spectator sport, or feelings of a show-and-tell learning environment. Current research has addressed the variety of issues facing classrooms and engaging environments. The physical space and setting of the classroom (Herzog, 2007), the number of students (class size) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and faculty and student interaction (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2008) have been examined.

These classroom environment issues and the importance of retaining students have led to a reform of educational practices and restructuring of the traditional college classroom (Tinto, 2000). The development of learning communities evolved into learning environments where students took the lead role in establishing and controlling their academic interests within the core content of the course. Students learned the course material, and had the opportunity to discuss the content from their own lens as it pertained to their past and present experiences.

Tinto (2000) identified basic learning communities as a linkage of courses or block scheduling. Students could be linked by courses at large institutions where a student experienced the same group of students in one's classes. For example, the cohort of students in college algebra would enroll in the same speech class. Block scheduling allowed students to take the same classes in sequence, which typically aligned with student's academic majors. Linked courses or blocked scheduling allowed institutions and departments to be intentional about building learning communities for undergraduates (Tinto, 2000).

Braxton, Willis, Hirschy, and Hartley (2008) surveyed 408 full-time, first-year students about their perceptions of faculty and colleges' level of commitment to using active learning practices as a method to engage students in the classroom. Using Tinto's (2000) interaction

model of student departure as the theoretical framework, the authors found a positive relationship between learning practices and the level of commitment from the institution as perceived by students. When students perceived that their institutions cared about their success, and when students were encouraged to engage in doing and thinking activities rather than passive listening, they reported high levels of satisfaction with their institutions and showed greater amounts of effort and persistence than students who perceived that their institutions did not care about their success (Braxton et al., 2008).

In summary, Tinto's (1975) student departure model provided an opportunity to study change and investigate influences on student persistence. As indicated by Tinto (2000) and Braxton et al. (2008), students were likely to persist if they encountered positive academic and social systems that matched their expectations. The classroom is a logical place for academic and social integration to occur. Learning communities, peer mentors, and block scheduling helped to enhance the college environment and to address the academic and social needs of students in the classroom. Tinto's (1975, 1993, & 2000) research has informed the present study by highlighting pre-entry attributes, institutional experiences, integrating academic and social systems, and goal commitments that lead to positive student outcomes, including student engagement.

### ***Kolb's Learning Theory***

Kolb (1984) described learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through experience. Knowledge can be transformed into experience through multiple avenues. Kolb (1981, 1985) viewed learning in four stages, which consisted of (a) concrete experiences, a feeling dimension; (b) reflective observation, a watching dimension; (c) abstract conceptualization, a thinking dimension; and (d) active experimentation, a doing dimension.



Kolb challenged learners to start with concrete experiences based on lived experiences or previous events in their lives. Once an event was identified, the learner was asked to reflect on the experience and became an observer of past or present experiences. Kolb's third stage challenged the learner to think critically and incorporate available information to make decisions or form a hypothesis. The final stage in Kolb's learning theory informed learners to move from theory to practice and place new knowledge into action by doing something. Learners need abilities in all four dimensions to adapt to the changing demands of classroom learning, job training, or life lessons (Salter, Evans, & Forney, 2006).

Kolb's (1984) theory suggested that learners must not rely only on their previous life experiences, but explore new experiences. Students who can separate their experiences and make observations are able to reflect on the significance of the experience with an objective lens. Students are asked to create order or logic to their observations and to develop a theory or conceptual framework, which is used to solve problems, make decisions, and take action (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's theory offered a framework for learning that asked students to start with an experience, make observations, reflect on that experience, and put their new knowledge into action.

It is important to understand how knowledge is acquired in a learning community. Learning theory anticipates that participants will frame their responses using one of Kolb's four dimensions of feeling, watching, thinking, or doing. The practical application of Kolb's learning theory informs students about the learning process, which has been one of his greatest contributions to education.

Lechuga, Clerc, and Howell (2009) suggested that students should be exposed to knowledge, activity, and reflection. They offered six recommendations for facilitators to

implement in learning communities when engaging students in the active process of learning. Small group facilitators could (a) provide a challenge to their students, (b) articulate clearly the learning objects and the theoretical framework for the learning activity, (c) design activities that meet the needs of the group, (d) create a group identity and allow for intergroup contact and dialog, (e) display empathy and affirm student voices in the group, and (f) engage students in critical self-reflection.

Students and learners create knowledge from experiences rather than just from received instruction (Bergsteiner, Avery, & Newmann, 2010). Personal change and development occur when conflicts, disagreements, and differences drive the learning process as learners move between models of action, reflection, feeling, and thinking. Kolb's (1984) learning theory provided a framework to move from passive learning toward active learning where students have the opportunity to work in small groups. This model has had a significant impact in the development of learning communities and other meaningful learning environments (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Healey & Jenkins, 2000).

### ***Learning Communities***

Learning communities are an environmental design that requires students to work together in a collaborative group where they are active and responsible for their learning and the learning of their peers (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000). Learning community theory identified four assumptions that explained how learning communities improved collaboration and learning which include: (a) students and teachers share responsibility for learning; (b) the community structure helps students recognize the importance of learning from each other; (c) the content and context of assignments are carefully thought through; and (d) learning is a process, not an

outcome (Laufgraben & Tompkins, 2004). Laufgraben and Tompkins (2004) explained the pedagogy or educational strategies that could be used within a learning community to build community and aid learning. Their explanation included educational methods such as collaborative learning, group assignments, journals, discussion, and technology use and application.

Laufgraben and Tompkins (2004) implied that strategies or instruction used to build a sense of community should be based on the premise that teaching is linked to learning, and that effective teaching and active learning present knowledge in different contexts. They assumed that knowledge can be presented in a different context by way of the learning community, as opposed to large lecture instruction. Erickson, Peters, and Strommer (2006) added the idea that learning communities are powerful academic environments which support collaboration between students and faculty.

There are three essential advantages of effective learning communities including (a) shared knowledge, (b) shared knowing, and (c) shared responsibility (Tinto, 2000). Shared knowledge was the extent to which the information discussed in the classroom is perceived and discussed among the members within the learning community. Shared knowing combined the social aspect of the learning community with the academic content. Shared knowing was the extent to which students have an opportunity to find out information about each of their peers throughout the course that exceeds just knowing the names of a few of their classmates. Shared responsibility meant that students take a vested interest in, and have responsibility for, their learning and cognitive development by holding one another accountable in group discussions, course assignments, and in the overall process of learning.

Faculty and administrators have been concerned with the effects of large classes on student engagement (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). Research has shown that an impersonal and passive learning environment, one that relies primarily on lecturing, is less likely to create learning and more likely to decrease student and faculty interactions (Astin, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Kuh (2003) discussed the importance of contact with faculty, collaboration, integration of education and experiences, and higher expectations. He found that collaborative and interactive environments were highly associated with student engagement and increase learning.

Astin (1993) discovered that student peer groups had the most influence on a student's development. Further, Astin found that interactions with faculty represented the second most significant aspect of a student's development. Drawing on Astin's conclusions, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Kuh (2003) reasoned that an effective method to increase learning and promote student-faculty and student-student interactions would be through the implementation of learning communities in large lecture classes.

These findings were confirmed in research conducted using the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE, 2008), which found that students who participated in learning communities, compared to those who did not, reported higher levels of (a) academic challenge, (b) active and collaborative learning, (c) student faculty interaction, and (d) perceptions of a supportive campus environment. The BCSSE is a companion survey to the National Survey of Student Engagement or NSSE (BCSSE, 2008), which collected data on the academic and co-curricular high school experiences of entering college students. The BCSSE (2008) gathered data on entering college students' expectations for participating in educationally purposeful activities during the first college year.

Kuh (2003) described learning environments as a bridge that could close the gap between the classroom and the extracurricular environment. Kuh found that out-of-class experiences were essential to student learning and student development. He concluded that a student involved in the classroom was most likely to be engaged outside of the classroom and be exposed to a variety of other resources on a college campus.

Contemporary research found that learning communities improved retention among at-risk students (Potts & Schultz, 2008). At-risk students were identified as students who entered college with a low high school class rank and lived off campus. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) reported that 56% of high income students completed a degree in six years, while only 26% of low income students earned a degree in the same time period. One potential reason for this finding is that low income students were more likely to start college academically underprepared when compared to their peers from affluent backgrounds (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Despite this limitation, Engstrom and Tinto found that when underprepared students were enrolled in learning communities, they were significantly more engaged in a variety of activities, including class work and student faculty discussions than their peers.

In summary, learning communities provided an environment for students and faculty to collaborate and share in the responsibility of learning. Learning communities are designed as a bridge between students' academic and extracurricular learning environments. Current research has supported the need for learning communities and discovered that learning communities have the greatest impact for at-risk students.

## ***Peer Groups***

A student's peer group is the single most important source of influence during college on one's growth and development (Astin, 1993). The more opportunities a student has to be socially and academically involved in a shared learning experience with peers, the more likely one becomes interested in academic goals (Tinto, 1993). The more interested students are in their academic goals, the more students will invest the appropriate amount of time toward academic development (Tinto, 1993). Individuals who form peer groups with similar academic goals see each other as peers because of the similarity in age, shared purpose, and course content (Astin, 1993). Creating environments that support peer teaching, peer tutorial programs, or first-year seminar courses led by students had a positive impact on student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

When in a group or learning community, students' values, beliefs, and aspirations can gravitate toward the group norm (Tinto, 2000). An example of an influential peer group can be seen in the formation of informal groups. Informal groups that form in the classroom can extend beyond the classroom in the form of study groups, providing an opportunity for students to work in collaboration, study for exams, or work on class projects (Tinto, 2000). Research has shown that students speak of their educational experience with richer meaning and detail when the social aspect is integrated with academic rigor (Tinto, 2000).

Peer groups can have a significant influence on students' academic preparation and performance. Students' moral reasoning and cognitive complexity are enhanced when they surround themselves with peer groups that function at sophisticated levels (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). If peer groups are positive, students will likely display positive characteristics modeled by group members. Kouzes and Posner (2002) referred to this type of influence as

modeling. Modeling positive student behavior in a classroom includes taking notes, asking questions, reading the assigned text, and discussing the course content with instructors and peers.

Peer groups provide students with the opportunity to engage one another, exchange ideas, and form peer relationships with other students in large lecture classes (Erickson et al., 2006). Johnson and Johnson (1998) suggested the creation of base groups in large lectures. Base groups are small groups consisting of approximately five students who are asked to work with one another before class, during class, and after class (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). Being intentional about using base groups in large lecture classes would allow students to socialize prior to class, discuss content during the middle of class, and reflect on content after class.

Peer mentors can be just as influential as peer groups in the learning process. Peer mentors who operate within and outside of the classroom, and provide multiple levels of support to students, are the most effective in supporting the curriculum (Rosenthal & Shinebarger, 2010). This finding was supported in a recent study examining peer mentors. Students indicated that successful mentoring occurred when in-class activities were paired with extracurricular events (Smith, 2008).

Micari, Streitwieser, and Light (2006) examined undergraduates leading undergraduates and found that learning communities created a structure that allowed undergraduate group leaders to progress in three general areas: (a) cognitive, (b) personal, and (c) instrumental. Cognitive growth referred to students gaining a greater understanding in the academic discipline. Knowledge acquisition helped group leaders apply core conceptual models and become better prepared to solve problems. Personal gains were identified by a greater confidence in communicating and speaking in front of people, picking up on non-verbal cues from the audience, refining interpersonal skills, and gaining skills in effective teaching. Instrumental

growth referred to students' understanding of how important their facilitation experiences would be in their professional growth and making progress toward their professional goals.

In summary, students who are socially and academically involved with their peers are most likely to be motivated to participate and engage in classroom discussions. Since peer groups have the most influence on student development (Astin, 1993), learning communities can be developed to promote positive peer interactions in the classroom. The aforementioned research supports the implementation of peer mentoring programs for first year students while also supporting the educational benefits for peer mentors.

### ***Leadership Development***

Researchers are interested in determining the impact that leadership has on students' college experiences (Logue et al., 2005). Leadership impact is typically discussed through the lens of leadership development or leadership education. As viewed by Komives, Mainella, Longerbeam, Osteen, and Owen (2006), leadership development is the process of helping students identify their strengths and develop leadership skills and competencies. Leadership education is the practice of creating intentional learning opportunities, mostly through experiential learning, to educate students on the academic discipline of leadership. Leadership development occurs over time as students begin to form identities as leaders (Komives et al., 2006). Leadership development explored how students developed a capacity to lead throughout their lives, while leadership education has extended beyond an experience to examine leadership interventions (Komives, et al., 2007).

Komives, Mainella, Longerbeam, Osteen, and Owen (2006) explained leadership development as engaging students with learning opportunities in their environments over time to



build their capacity to engage in leadership. Leadership development, as a process, involves three principles: (a) knowing, (b) being, and (c) doing (Komives et al., 2007). Students must have a sense of self, know who they are, and recognize what they value. Once students know themselves, they can begin to understand and know others. *Being* is committing to live one's leadership philosophy on a daily basis. Being ethical, principled, caring, and inclusive are a few requisite attributes of *being* as a principle of leadership (Komives et al., 2007). *Doing* refers to leadership as action oriented. Students engaging in leadership activities must do so in socially responsible ways to help the greater good. Exercising leadership to help the greater good is an example of *doing*.

Leadership interventions are programs designed intentionally to assist students in learning the academic discipline of leadership (Komives et al., 2007). Leadership interventions can be classified as courses, seminars, retreats, workshops, or other programs where leadership is taught or can be learned (Brungardt, 1996). Having the opportunity to lead others can impact students' soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership skills, and leadership adaptability (Brungardt, 1996). Student leadership educational opportunities include day long workshops, extracurricular programs, academic minors, and full degree granting programs (Micari, Gould, & Lainez, 2010). Cress, Astin, Zimmermen-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001) found that leadership training programs for college students create opportunities for volunteer service, experiential activities, and active learning through collaboration.

Interventions are not only developmentally beneficial, but fun. Logue et al. (2005) reported that student leaders found their experiences to be enjoyable, beneficial, fun, and overwhelmingly positive. Further, student leaders experienced an increase in their academic,

career, and personal skill development, which contributed to their positive perceptions of self or identity (Logue et al., 2005).

Students develop as leaders in meaningful ways, especially by affirming their own leadership identity (Micari et al., 2010). Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) identified five critical components of student leadership identity: (a) essential developmental influences, (b) developing self, (c) group influences, (d) changing view of self with others, and (e) broadening view of leadership.

In summary, leadership development takes multiple forms on college campuses. Traditionally, leadership development occurs through holding leadership positions. As Micari et al. (2005) explained, the impact of holding a leadership position showed significant relationships in cognitive, personal, and instrumental development. Not only were there developmentally beneficial outcomes to holding positions, but students saw leading others as a fun and engaging experience. Therefore, as the demand for future leaders grows so will the need for leadership programs on college campuses.

### ***Summary***

The literature review explained why learning communities and leadership opportunities are critical to student's development. While college campuses continue to develop educationally purposeful activities, high impact practices direct educators toward expanding experiential learning opportunities, learning communities, and leadership opportunities for undergraduate students. Student learning and student development are enhanced by student involvement. Student development work is best practiced if involvement in the classroom is matched with

extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. Involvement leads to social interactions with peers and peers have the most influence on students' college careers.

The college environment has changed significantly to create meaningful college experiences for students. The establishment of learning communities is an educationally-purposeful activity that has increased student engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Therefore, learning communities are high impact practices that encourage faculty involvement, have elements of peer mentoring, and allow students to develop leadership skills such as communication and teamwork.

Astin, Kuh, Tinto, Pascarella and Terenzini referenced learning communities in their research. Learning communities contain elements of shared knowing, knowledge, and responsibility (Tinto, 2000). Learning communities are dynamic structures which allow students to discuss course content while building meaningful relationships.

## **Chapter 3 - METHODOLOGY**

The literature review has supported the need for strong learning communities, student involvement, and leadership opportunities. The purpose of this study was to determine what student leaders experienced in a learning community of first semester freshmen in an introductory leadership course. Studying student leaders who led discussions with a small group of first semester freshmen created a unique environment. By studying student leaders through qualitative research, valuable information was gained about learning communities, student involvement, and the relationships that existed within a learning community.

Chapter three described the research methodology of the present study. The chapter began with a discussion of the research design, which includes rationale for selecting phenomenological inquiry as its methodology, and follows with the purpose of the study. The chapter also outlines the processes of participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness along with researcher bias.

### ***Research Design***

Qualitative research is based on the idea that people create knowledge and that research is a tool to make sense of the environment based on historical or present social perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative methodologies are commonly categorized into narrative inquiry, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and case study (Creswell, 2007). Since the voice of the participants was the most important aspect of the study, phenomenology was selected as this study's research methodology as the most effective way to capture the experience of being a student leader.

Phenomenological research seeks to understand the meaning behind the lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon for several individuals (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological studies explore an individual's world from the perspective of the person living it (Huberman & Miles, 2002) and examine how people perceive, describe, feel about, remember, or make sense of their world (Patton, 2002). The present study used the phenomenological method of semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Moustakas (1994) recommended researchers ask participants two general questions to discover what participants experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what contexts of situations have influenced or affected their experiences of the phenomenon. These two questions ultimately provided an understanding of the common experiences of the participants as it pertained to what it meant to be a class leader within a learning community of first-semester freshmen.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of this study was to determine what student leaders experienced in a learning community of first semester freshmen in an introductory leadership course. The primary research question was: *What do student leaders experience in a classroom learning community?* Four secondary questions framed the inquiry:

1. What have class leaders experienced in the classroom?
2. How has your role as a class leader shaped your impressions of a learning community?
3. What have you learned from your experience as a class leader?
4. How has this experience impacted your college career?

## ***Method***

### ***Research Participants***

Twenty-five participants were selected to participate in the study. Participants included undergraduate students and alumni. Undergraduate students were current class leaders who completed their role as a class leader one semester prior to the study. Alumni, were former class leaders who had completed their role as a class leader within five years of the study. All participants had earned, or were in the process of earning, a minor in leadership studies, an 18-credit-hour interdisciplinary academic program provided by the School of Leadership Studies.

### ***College and Academic Program***

The research was conducted at Kansas State University, a Midwest land grant institution that enrolled 23,588 students and 3,480 first semester freshmen in the fall of 2010 (Office of Planning and Analysis, 2010). The data was gathered at the School of Leadership Studies which offers and eighteen hour interdisciplinary minor in leadership studies. The School enrolls approximately 1,000 students annually (School of Leadership Studies, 2010)

### ***Selection of Research Participants***

The total number of class leaders from which this study could draw on was limited (class leader requirements are presented in Appendix A) because the class leader position is selective. Applicants had to hold junior or senior standing and have a minimum 3.0 cumulative GPA. Applicants who met these requirements were asked to interview for the position. Not all students who interviewed for a class leader position were hired.

Criterion sampling was used to identify participants. Students had to meet the criteria of being a class leader to participate in the study. They had to have completed one full semester as

a class leader to be eligible for participation in the current study and have taught in one of the large lecture sections (150 students) of LEAD 212, Introduction to Leadership Concepts. Students were recruited after they had taught for an entire semester to ensure that their responses were reflective of the overall experience. The first twenty five participants contacted to participate in the study agreed to participate.

### ***Instrumentation***

#### ***Interview Protocol***

Open-ended questions were used to ask participants about their experience as a class leader. The researcher developed an interview protocol, as suggested by Patton (2002), which included research questions and potential follow-up questions. The four secondary questions that framed the inquiry included (a) What have class leaders experienced in the classroom, (b) How has your role as a class leader shaped your impressions of a learning community, (c) What have you learned from your experience as a class leader, and (d) How has this experience impacted your college career? The interview protocol guide is presented in Appendix B.

#### ***Demographic Form***

A demographic form was used to collect demographic data about each participant including age, race/ethnicity, gender, and academic enrollment information. Participants were asked to include their academic major, state of residency, year in school, completed leadership courses, if they were a returning class leader and where they lived. The demographic form is presented in Appendix C.

#### ***Contact Summary Form***

Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended using a contact summary form that allows the researcher to reflect on individual interviews and summarize themes that emerged from each interview. This form was completed at the close of each interview to capture information that was significant to the study. This reflection allowed the researcher to think critically about the main issues or themes that emerged during the interview, identify salient or interesting points, and determine if follow-up questions would need to be considered. The contact summary form is presented in Appendix D.

### ***Data Collection***

The researcher followed ethical guidelines as required by the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Data collection occurred during the spring semester, 2011. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of each participant.

### ***Interview procedures***

Twenty-five class leaders, who meet the criteria for the study, were sent an e-mail inviting their participation in the study (Appendix E). All twenty-five individuals indicated their willingness to participate. Each individual was contacted by phone to schedule an interview. The script for these telephone calls is presented in Appendix F.

Individual interviews occurred in a small conference room in the Leadership Studies Building one with a solid door without a window. The room was selected to minimize distractions and to assure privacy. The participant sat at the head of the table, while the researcher sat to the participant's left. Two digital audio recorders were placed on the table to document each interview.



Participants were asked first to read and sign the IRB consent form (Appendix G). Next, the investigator asked whether the participant had any additional questions regarding the research interview. Each participant was reminded of his or her freedom to withdraw from the study at any point and was asked to complete the demographic form prior to the interview. Five of the alumni participants were interviewed over the phone because they were unable to travel to Manhattan, KS. Those participants were asked to either fax or e-mail their signed informed consent and demographic forms to the researcher prior to the phone interview. The phone interviews mirrored the same process as face-to-face interviews. The only difference was that interviews were conducted using speaker phones so the audio recorders could capture the data.

After participants signed the research consent forms the digital recorders were turned on, and the interview commenced. The researcher used an interview protocol guide to ensure consistency of the questions for each interview. Each participant was asked to provide detailed responses. Once the interview concluded, the researcher stopped the audio recorders, and the participant was notified of the debriefing process. Debriefing involved several steps including: (a) outlining next steps in the data collection process, (b) clarifying the timeline for reviewing transcripts, and (c) participant review of their transcribed interview. A formal letter of thanks was sent to each participant at the conclusion of this data-gathering process. This letter is presented in Appendix H.

During the sixth interview, the researcher asked the participant added another question to the interview protocol, and asked about the range of emotions that occurred throughout the sixteen week semester. This change in the protocol questions occurred because participants kept discussing their emotional connection to the experience. The researcher did not go back and ask

the first five participants about their range of emotions because saturation was met through the remaining nineteen participant responses.

### ***Transcribing the Data***

Transcribing phenomenological data is an extensive process requiring the researcher to spend significant time listening to, reading, and reviewing the data. The researcher hired a professional transcriber to transcribe each interview verbatim. Once the researcher received the transcribed interviews, the researcher replayed each audio recording and edited interviews for content accuracy. Abbreviations were spelled out, punctuation was added, and communication phrases such as “um,” “uh,” and “like” were deleted. The researcher added comments on the voice pitch and mood of the participant in order to accurately place comments within the correct context of the participant’s responses. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to protect confidentiality.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data coding began by reviewing all the interview data and making initial remarks in the margins of the transcripts. All statements were given equal value and then later determined as irrelevant or repetitive (Moustakas, 1994). Statements not pertaining to the research were determined irrelevant, and repetitive statements were condensed into one theme to make the data manageable. Irrelevant statements included tangents or ideas that strayed from the topic of the study. Repetitive statements served as a measure of frequency, guiding the researcher to view repetitive statements as significant to the participants and overall study. Examples of repetitive statements include, “My role as a class leader was to...” or “I established relationships with my

students, class leaders, and faculty.” The repetitive nature or frequency in which participants identified significant statements such as roles or relationships were indicators of meaning units.

Initial comments made in the margins of the transcribed interviews helped the researcher identify significant statements. Significant statements are accounts that directly connect to the central research question (Moustakas, 1994). A spreadsheet was created to track significant statements. These were grouped into larger units of information called meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). Thirty-nine meaning units emerged and 1,747 significant statements were recorded. Each significant statement directly connecting to the central research question and sub questions was highlighted. The process of highlighting significant statements is referred to as horizontalization (Creswell, 2007).

Based on the most salient themes that emerged from the significant statements and meaning units, a coding chart was established that included learning communities, personal development, and leadership. During the coding process, the researcher had problems differentiating between personal development and leadership. To avoid double coding of significant statements, the researcher decided to collapse the code of leadership into personal development. The coding chart was altered, transcripts were re-read, and significant statements were highlighted and quantified according to the frequency in which participants mentioned a particular concept. Frequency of participant responses aided the researcher in identifying the dominant ideas in the transcripts.

The researcher identified six sub codes (e.g., specific terms) that were established as a result of analyzing the two main codes. Sub-codes helped the researcher organize the data to identify the depth of what participants discussed in their interview. After the data were coded, the researcher searched for patterns within the sub codes and seven themes emerged. The final

essence of what it meant to be a class leader encapsulated the seven themes that emerged from the central research question.

### ***Trustworthiness***

The current research was conducted to describe the human experience of the participants and not to generalize findings. While qualitative data is not generalized, it must still be validated as trustworthy. Creswell (2007) recommended that qualitative researchers engage in at least two validation procedures. The researcher used member checks to validate the coding process and peer reviews to verify the accuracy of interpreting the coding chart. Lincoln and Guba (1985) used credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative studies. Each of the four aforementioned areas used in this study are addressed below to discuss validation procedures.

### ***Credibility***

The researcher guarded against inaccurate information by allowing each participant to review his or her comments after interviews were transcribed. This process provided each participant with the opportunity to add or change any of the written transcripts. Five participants were selected based on their accessibility to judge the accuracy and credibility of the data, analyses, and interpretations drawn from the coding chart. This process is referred to as member checks (Creswell, 2007). The researcher coded each of the participant's transcribed interviews and asked the participants to review the codes to discover if statements were misinterpreted. The five participants verified that the researcher had accurately captured their responses as defined through the coding chart.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified using peer auditors or peer review sessions as a credible option to double check for accuracy of the data analysis. Coded transcripts were selected at random and peer reviewed by two of the researcher's colleagues and major professor. Peer review sessions allowed external constituents to ask challenging questions about methods, meanings and interpretations. A peer auditor is typically a colleague or another outside source that reads the transcribed interviews and participates in the coding process.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability is the extent to which the results of a study may be useful in another setting (Whitt, 1991). To enable the determination of this study's transferability and to learn more about the participants' lived experiences, the researcher provided rich details about the setting and context in which the class leaders were studied. The setting and context will be described through a structural description in Chapter 5. A full understanding of the nature of the leadership position will eventually guide the researcher in developing training programs, instructional manuals, and policies to assist future class leaders.

### ***Dependability***

For a study to be dependable, the researcher must provide the appropriate evidence during the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Appropriate evidence includes the interview process, number of participants, length of interviews, and follow-up with participants. Since the researcher was the only person asking interview questions, the interview questions were asked in a consistent manner. Participants were asked follow-up questions to explore the deeper meaning of interview responses. Using an interview protocol guide of questions and following the same interview process each time lends to a study's dependability. Twenty-five participants were

interviewed with the length of the interviews ranging from 21 to 92 minutes. The researcher reviewed and analyzed the interview transcripts over a nine month period.

### ***Confirmability***

Keeping track of data, notes, and products to verify that logical interpretations were formed from the findings of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) ensures confirmability. To ensure the confirmability of this study, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and the researcher saved all the notes from the data analysis and other reflective notes from each interview. Keeping the data allowed the researcher to review the raw data and confirm the results. All written documentation pertaining to the study (e.g., interview transcripts, researcher notes, consent documents, and interview instruments) was stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. Electronic data were kept on a flash drive, which was locked in the same file cabinet in the researcher's office. Only the researcher has access to this file cabinet.

### ***Researcher Background***

Good practices in phenomenological research included acknowledging the researcher's own experiences and the context and situations that influenced the researcher's lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). To identify the roles and biases of the researcher, the researcher reported his personal experiences through a process called bracketing, "a technique used to set aside the researcher's experiences in order to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). Bracketing is the first step in the phenomenological reduction process (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher relied on Moustakas's modification of the phenomenological data analysis that included the researcher's personal experiences into the study. The researcher's personal experiences included length of

time with class leaders, former university positions, researcher characteristics, current responsibilities, and philosophical assumptions of the phenomenology.

The researcher worked with class leaders in a large lecture course. For the last seven years, the researcher has hired, trained, and developed class leaders to assist with small groups of first semester freshmen to deliver course content and assist students as they navigate their first semester in college. The researcher has worked as an Admissions Representative and as an Assistant Director of New Student Services. Having a background in student development work, the researcher was committed to making sure students had a positive experience in their learning community and learned the academic content. The researcher was extremely positive, enthusiastic, and dedicated to working with undergraduate students. Therefore, the researcher attempted to bracket his tendency to be overly positive of what participants learned, experienced, or described in regards to their work within a learning community.

Part of the researcher's responsibility was to develop programs that supported class leaders in their facilitation skills, content knowledge, and classroom instruction techniques. However, the researcher acknowledged his tendency to focus more on the needs and interests of the students under the tutelage of the class leaders than on those of the class leaders themselves. While the experience of the first-year student was important, it did not address the actual experience of the student leading the learning community. Therefore, this study aimed to concentrate on the peer leaders rather than those being led. The researcher was aware that his questioning focused more on how the peer leaders meet the needs of the first semester freshmen rather than on the experience of the class leader.

Because of the researcher's role, class leaders participating in the study might have perceived the researcher in a position of power. Being in a position of power could have

impacted participants' responses to the interview questions. The participant could have shaped their responses to reflect the ideas and concepts learned through training rather than disclosing experiences that took place in their learning community that they were unprepared to handle.

Since the researcher had prior knowledge of why class leaders existed, the focus of the researcher shifted to learning more about the experiences of a class leader. The researcher approached each interview with an open mind and viewed the participants as the expert in working with students in a learning community. Being aware of researcher biases helped to neutralize ideas and thoughts and remind the researcher to focus on what participants shared.

### ***Limitations of the Current Study***

This study was conducted under the assumption that learning communities are high-impact practices and yield opportunities for meaningful learning to occur. However, not all learning communities lead to learning. It is quite possible that one of the participants could manage a learning community of first semester freshmen for an entire semester, and not learn anything as it pertained to learning communities of personal development.

Class leaders are high ability and high achieving students. They must receive faculty nominations to be considered for the position. Due to the qualifications of the hiring and selection process, student participants had a cumulative 3.0 GPA or above. Therefore, the researcher understood that the participants were academically successful students who had made the initial commitment to be involved within their academic program of study.

The lack of racial or ethnic diversity was a limitation of the present study. Between 2006 to 2010, ten African Americans, two Latinos, and one Asian participated as class leaders out of a



total of 274 class for a total of less than 5% of racial and ethnic diversity (School of Leadership Studies, 2010). However, by incorporating quota sampling (selecting specific participants to participate in a study who meet the sampling criteria), the researcher included African American and Latino students in the study so results were not skewed to represent predominantly white cultural norms, values, and beliefs.

The reported data and overall experience of participants were overwhelmingly positive. The researcher disclosed his positive nature and excitement in working with undergraduate students. It was important to note that one-hundred percent of the participants, who were contacted, agreed to participate in the study. Moreover, the protocol questions did not ask participants to explain or describe negative, bad, or undesirable experiences.

To determine the general essence (overarching theme that emerged from the data) of participants' experiences, the researcher decided to not disaggregate the data by specific sub-groups by race or gender. Race and gender were accounted for through the process of quota sampling, and the overall rationale for the study was to present a general essence of what it means to be a class leader, not what it means to be an African American class leader, female class leader, or male class leader. The researcher understood that the decision not to disaggregate the data was a limitation of the study because the researcher neither addressed, acknowledges, nor affirmed the cultural identity of class leaders.

### ***Summary***

This chapter introduced the methods and procedures used to conduct the present study. A phenomenological research approach was used to structure the research design. Criterion sampling was used to identify 25 participants to be interviewed for the study, resulting in 25

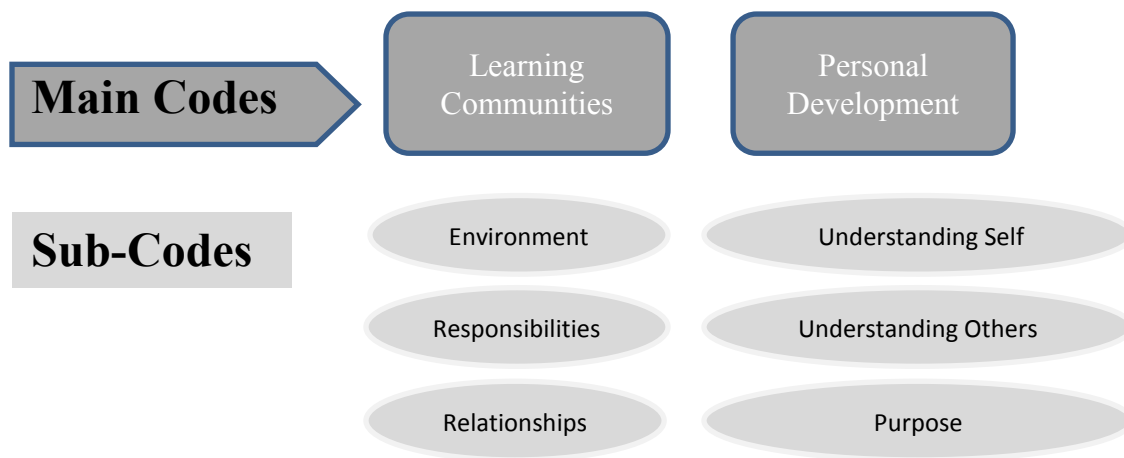
completed interviews. One-hundred percent of participants who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone. The interview procedures were consistent and all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and available for participants to read and review.

The data analysis section outlined the procedures used to assist the researcher in the organization of key themes and categories. A coding chart was developed that included two codes and six sub-codes. The coding chart was used to identify significant statements of shared meaning among the participants to help explain the overall essence of what it means to be a class leader. Also discussed in this chapter was the trustworthiness of the research. The researcher discussed the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study to present the trustworthiness of the research. To account for research bias, the researcher disclosed how long he had been working with class leaders and his specific role in the hiring, training, and developmental process of class leaders. Limitations of the current study were examined. Chapter Four presents the results from the data analysis.

## Chapter 4 - RESULTS

This chapter reported the findings of the current study. The results provided a context for understanding what participants experienced when leading a learning community. The data were analyzed, significant statements were identified from the transcripts and meaning units were established. The meaning units were organized and used to formulate two codes: (a) learning communities and (b) personal development. Sub-codes helped the researcher organize the data. Sub-codes for learning communities included (a) environment, (b) responsibilities, and (c) relationships. Sub-codes for personal development included (a) understanding self, (b) understanding others, and (c) purpose. The coding chart presented in Figure 4.1 illustrates the process of coding.

**Figure 4.1 Visual Illustration of the Coding Process**



### *Learning Communities*

This section summarized the findings regarding participants' understanding of learning communities. As participants described their experiences within the learning community, three sub-codes became apparent: participants discussed with frequency the (a) physical features, or

environment, of a learning community, (b) their responsibilities as class leaders, and (c) the relationships that emerged from the experience. The majority of data came from the interview question, *How has being a class leader shaped your impressions of a learning community?*

### ***Sub-Code: Environment***

This section described how participants viewed the environmental elements of a learning community. Environmental elements were subdivided into structural aspects and relational aspects of the learning community. The structural aspects of the learning community included class size, location, space, and time. Relational aspects of the learning community included openness, safety, and diversity. Participants described the perceived benefits of a learning community based on their involvement. Examples of participants' comments regarding the physical and relational environment are represented in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1 Environment of a Learning Community**

Sub-codes	What happened & how participants expressed the concept	Evidence: Examples from the Transcripts
Environment	Structural (Class Size, Location, Space, Time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes we were in the building...sometimes we were outside.</li> <li>• We were in different parts of the leadership building each week.</li> <li>• Unless you sit in a big circle, you are not going to be able to see everyone.</li> <li>• Fifteen people sitting around talking discussing leadership properties.</li> <li>• We only met once a week.</li> <li>• I ran out of time....we only had 50 minutes.</li> </ul>
	Relational (Openness, Safety, Diversity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was a give and take between class leaders and students...it was more of a conversation...it was a relaxed setting.</li> <li>• Students felt comfortable sharing their life experiences</li> <li>• Shared learning...there is not a hierarchy; everyone is on an equal level.</li> <li>• Most of them felt really open, most people really did feel comfortable just talking in our group.</li> <li>• We had members of Greek housing, non-Greek housing, out-of-state students, students from Johnson County and Western, KS.</li> </ul>

As participants described the physical environment they mentioned (a) class size, (b) location, (c) space, and (d) time. As participants described the relational environment they commented on the (a) openness, (b) safety, and (c) diversity of the learning community. Participants' construction of meaning from the physical and relational aspects of their environment contributed to their overall appreciation for learning communities.

### ***Physical Elements of a Learning Community***

Participants emphasized the difference between large lectures and smaller classes. Evelyn perceived large lectures as impersonal, with instructors and professors distributing information and students taking notes. Enrolled students attended a large lecture once a week for fifty minutes and then attended a smaller learning community for fifty minutes, or, as Greg called it, "The second half of class." Greg saw the importance of creating smaller learning communities within a large lecture classroom. Greg said, "Whether it is a class of 200 people, like the intro class is, you can still break [large lecture class] off into classes that are much smaller and more intimate."

Ashley contributed to the conversation on class size by saying, "When people think of a learning community, obviously they think of a small group." The average number of students per learning community was 12.8 students as indicated by participants. Some participants mentioned that 15 students were more than they could handle, especially given the available classroom space. Will said, "I think the group was small enough [12 students] to where they [the students] really got to know each other, and even though they were different, they'd be excited and willing to work together."

Participants chose where their learning communities met on the campus. Some participants met their communities in outdoor areas while others used a classroom setting.

Dorothy discussed the impact of location on the learning community experience:

I remember specifically, it was my second year of [being] a class leader. We had small group in the library of the alumni center so just the environment itself was very proper, or you know strict, I guess kind of feeling. And there was a nice day out and they [students] really wanted to go outside. I remember going outside and just that in itself helping relax the students...so they wanted more of a relaxed environment.

Christopher chose meeting locations based on the availability of a white board.

Christopher said, “I found that my class worked a lot better when I wrote stuff on the white board and tried to draw connections to course content.” Christopher mentioned that the white board seemed to capture his students’ attention more than taking notes or participating in other ways.

Participants learned that creating an environment where their students could focus while still being engaged was very important to a successful learning community. Participants made decisions on how to arrange the physical space to engage students in the process of learning. They re-arranged desks and chairs in classrooms or in open community space to make the space intimate for small group discussions. Olivia said:

Unless you sit in a big circle you are not going to be able to see everyone and that can be a challenge depending if you are meeting in the fireplace or tree house locations [small breakout spaces at the end of each hallway] at the School of Leadership Studies.

Time was another important structural element of the learning community since the learning community met for fifty minutes once a week. Participants reported that they had difficulty managing class time and either ran out of time or finished too quickly. Robert noted, “Our very first class period that we had lasted about half the time because everyone was so quiet

and I was so nervous I was talking at a rapid pace.” Olivia said, “If you let them [your students] out early, the next week they are going to expect to get out early.”

Overall, the physical environment elements of class size, location, space, and time played an important role in the success of their learning communities.

### ***Relational Elements of a Learning Community***

Participants discussed the relational elements of the learning environment, which included openness, safety, and diversity within the community. Participants valued openness in their learning communities. Many participants found that if their students felt a sense of openness, they would be willing to participate in discussions. Evelyn offered a comparison between students’ comfort levels in lectures versus learning communities:

I think the more you know your fellow students [within a learning community], the more willing you are to share, learn, and open up as opposed to just sitting in a lecture. The more you know your fellow students the better you are able to learn.

Participants identified that it was important for them to model what it meant to be open, transparent, and receptive to different ideas and viewpoints. Ian stated, “I learned to set aside my own ideas or perspectives to understand someone else’s [comments].” Edward noted, “I really opened up to them [my students] and shared my fears of not being able to make it through my major... and really told them [the students] at one point I was scared that I might not graduate.” Vanessa offered a concise description when she remarked, “A learning community should be open, it should be honest, it should be free for creative flow.”

Participants described their learning communities as safe environments where students valued diverse perspectives, listened, asked questions, and stepped outside comfort zones. Vanessa said, “This position gave me exposure, exposure to other students that I don’t think I would have worked with or spoken to.” Trevor observed that the safe space of the learning

community allowed him to facilitate a conversation around diversity. He explained, “It’s ok to ask questions and be comfortable doing it...let’s talk about the Black area in the Union [a space in the Union where African American students ate lunch and socialized between classes], how you feel about Black Student Union, or Black fraternities and sororities, or just whatever question you want to ask.” Trevor valued diversity and encouraged others to talk about topics that his students found uncomfortable.

Participants mentioned the important role that diversity played in their learning communities. Demographics such as (a) hometown, (b) academic major, (c) Greek affiliation, (d) personality type, (e) leadership style, (f) gender, and (g) race or ethnicity all contributed to a group’s diversity. Christopher said, “My small group was really diverse. You know [geographically], we had kids from southeast Kansas, western Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska and a couple of Kansas City kids and one or two might have been from Topeka, KS.” Participants said that geographic diversity brings different perspectives and a higher discussion level into the learning environment.

In conclusion, the study examined participants’ experience of a learning community as a small group of diverse students engaged in the process of learning. Learning communities were perceived by the participants to have both physical and relational aspects of the learning community environment. The physical environment of a learning community included class size, location, space, and time. The relational environment of a learning community included a feeling of openness, safety, and diversity. Overall, participants learned the value of managing a classroom environment and fostering a safe environment where diverse groups of students can discuss class content.



### ***Sub-Code: Responsibilities of a class leader***

Participants were responsible for managing a learning community and facilitating course content. They were asked to be the authority figure within the learning community. Three salient responsibilities emerged from participant interviews: (a) preparing lesson plans, (b) grading student assignments, and (c) leading groups. Other responsibilities emerged, including helping students transition into college as first-semester freshmen and acting as an advocate for the leadership minor. As indicated by their identification with these responsibilities, participants viewed their role within the learning community as a (a) mentor, (b) facilitator, (c) instructor, (d) role model, and (e) peer leader. Table 4.2 presents a representative sampling of participants' comments regarding the responsibilities and role of a class leader.

**Table 4.2 Responsibilities of a Class Leader**

Sub-codes	What happened & How participants expressed the concept	Evidence: Examples from the Transcripts
Responsibilities	Responsibilities (Grading Papers, Lesson Planning and Leading Groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I have to grade papers.</li><li>• I was already doing the class prep and it was just the grading that ended up taking more time.</li><li>• We have to learn course content...each week we go to class prep.</li><li>• It is your responsibility to get the information out there to your students. I had to plan to be successful.</li><li>• You have to adapt your teaching style according to the lesson plan.</li></ul>
	Roles Class Leaders Played (Mentor, Facilitator, Instructor, Role Model, Peer Leader)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ...mentor because you have been there, you have been through what they are going through. (Mentors)</li><li>• I asked the questions and kept the conversation moving. (Facilitators)</li><li>• I'm your teacher...my role is to be the instructor. (Instructors)</li><li>• You have to model appropriate behavior. (Role Models)</li><li>• I learned about that awkward line between being their leader, but also... their friend. (Peer Leaders)</li></ul>

### ***Responsibilities of Class Leaders in a Learning Community***

Participants' responsibilities for lesson planning, grading, and leading groups were taken seriously. Participants learned quickly how important these tasks were in generating quality discussions that engaged students in the learning process.

Lesson planning consisted of attending a weekly class preparation session to prepare content, discussion questions, and learning activities. Participants reported that lesson planning and preparing for weekly lessons were valuable learning experiences. Participants prepared for class throughout the semester by attending training days, retreats, and weekly class preparation meetings. Jeremy reflected on the importance of preparation before class:

I really did learn that I need to prepare because I am expecting them to be prepared. I am expecting them to care so it should go tenfold back to me that if I do not care. If I am not passionate about it, why should they be interested?

Christopher said:

I have learned how to be a little more off the cuff, because you know you can plan, and you can plan, and you can plan, and it is probably still not going to go exactly the way you figured it would in the classroom.

Grading was another big responsibility placed on the participants. While participants understood that grading was one of their responsibilities, it caused them to question how grading would impact their relationship with students. Jeremy said, "I felt terrible about giving scores on the first paper because I thought it was my fault for not preparing the students to be successful." Quinn said, "I was worried that they would hate me because I gave them low points...I wondered how it would affect our relationship or if they would get discouraged." Evelyn shared her thoughts on grading papers, which showed how much time she put into evaluating the work of her students.

Well, the papers were all top-notch. I know we talked a lot in class prep about you know, you do not give easy A's, and you do not just pass it [evaluating papers] off. So when I got the first set of papers and we went over them, and over them, thinking that these were all "A" papers. Seriously [participant was laughing], you know these are all A papers!

They are good quality papers. So that is when I came in and I talked to my lead instructor, to confirm that they were indeed, “A” papers.

Participants wanted to make sure they were grading fairly and were consistent across all sections of Introduction to Leadership Concepts. Dorothy said, “It [evaluating papers] is more subjective than I thought grading was. I thought it was based strictly on rubrics, but when you have rubrics, it [grading] is still somewhat subjective. I think I learned how difficult it is to grade reflective papers.” Generally, students turned their papers in on time and did quality work, but there were a few students in each section that did not meet minimum requirements and this posed a challenge for participants.

Participants were asked to explain what they learned about leading groups, the third primary responsibility as determined by participant interviews, during their time as class leaders. Facilitation and time management were the most commonly cited skills students learned from leading groups. Robert talked about the importance of practicing his facilitation prior to class.

Sometimes, you know, you practice for hours before [your facilitation]. I think I had a Tuesday class...so I would practice on Monday night for a couple of hours...you did not want to screw up for the class because it is their education that they are paying for and you are trying to better them.

Olivia mentioned the need to not always be the focal person in the group and not do all the talking because that gave students more ownership and responsibility for their learning. Other participants reflected on what leading groups taught them about the importance of asking questions, being flexible, and patient enough to develop students’ thoughts and ideas.

Participants felt responsible for their students and the course content. On leading a group of first semester freshmen, Robert stated, “It put pressure on me, it was a good pressure, I did not want to screw up because I knew I was leading and helping ten other people out in my small

group.” Will said, “Students are looking up to you for the answers and I felt obligated to hold up that responsibility and be accountable for the class.” Kathy commented:

I have experienced what it means to be accountable. There would be times in class where I would say, you know I am going to have an e-mail out to you on Friday and I may not get it out until Saturday morning and it might not be the biggest deal but there will be that one student that catches on and says they needed that information on Friday because they had already made plans to do other things on Saturday and Sunday.

Participants reiterated continually that lesson planning, grading papers, and leading groups were significant and challenging responsibilities. These were new experiences for participants and the new learning and doing posed challenges.

### ***Roles of Class Leaders in a Learning Community***

Participants identified specific roles and their approach to fulfilling these roles. Participants felt challenged because they had to learn to balance their role as an authority figure with their role as a peer. They used many terms to describe their role as class leader: mentor, facilitator, instructor, guide, role model, and peer leader.

Mentor was the most frequently chosen title among participants to characterize their role as a class leader. Participants saw themselves as a guide or someone who had been through a similar learning experience. Jeremy said:

Being a class leader, you have to take that step. You have to take that authority position, while not being too authoritative. It is not a professor to a student [role] and it is not even like [the role of ] a TA to a student. It is literally [a] student to student [role]. You could almost call it... mentor because you have been there. You have been through what they [your students] are going through, and you have done what they are doing right now.

Ian mentioned that class leaders are mentors and guides to help students see the benefits of the learning community. Participants saw value in their students questioning the material and felt as if they were mentoring students through the information and course content. Participants

mentioned the importance of bouncing ideas off of one another and gaining instant credibility with their students because they had once been in the same class and learned the same material.

The second most commonly referenced title was facilitator. Participants saw their role as facilitating learning, but not learning for their students. Participants commented that there was a specific skill or art to facilitating conversations and trying to draw information out of their students.

Eight participants referred to themselves as instructors whose primary role was to teach. Barbara said, “From a class leader point of view, teaching was the first time I had seen everything [sixteen weeks of course content and student assignments] kind of come together. It was fun to be their instructor.” Christopher talked about what it meant to play the role of the teacher. He said he had to reconnect with what it was like to be a freshman and see things from another perspective. Christopher commented that it took some time to figure out how to apply the course content as an instructor. He was used to learning information, not teaching the information to students.

Participants used the term role model to explain how they intentionally demonstrated appropriate behavior in the classroom. Participants commented that all eyes were on them and that their actions and behaviors were important to the delivery of the course content. Many participants said that if they were excited about being in the classroom and interested in the subject, so too would their students be. Dorothy mentioned being intentional about modeling a positive behavior earlier on in the semester and then moving into more of a facilitator role by being the question prober.

Other participants saw themselves as peer leaders. Olivia said, “I am only two years older than them so there is kind of that fine line that you walk between being a peer, but also

being a peer leader.” The fine line that Olivia mentioned was echoed by other participants. Pamela explained that she was assertive with telling her students exactly how she saw her role. Pamela said, “I’m your leader, I’m grading your papers, I’m teaching you this information, I mean, you need to look to me as a leader, but at the same time, I’m your peer.” Fawn saw herself as having multiple roles within her learning community. This comment was a distinct departure from other respondents:

It was an eye-opening experience for me to be able to be a teacher to them and not just be a facilitator. I was able to teach them material I learned two years ago and put my own leadership I had been studying the past three years into practice by being their mentor and being their teacher. Teachers teach material from large lecture with an emphasis on course content, facilitators have discussions about personal experiences, and mentors are people who students can confide in, are close in age, and come to you outside of class with their problems.

The two most commonly noted skills that were developed through this experience were time management and facilitation. The act of leading a group took different forms depending on the perspective of the participant. Some participants led through mentoring and facilitating while others took the role as an instructor, role model, or peer leader. Regardless of role, participants learned what it meant to be responsible (lesson planning, grading, leading groups) for a learning community of first-semester freshmen.

### ***Sub-Code: Relationships***

Participants emphasized the importance of relationships in the learning community. Participants identified three types of relationships that resulted from their class leader experiences: (a) relationships with students, (b) relationships with other class leaders, and (c) relationships with faculty. These relationships changed over time, depending on the task. Participants characterized these relationships as caring and long lasting. Table 4.3 presents sample participant comments regarding relationships.

**Table 4.3 Relationships**

Sub-codes	What happened & How participants expressed the concept	Evidence: Examples from the Transcripts
Relationships	Students in the Learning Community  Class Leaders  Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I'm still trying to talk to them, send them e-mails and just see how they are doing.</li><li>• They [my students] start to trust you...comfortable relationship</li><li>• I really connected with the other class leaders...some of them I was already friends with.</li><li>• I would bounce ideas off other class leaders when I saw them in class</li><li>• I had the opportunity to get very close with the faculty and build some very strong relationships.</li><li>• Lead instructors [Faculty} were small group leaders for class leaders...</li></ul>

### ***Student Relationships***

Participants described their relationships with students as caring, helping, and supportive. These relationships extended beyond the classroom. Participants cared about how their students adjusted to college and succeeded in class. Participants expressed their care by spending extra time with students who needed help on papers, assignments, or extra assistance with issues outside of class. Steven said that he helped one of his students prepare for an interview. Christopher noted that he gave grammar lessons after class. Robert reported that his students e-mailed him to schedule a meeting over coffee to check their papers. Participants reported that their students sent text messages and e-mailed them to ask questions about student organizations, leadership opportunities, and other classes.

Relationships with students were characterized by participants as long lasting or continuous as demonstrated by interaction outside of class and even long after the course was completed. Participants recalled out-of-class social gatherings. Heath said, "We went to Taco Bell [fast food restaurant] afterwards one night and hung out for a half hour or so after we completed Cats for Cans [a community service project]." Yancey said, "The Harry Potter movie

came out, and my group all went together...my group made connections outside of the classroom.”

Fawn reflected on her ongoing social relationship with a former student. “One of my students is a photographer for Marketing and Communications and we still talk and touch base. I enjoy seeing how he is doing as an individual.” Seventeen participants reported that they saw their students on campus frequently or remained in contact with them. Robert noted that he saw one of his former students on campus and took the time to visit. He mentioned that it was great to learn what was happening in his former student’s life. Other participants said that they stayed in contact with their former students by utilizing social networks, primarily Facebook.

Grading papers contributed to the participant’s ability to connect with their students and learn more about each student because they were reading reflection papers. Participants commented how much they enjoyed reading students’ reflective papers because they learned more about their student’s leadership experiences and how each student connected with the course content. Pamela said:

You get a deeper relationship to them when you can read their papers, you know, something that they’ve been through, something that they’ve experienced, or the way they feel about something, or *why* they feel that. Reading their papers helped in my relationships with the students.

Jeremy enjoyed the fact that his students demonstrated an understanding of course content. Not only was he able to evaluate his students’ work, but he recognized the connection between what his students wrote in class and how they acted in the classroom. Students were asked to write about their Myers Briggs Personality Type [personality assessment] and their five strengths [Donald Clifton’s StrengthsFinder™]. Jeremy enjoyed reading his students papers and then seeing his students personalities and strengths expressed within the learning community.



Reading their papers, you really got an inside look, especially the personal philosophy of leadership stuff. You read what they wrote and you understand it! You would think you would read it once, grade it, and move on, but when you are in the classroom and you watch them you now analyze and see it in the classroom.

Participants valued the relationships with individual students in terms of their own interpersonal communication skills. Greg said, “I have always not been the strongest at building the personal relationships into my leadership style, but I realized the importance of relationships when working with my learning community.” Will described his work with students in this way:

You have to be able to reach the students and relate to the group. You are taking care of the constituents, everybody in the group to make sure that you don’t have anyone that feels a little bit lost or feels disengaged...they need to connect with what’s going on in the group.

### ***Class Leader Relationships***

Participants spent a substantial amount of time working together preparing lesson plans and attending weekly meetings. As a result, participants felt more connected with other class leaders than with peers in their own majors. Eighteen participants discussed the relationships that emerged among fellow class leaders. Nine participants mentioned specifically that they developed strong friendships with other class leaders as they worked to help each other become better class leaders. Pamela said:

We still text and stuff like that. I feel like it’s a club or organization on campus, like a class leader club...I feel closer to class leaders than I do with students in my own major because we put in the extra work together, and we *wanted* to do this. I don’t always want to go to the classes in my major, but here, you want to go to class, and you want to teach every time, you want to go to the 7:30 meetings. We’re all different but we all have the common thing, we teach together!

Participants commented about the importance of being able to partner with another class leader as they planned and prepared class lessons. They felt as if being class leaders added to their networks of peers across campus.

### *Faculty Relationships*

Participants were aware of the special bond that existed between not only fellow class leaders, but also among the leadership faculty. Fifteen participants reported the importance of having connections with the faculty team and lead instructors of Introduction to Leadership Concepts. Trevor spoke of how his experience as a class leader influenced his relationships with faculty:

I had the opportunity to get very close with the [faculty] and build some very strong relationships with them and not feeling like they were even really over you, but more like your partners and colleagues and helping guide you along this journey.

Pamela stated, “I feel more connected to Leadership Studies, like in walking through the building I feel like I can step into everybody’s office more now than I did before.” Ian viewed the faculty relationships as mentoring relationship because he was nearing graduation and appreciated faculty support. Other participants saw the faculty team as a resource--people to go to for encouragement or support.

Participants indicated that three types of relationship emerged: (a) relationships with students, (b) relationships with other class leaders, and (c) relationships with faculty.

Participants described the relationships with their students as caring, and those interactions extended outside the formal class meeting and continued after the course was completed.

Participants felt extremely close to their fellow class leaders due to the amount of time they spent together preparing lesson plans and brainstorming ideas. Participants noted a meaningful difference in their experience with class leaders and faculty as compared with peers and faculty in their own major. Overall, participants extended their networks across campus as they worked with students, class leaders, and faculty. The relationships varied in nature, but seemed to have had a positive impact on the lives of participants in the study.

## ***Personal Development***

Educationally purposeful activities are beneficial to college students because they promote continuous learning and personal development. Personal development is defined as the way a student grows, progresses, or increases their developmental capacity (Rodgers, 1990) as a result of their experience teaching a small group of freshmen. When analyzing the impact and significance of the class leader position, the data were coded to identify elements of personal development in participants' reflections on what it meant to lead a group of first-semester freshmen in a learning community. Personal development data were arranged into three sub-codes: (a) understanding self, (b) understanding others, and (c) purpose.

### ***Sub-Code: Understanding Self***

Understanding self required reflection on aspects of growth, progress, and developmental capacity. Participants reflected on their experience as a class leader, explored what they learned, and assessed how they grew as a leader. Participants described development through affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes. Affective changes were categorized as the range of emotions that participants experienced throughout the semester. Cognitive changes occurred as a result of a perspective shift in how participants perceived and thought about leadership. Behavioral changes were identified as the action of exercising leadership within the learning community. Participants identified their reflections as beneficial to their personal growth and development. Table 4.4 presents representative statements that pertained to understanding self.

**Table 4.4 Understanding Self**

Sub-codes	What happened & How participants expressed the concept	Evidence: Examples from the Transcripts
Understanding Self	Affective (emotions experienced)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I was anxious on the first day of class.</li><li>• I worried that grading papers would have a negative impact on the relationships I established with my students.</li></ul>
	Cognitive (critical thinking, perspective shift)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I learned that there are different ways to approach different people.</li><li>• I needed to slow down; I needed to get my thoughts together... so that, as a person, I could grow.</li><li>• My patience has grown immensely.</li><li>• I now see leadership as a process.</li><li>• Leadership is building personal relationships.</li></ul>
	Behavioral (exercising leadership)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You have to be confident because [the students] can tell when you are not.</li><li>• Developing into a leader is something that you can't just say that you are going to go out and do; it's something you have to practice every single day.</li><li>• Modeling a positive behavior had an impact on my students.</li></ul>

Participants experienced a range of emotions throughout the course of a sixteen-week semester. Through the process of teaching and facilitating, participants became aware of their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. The following comments described affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes that participants identified as they became more aware of their own abilities, strengths, and weaknesses.

### *Affective*

Eleven participants expressed surprise at how much satisfaction or enjoyment they received from leading classes. While enjoyment was the primary emotion participants commented on, they discovered a range of emotions throughout their experience such as nervousness, excitement, anxiety, and concern.

Participants recalled feeling nervous on the first day of class. They said that anxiety came from wanting to meet their students, wondering if their students would like them, and not

knowing anything about the students initially. Matt mentioned, “On the first day, breaking from large lecture going to small group, my knees were shaking.” Participants were aware of the importance of making a good first impression on the first day of class. While some participants were nervous, others expressed enthusiasm. Lacey said she was excited to see how her students were going to connect, Vanessa was eager for the new school year, and Steve was thrilled to meet people.

Excitement and nervousness occurred at the beginning of the semester as participants met their students. During the middle of the semester, participants felt overwhelmed with the responsibilities of being a class leader and completing their own academic course work. At the end of the semester, most participants reflected on how much they enjoyed the entire experience, but expressed sadness as the class ended.

### *Cognitive*

Participants experienced cognitive changes as well. Thinking critically helped participants to form values or re-conceptualize how they viewed leadership. Barbara commented on connecting back to one of her core values: “I value learning, as a class leader you put yourself out there and you know you make a mistake and that is ok, you pick yourself up and you learn from it.” Other participants noted that this experience caused them to take their academics more seriously.

When participants were asked to think about how their experience changed their view or perception about leadership, many participants commented that leadership is a process. Fawn saw leadership as a process because course content and students were always changing from one situation to the next. She said:

Leadership is kind of about ownership...it is about making what you want of it and standing by principle, morals, and beliefs...Being a leader is experience, it is trial and

error. It is learning from your past and seeing what you can take from it as you lead in the future.

Trevor struggled to define leadership, saying:

It's kind of hard to put it in words [because]... how do you teach leadership? Leadership is asking a lot of questions as opposed to telling someone [what to do]. We kind of all figure it out, but it's still hard to put it into words what it is, because it is what it is.

Trevor's quote highlighted that leadership was an abstract concept that involved a process that varied from individual to individual.

Pamela noted a shift in her cognitive development during her experience as a class leader:

...what I learned...I needed to slow down, I needed to get my thoughts together, I needed to figure everything out so that, as a person, I could grow. And so that's affected my students, my professional career, my relationships...everything changed in the fall, and I think it's because of this [her experience as a class leader].

### ***Behavioral***

Participants experienced changes in their own behavior as it pertained to skill development, how they exercised leadership within their learning community, or how they approached their own academic work. The primary skills participants reported developing while serving as a class leader were communication and facilitation. Will said, "My students were a reflection of me and how I was able to effectively communicate. I realized if my students didn't understand something, I probably was not explaining it well enough." Participants learned quickly that if their students had a lot of questions about assignments, due dates, or course content, it was the participants' responsibility to find better ways to communicate expectations.

In some cases, participants expressed the need to change their behavior because they started seeing things from a different perspective. For example, it was not until Robert saw his students texting in class from the perspective of a teacher that he decided to no longer text in his own classes. He understood the impact that his texting in class would have on his professors:

Ever since I became this class leader I stopped text messaging in class because a couple of times I would see someone text messaging during my class and I thought that was rude so now I know how tough it is to be a teacher.

One class leader noticed a change in her behavior as it pertained to appearance. Olivia mentioned that her sorority sisters noticed she would dress professionally on the days she was teaching. Olivia made the connection that dressing nicely gave her a different mindset and contributed to her confidence when leading her learning community. Matt mentioned a shift in his sense of what it means to have a social presence. “Being a class leader gave me the confidence to take the initiative to start a conversation and interact with others I work with in my professional career.” Many participants stated that they became comfortable delegating tasks to their students and peers because they were confident in their own ability to lead.

As participants reflected on their experience, a greater understanding of self-awareness resulted from their leader role within the learning community. One participant’s reflection encompassed self-understanding of affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes:

When you ask a question that no one answers, you start to panic [affective]. I struggled with that, but we were pushed to be ok with silence. Being comfortable with silence is something that I was really happy we did [in class leader training sessions] because I learned a lot about facilitating a conversation [cognitive]. I would wait [behavioral] for twenty seconds after I asked a question to push students to respond and it took everything I had to resist the temptation of asking another question.

Affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes that occurred throughout the semester had a significant influence on the participants’ identity and self-awareness. Participants learned how to manage their emotions, became confident, learned leadership skills, and modeled appropriate classroom behavior.

### ***Sub Code: Understanding Others***

Participants quickly realized that they needed to understand the individuals and the dynamics within the group to be effective teachers. In some instances, participants could closely identify with their students and in other instances, participants perceived their students to be polar opposites. Participants shared experiences that helped them frame observations and realizations about their students to help them become more efficient communicators.

Participants observed notable differences in behavior or engagement of their students and various peer-to-peer partnerships that emerged between their students. Table 4.5 presented statements from the data representing participant observations of their students and educators.

**Table 4.5 Understanding Others**

Sub-codes	What happened & How participants expressed the concept	Evidence: Examples from the Transcripts
Understanding Others	Differences  Peer to Peer Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Each student in your learning community is different.</li><li>• I realized that other students don't take their academics as seriously as I do.</li><li>• Students in Greek houses would sit together.</li></ul>

Participants found that sometimes their lesson plans did not engage all of their students. They learned that a large part of leadership is learning about people and how to motivate people who have different personalities. Serving as a class leader offered participants the opportunity to get to know and understand ten or more people. As participants increased their understanding of their students throughout the semester, they engaged more students and became effective leaders.

### ***Working Through Differences***

Participants recalled some students as being distracted, pre-occupied, or not willing to participate. Participants became aware that each member of their learning community was different and that these differences were important to think about when facilitating classroom



discussions. Accordingly, Jeremy said that being a class leader taught him to be adaptable: “Everyone is at a different stage...you have to adapt to it, every single situation, [because] you can’t leave anybody out.”

Ashley mentioned that prior to being a class leader, she had become frustrated when working with small groups because members did not pull their own weight. Ashley gained a renewed confidence in group work after working with her students. This confidence came from Ashley having to make the effort to understand her students so she could lead more effectively. She felt that this knowledge will help her to also understand group members better so that she will be able to lead in small group situations instead of simply getting frustrated.

### ***Peer-to-Peer Interactions***

Participants noticed relationships emerged from within their learning communities between their students. Greg said, “You could tell students were actually forming some kind of relationship or friendship [within the learning community].” If students started to form groups, they were based on commonalities such as residence hall, academic major, home town, high school, being from out of state, or involvement in networks such as Greek life [fraternities or sororities] or intramurals.

Sometimes small groups posed challenges to participants. Seven class leaders recalled their frustration of having a group of individuals who interacted with each other and excluded others from the group. In most cases, the cliques as mentioned by participants, consisted of fraternity and sorority members who isolated themselves from the group or did not readily involve other group members in conversations. Participants learned how to lead in a way that encouraged group cohesiveness.

Overall, participants made the effort to understand their students in order to be a successful class leader. Participants focused on understanding the dynamics within the learning community in order to maintain an open environment in which students felt comfortable adding to the discussions. Participants indicated that they found themselves using these skills required to understand others outside of the classroom.

### ***Sub-Code: Purpose***

Participants in this study noted the way their experience helped develop a sense of purpose that impacted vocational goals and their identity as a leader. Table 4.6 outlined what participants experienced with regard to purpose. Data were coded to identify connections to participants' (a) vocation and (b) identity.

**Table 4.6 Purpose**

Sub-codes	What happened & How participants expressed the concept	Evidence: Examples from the Transcripts
Purpose	Vocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm an education major and it just kind of hit home with me that it is something that I really love to do.</li> <li>• I am going to maybe do mission work for the Peace Corps because of my experience as a class leader.</li> <li>• [My experience serving as a class leader] will benefit me later in my career as an engineer when working on projects with smaller groups.</li> </ul>
	Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My leadership learning is never complete.</li> <li>• I decided to continue with the leadership minor.</li> <li>• I joke about minoring in marketing and majoring in leadership.</li> <li>• Everything I was learning in [the leadership minor] came together.</li> </ul>

### ***Vocation***

Participants identified talents, abilities, or skills that they possessed and enhanced during the class leader experience. Participant's talents, abilities, and skills were perceived by participants as valuable. They wanted to align these aptitudes to their vocational goals. While

the experience affirmed some participants' vocational goals, it led other participants to rethink their future plans and goals.

Sixteen participants discovered that they wanted to teach, serve, or help others in some capacity. Evelyn observed:

I know why I am teaching, I enjoy it, I'm good at it, I get as much out of it as they do... [serving as a class leader] really caused me to stop and focus and find out what I want to do with the rest of my life.

Kathy said, "I learned that I made the right switch into education. This is where I am supposed to be; being a class leader has re-affirmed that I made a good decision." Olivia said, "It's a unique experience that not everyone gets to do...teach as an undergraduate student."

Olivia is an education major and mentioned how important this experience was for her future career. Ashley reported that her teaching experience was the reason she decided to study abroad and add another major. Ian felt that he could relate with his first semester freshmen by connecting back with his own freshman experience. Ian's students helped him reflect on where he wanted to be in the next two, five, and ten years. Ian said,

Going through this process I think I have learned that being a teacher is not as bad as I originally thought it was. I always get the question being an English major, "So are you going to graduate and teach?" I would say, No, I do not want to be a teacher right out of college, but now I have been looking at different options and I might be doing English as a second language so I could be teaching...having this chance to really grade papers, hand out grades, and take a more formal teaching role helped me to learn that it [teaching] is challenging, rewarding and fun.

While many participants discovered that their experience teaching a learning community affirmed their desire to be an educator, others realized that they just wanted to be in a position to help others develop a capacity for leadership. Jeremy mentioned that being a group leader gave him the confidence to apply for a lab practicum position. He noted that without this experience, he would not have considered running a lab. Other participants discovered through their

experience what they *did not* want to do in the future, information equally important to career-related decision-making. For example, Quinn realized that the teaching profession was not for her, saying, “I am not actually good at teaching.”

### *Identity*

The experience of being a class leader allowed participants to see value in developing a leadership identity and generating a desire to continue one’s leadership education. Evelyn said, “At one point I had almost considered not finishing the [leadership] minor. Then after teaching [a leadership class] it was like ‘yeah, oh yeah, going to go on’ and I am going to finish [the leadership minor].” Pamela talked about her desire to continue learning leadership because of this experience: “My leadership education is never done, like it’s never over and before teaching I definitely thought, ‘Fifteen credits, got it on my resume, I’m ready to go,’ but it’s not like that for me anymore, it’s ongoing.”

In some instances, participants did not articulate a specific skill or lesson learned, but indicated that they grew as a leader. Barbara reflected on her class leader experience as a culmination of her entire leadership education:

Well, it puts everything that I have ever learned through my leadership education together, and I saw leadership in action through my experience as a small group leader. The things that we learned in class were happening as I was teaching. It also gives you the opportunity to revisit the information that you have studied. And I think that was the cool experience because there were things I did not notice when I was a freshmen taking the class. That then again I could see as a junior or senior taking the class again and using my experiences as having been in the college atmosphere and seeing it playing out as I was teaching. All of those things, it just was kind of like the topping on my leadership education which just pulled it all together which was a really good experience to have.

Robert said:

Looking back, one of the main reasons I did it was because I wanted to see what it took to be a good leader. I want to help the students but at the same time I wanted to see where I need to grow as a person. I still have a long ways to go but I think I have definitely taken a couple steps up through that 212 class leading, so I have really benefited from becoming a class leader.

The deep connection between participants and the School of Leadership Studies that the experience fostered contributed to students' sense of themselves as leaders. Jennifer stated, "I joke about minoring in marketing and majoring in leadership." Pamala mentioned,

I feel like it's a club or organization on campus, like a class leader club... I feel closer to class leaders than I do with students in my own major because we put in the extra work together, and we *wanted* to do this.

Trevor said the experience's impact was so great that when he gave back financially to K-State, he donated to the School of Leadership Studies and the Office of Diversity. Olivia said that she highlighted this experience on her resume and included the position on all of her applications because it was so beneficial to her leadership development. This position meant so much to Matt that he said, "These are the experiences that I will tell my children and grandchildren about when they start thinking about college."

Participants commented that they were fully invested in their work. Participants described their experience as active, involved, and focused. Participants saw their position as challenging, but had the necessary skills and abilities to meet the challenges. Fourteen participants specifically mentioned learning leadership concepts first-hand by teaching leadership concepts to their students. Jennifer mentioned how it was one thing to sit down and learn leadership concepts, but to actually communicate it to someone, teach someone, demonstrated real learning. She said:

I had practiced leadership (concepts) in the classroom, and yeah, I had opportunities, real life opportunities to practice leadership, but then to have to sit down and actually communicate it to another group of people was challenging, but in a good way cause it reinforced those principles I was learning.

Christopher added, “It is more than just a textbook example from what you see in class. You can actually go through these things and you can go through them in college you know. To a point, I did not think it would be as real to me as it has been.”

In conclusion, participants learned how valuable this experience was to their future careers and aspirations and to their identity as leaders. Participants re-conceptualized future careers and explored how teaching might be an integral part of their future vocation whether through formal instruction, corporate training, or leadership workshops. Education majors saw this experience as essential training prior to their final semester of student teaching.

Participants established a leadership identity and developed confidence in working with others. Participants saw the personal and social benefits of being a leader, such as developing self-awareness, building self-confidence, learning new skills, and establishing meaningful relationships. Building a leadership identity influenced participants to continue their leadership education. Continuing with the leadership minor and applying lessons learned through course work as they managed their learning community brought the course material to life. Participants found new meaning on a large college campus by being a class leader of first semester freshmen.

### ***Summary***

This chapter presented the analysis of data gathered from 25 participants. The data were coded for the purpose of extracting meaning that answered the research question, *What do student leaders experience in a classroom learning community?* Two main codes each supported with three sub-codes emerged: learning communities contained data about the environment, responsibilities, and relationships while personal development contained data about understanding self, understanding others, and purpose.

Based on participants' interview responses coded as *learning community* and its sub-codes of *environment*, *responsibilities*, and *relationships*, their understanding of and experience with being a learning community leader provided shared meaning to what is and what happens in a learning community. Learning communities are a small group of diverse students engaged in the process of learning with an emphasis on a safe environment, an environment that the leaders need to cultivate. Skills that are developed from leaders' responsibilities included time management and small group facilitation. Throughout the experience, leaders looked forward to the development of caring and long lasting relationships with students, other peer leaders, and faculty.

Based on participants' interview responses coded as *personal development* and its sub-codes of *understanding self*, *understanding others*, and *purpose*, their understanding of and experience with being a learning community leader provided shared meaning to how development occurred. Being a learning community leader will result in the leader's affective, cognitive, and behavior development, all of which will impact leaders' self-understanding and self-confidence. To be successful, leaders need to understand the individuals with whom they work with as well as the whole-group dynamics. The experience of being a learning community leader shapes or affirms future plans and goals and strengthens one's identity formation as leader.

Chapter 5 discussed the seven emergent themes from the data. A textural description of what the participants experienced and a structural description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon is provided. From the textural and structural descriptions, a composite description that presents the essence of the class leader

phenomenon is presented. Implications of this study for student development practice and recommendations for future research were highlighted.

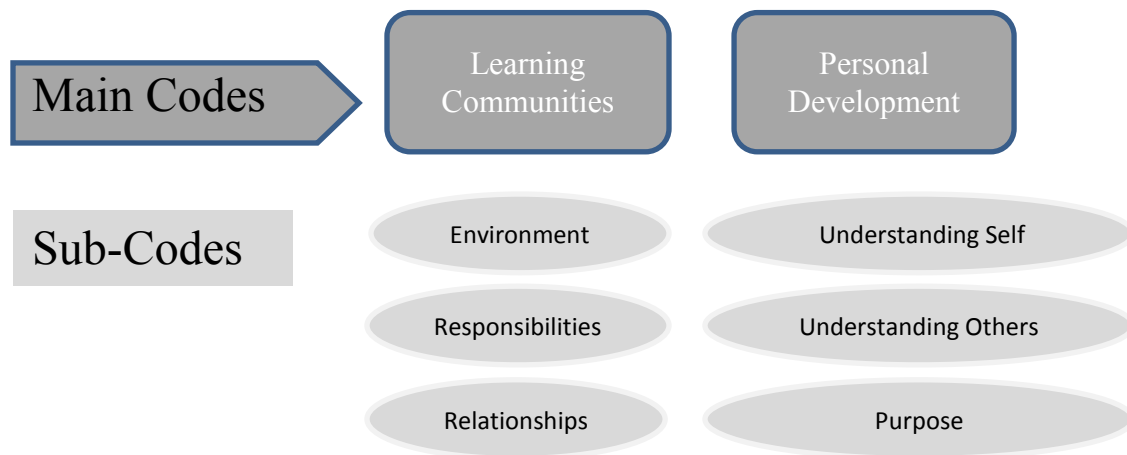


## CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

This chapter discussed the findings of the study and their implications for future research and student development practice. The aim of this study was to learn what the study participants experienced leading a group of first semester freshmen in a learning community. The central research question asked was *what do student leaders experience in a classroom learning community?*

To discern the answer, four secondary questions were asked of each of the 25 participants. The responses generated rich data about the class leader experience. Data were collected and analyzed to make meaning of what was reported. The data were analyzed, significant statements were identified from the transcripts and meaning units were established. The meaning units were organized and used to formulate two codes: (a) learning communities and (b) personal development. Sub-codes helped the researcher organize the data. Sub-codes for learning communities included (a) environment, (b) responsibilities, and (c) relationships. Sub-codes for personal development included (a) understanding self, (b) understanding others, and (c) purpose. The coding chart presented in Figure 4.1 illustrates the process of coding. Using the codes and sub-codes presented in figure 5.1 to organize the data analysis, seven overarching themes emerged from the data

**Figure 5.1 Visual Illustration of the Coding Process**



The following seven themes, which closely aligned with the sub-codes, provided an understanding of what the class leader experience meant to the research participants:

1. Participants described learning communities through structural and relational elements which included class size, location, space, time, openness, safety, and diversity.
2. Participants indicated that class leader responsibilities included preparing lesson plans, grading student assignments, leading groups, helping students transition into college, and being an advocate for the leadership minor.
3. Class leaders described their role within the learning community as a mentor, facilitator, instructor, role model, and peer leader.
4. Caring relationships emerged between class leaders and enrolled students, other class leaders, and faculty.
5. Participant self-awareness contained elements of affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes that enhanced personal development.

6. Vocational aspirations were influenced through the class leader experience.
7. Serving as a class leader impacted students' leadership identity and leadership education.

### ***Discussion of Findings***

The review of literature revealed reasons why learning communities can be powerful sources of influence or high impact practices. Some of these reasons include (a) shared responsibility for learning between students and teachers, (b) the community structure helped students recognize the importance of learning from each other, (c) the content and context of assignments were carefully thought through; and (d) learning is a process, not an outcome (Laufgraben & Tompkins, 2004). To discover how participants experienced a learning community and made meaning of their experience, a summary of the textural (what the participants experienced) and structural (how the participants experienced the phenomenon) descriptions was included to develop the essence of the overall experience. Understanding the phenomenon of being a class leader framed the thinking to generate recommendations for student development practice and implications for future research.

***Theme One: Participants described learning communities through structural and relational elements which included class size, location, space, time, openness, safety, and diversity.***

Participants saw learning communities as structural and relational. Especially significant and worthy of discussion are participants' experience of a contingent relationship between the structural and relational elements. Participants realized that the smaller learning community

provided an opportunity to establish relationships with their students while the large lecture community served a different function, to introduce course content. Conceptually, participants assigned value to class size, and assumed that class size is a determining factor in how content can and cannot be delivered. Participants realized how personal and intimate a learning community is as compared to the impersonal feel of a large lecture class, and they valued the effect this had on community development.

Participants felt obligated to spend as much time and attention on creating an open, safe, and welcoming environment as they did on teaching content. Participants commented on how geographically and culturally diverse their learning communities were, not because their large lecture communities are any less diverse, but because they actually created space to learn about the life experiences of their students. Participants' impressions of a learning community were focused more on the relational aspect of developing a community rather than on student learning or teaching course concepts. When defining the purpose of a learning community, both structural and relational elements are important to consider.

***Theme Two: Participants indicated that class leader responsibilities included preparing lesson plans, grading student assignments, leading groups, helping students transition into college, and being an advocate for the leadership minor.***

Leadership development research explored how students develop a capacity to lead throughout their lifetimes (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007). Participants commented on their capacity to lead others while being responsible for specific tasks. Being responsible for a group of first semester freshmen was a powerful learning experience for the participants. Participants acquired new skills because of what they were asked to accomplish through leading a learning community, skills including communication, task delegation, and facilitation.

Participants said they ascertained their communication effectiveness by the questions their students would ask. If the assignment was clear and students had few questions, participants felt confident that they clearly communicated expectations to their students.

Participants reported that they learned to appreciate diversity as well as the importance of listening, asking questions, and stepping outside comfort zones. A majority of the participants mentioned that working with different students, being responsible for grading papers, and having to be prepared to respond to everything and anything that can happen in a classroom took them out of their comfort zone. Because participants cared for their students, they were willing to put the time and energy into preparing for class and evaluating student assignments. Through the process of grading student papers, participants discovered challenges that their students were facing. Therefore, participants felt the need to help students through the first semester of college and even encourage them to pursue the leadership minor if students saw value in what they were learning.

***Theme Three: Class leaders described their role within the learning community as a mentor, facilitator, instructor, role model, and peer leader.***

Participants used broad terms to communicate their perceived role within the learning community. Participants viewed their roles first as mentors followed by facilitators, teachers, role models, and peer leaders. Regardless of the terminology, participants discussed elements of being in an authoritative position while still being a friend or peer. They described their role connected to the leadership identity they developed. Participants saw themselves as credible teachers who could connect and relate to their students since many had been in the same classroom environment two or three years earlier. Participants realized that, while they were in a position of authority, it was not their role to do all the work but to be a facilitator of learning.

Participants were well aware of their own scope of authority within the learning community. Participants recognized professional boundaries that impacted the relationship with enrolled students. Boundaries included spending time with students outside of formal class meetings, evaluating class assignments, showing favoritism, singling out students, and appropriate usage of social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn). In some instances, participants bounced back and forth between being the person of authority and being a friend to their students.

***Theme Four: Caring relationships emerged between class leaders and enrolled students, other class leaders, and faculty.***

Participants experienced what it meant to develop relationships within the classroom context. Participants reflected on their experiences with enthusiasm because they were invested and involved in their work. Astin (1993) measured student involvement in five areas: (a) academic involvement; (b) involvement with faculty; (c) involvement with student peers; (d) involvement in work; and (e) other forms of involvement including, but not limited to, playing sports, hobbies, reading for pleasure, volunteering, and watching television. While Astin (1993) measured involvement through quantitative methodology, the qualitative methodology driving this research constructs new meaning to discover what students experience through their involvement as a class leader.

Participants' relationships with their students developed quickly because participants sought to understand what was happening in their students' lives. Due to their proximity in age and experience, participants felt connected to their students. Participants discussed the importance of being authentic, honest, and transparent in their student interactions. Participants

wanted to show their students how much they cared about them as people and their academic success.

The current research supported the notion that developing peer relationships was essential because the peer group is the single most important source of influence on students' growth and development during college (Astin, 1993). Additionally, participants discussed in-depth the friendships that emerged between class leaders. Participants discussed the importance of having a shared experience. Classroom instruction, facilitation, and working through course content provided participants an opportunity to talk and discuss what was happening in their learning communities. Working with other class leaders was a value added experience for each participant. Some participants related their experience interacting with other class leaders to being in a club or organization. They felt a strong bond with other class leaders because they put in extra work and they wanted to have an impact on the students they taught.

Literature in higher education has documented the positive influence between faculty and student interactions as it pertains to student learning and development (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Participants discussed the importance of having connections with the faculty team and lead instructors of Introduction to Leadership Concepts. Participants reported strengthened relationships with faculty after having a class leader experience. The relationships were described as being close, more like that between partners or colleagues. Participants felt comfortable visiting with faculty about challenges they were facing in the classroom and appreciated the support and resources the faculty team provided. Other participants expressed feeling more connected to the School, the mission, and the program.

Having a great deal of responsibility was closely connected with building meaningful relationships. Participants mentioned learning the importance of building personal relationships,

getting to know their students as individuals, and being able to help others grow, and they expressed the goal of accounting for these goals in developing their leadership styles. Since participants were asked to make the content their own, each participant had the opportunity to interact and work with their students in a manner that affirmed, acknowledged, and recognized the importance of building relationships within the community. The experience of being responsible for leading a learning community shaped the participants' impression that learning communities are focused on developing and building relationships.

***Theme Five: Participant self-awareness contained elements of affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes that enhanced personal development.***

Participants made individual gains in their personal development by being self-aware and observant of one's own behaviors and the behaviors of others. Participants indicated a range of emotions (affective) throughout the semester, found new meaning in how they thought (cognitive) about leadership, and changed how they exercised (behavioral) leadership. Participants learned how to manage their emotions, think on their feet, respond to questions for which they did not always have answers and model positive leadership as they were teaching leadership content.

Participants mentioned the value of applying their knowledge and experiencing leadership concepts first-hand. They differentiated between the cognitive and behavioral shift of learning leadership concepts as a student versus actually communicating and teaching leadership content to someone. The action associated with teaching course content demonstrated to the participants that real learning occurred. Participants developed a greater understanding of the academic discipline of leadership because they were asked to teach the material to other students.



***Theme Six: Vocational aspirations were influenced through the class leader experience.***

Research supported that the college years were a critical period of students' personal, academic, social, and professional growth (Astin, 1985, 1993). Participants commented on how much their teaching experience contributed toward their professional growth. Some participants expressed that being a class leader affirmed their decision to be an educator and to continue study within their major. Participants reported that they became self-aware of their behaviors in their own classes and increased their interpersonal communication skills while having fun at the same time. Knowing that not all participant experiences were positive, the present study supported the findings of Logue et al. (2005) that student leaders' experiences were enjoyable, beneficial, fun, and overwhelmingly positive.

Participants' group and classroom management instilled confidence in their ability to lead groups or teams in the future. Many participants mentioned that their experience supported their aspiration to become a teacher or to continue leading teams regardless of their profession. Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) reported that high impact practices provide avenues for students to develop habits that build their capacities for continuous learning and personal development and are essential to a productive and satisfying life after college (Carini et al., 2006). The habits or behavioral changes that occurred during the class leader experience promoted continuous learning and enhanced the personal development of each participant which will be essential to a productive and satisfying life after college.

***Theme Seven: Serving as a class leader impacted students' leadership identity and leadership education.***

Participants developed their own leadership identity through a continued commitment to their leadership education. Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2007) discussed leadership development as a process that involves three principles: (a) knowing, (b) being, and (c) doing. The present study's finding that participants developed self-confidence (knowing), leadership knowledge (being), and the ability to exercise leadership (doing) supported the findings of Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella and Osteen (2005).

Participants gained confidence in leading their students to understand the course content. They looked forward to coming to class each week to continue a dialog and relationship with their students. While the process was enjoyable, participants recognized they felt nervous, anxious, overwhelmed, and stressed. These emotions were directly connected to how participants thought they would be perceived by their students. By the end of the semester, participants had mixed emotions of accomplishment, pride, and satisfaction for the work they had done coupled with sadness and loss at no longer meeting with their students on a weekly basis. Developing a leadership identity as a class leader was just as much rational as it is emotional.

Participants recognized the importance of ethics, caring, and inclusion. They were confident in their own authentic way of being to display and represent themselves as a peer teacher. Participants knew their personality type and had fun exploring personality differences with their students. They were teaching the ethical dimensions of leadership and felt extra pressure to be ethical in their approach to grading papers. Their students talked about caring

leadership and participants wanted their students to view them as caring and compassionate peer leader. Participants placed pressure on themselves to model and practice inclusive language.

Participants intervened or acted to support and help their students. They said they exercised leadership when they facilitated conversations and asked questions. Participants stated they wrote letters of recommendation for their students and built safe learning communities. Everything that participants did provided them an opportunity to build on their own leadership development.

Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) identified five critical components of student leadership identity: (a) essential developmental influences, (b) developing self, (c) group influences, (d) changing view of self with others, and (e) broadening view of leadership. Participants identified the learning community and their position of being a class leader as the primary developmental influence, which shaped their identity as a class leader. Developing self was closely connected to developmental outcomes. Outcomes included an increased awareness of their ability to develop facilitation skills, interpersonal communication skills, and problem solving abilities. Group influences within the context of this study included enrolled students, other peer leaders, and the leadership faculty. Some participants experienced changes in their own capabilities including flexibility, confidence, organization, positivity, and patience because they were intentional about learning how they interacted with others. The class leader experience broadened the view participants had of leadership to be more inclusive, diverse, collaborative, and relationship centered.

Establishing identity and developing purpose are two of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of student development. While some participants discussed their connection to purpose (Theme six, future vocational plans and leadership education), others commented that

this experience provided them with an identity. Some of the participants mentioned that they felt more connected to their minor in leadership studies than to their academic major because of the class leader experience. Participants felt connected to the faculty and became involved in other programs through the minor (leadership ambassadors, attending conferences, service work).

### ***Textural Description***

This section explained what participants experienced through their position as a class leader. Participants made the conscious choice to become involved as a class leader, which, in turn, contributed to their own development. Participants developed meaningful relationships and an appreciation for diversity through a shared learning experience within their learning community. Learning communities were described as cooperative, collaborative, and comfortable. The description led to the understanding that participants saw learning communities as a learning space that was open, safe, and diverse. Creating space to listen and discuss course content fostered an environment welcoming of diversity including elements of perspective (worldview), geographical location, lived experience, personality, and major which enhanced classroom discussions.

Participants experienced what it meant to be responsible for creating a positive learning environment and teaching others. Being responsible to (a) grade student assignments, (b) prepare lesson plans, (c) learn course content, (d) facilitate discussions, (e) help students get acclimated to college life, and (f) be an advocate for the leadership minor further developed time management and interpersonal relationship skills.

Participants identified the need to be flexible, confident, organized, and patient when working with their students. As participants navigated through an entire sixteen-week semester a

range of emotions were identified. All participants experienced a range of emotions which closely resembled a roller-coaster full of twists and turns.

Participants described how their own behaviors changed because of the class leader experience. Knowing what it felt like to be the teacher in the room made participants attentive during their own classes. An overall perspective shift occurred from being task focused to person focused. Participants became appreciative of their teachers and professors. Measurable outcomes used to assess the change in behavior were identified as participants reported paying more attention in class, being the first to answer questions, and offering other opinions during class discussions. Participants were able to see what they appreciated in their own students and transferred those behaviors and actions into their own classroom experiences. Thus, the class leader experience transferred to other aspects of their formal education.

As peer mentors, participants felt as if they could connect with and relate to their students more so than other faculty or staff. The ability to develop a positive relationship with their learning community and individual members served as a means to build an influence relationship. Participants saw their responsibility as two fold, (a) teach leadership content (facilitate classroom discussions) and (b) help students navigate their first semester of college.

In conclusion, participants experienced a leadership position, which enhanced their own understanding and learning of leadership concepts. Relationships developed with enrolled students, class leaders, and faculty. Participants experienced the benefits of learning communities as a way to enhance diversity, collaboration, and open-mindedness. Participants showed increased awareness of their own needs as well as the needs of their students.

## ***Structural Description***

The structural description focused on how the participant experienced the phenomenon including conditions, situations, and context. Participants experienced the phenomenon of leading and learning within an undergraduate learning community. Learning communities were defined as a small discussion group including 12 to 13 members from the large lecture classroom. All students enrolled in Introduction to Leadership Concepts courses attended a large lecture course once a week for 50 minutes. Learning communities met for 50 minutes after large lecture.

The transition between large lecture and learning communities was challenging for participants because of the physical change in location and their desire to connect the lecture content to small group discussions. A considerable amount of time was spent arranging classroom space to make sure the environment was conducive for learning. Managing both the physical space and class time was an added element of being a class leader.

Relationships were identified between the class leader and their students, other class leaders, and faculty. All relationships were described as helping relationships. Participants helped their students understand course content and navigate their first semester on a college campus. The relationship between class leaders was developed through having a shared experience which was fostered through training sessions and weekly class meetings to prepare for upcoming content. The relationship between participants and faculty was important because faculty helped participants as challenges were identified.

Participants commented how much they appreciated the opportunity to work with first semester-freshmen. Participants were able to relive the same challenges they faced when they transitioned from high school to college through observations and conversations with their

students. Many of the questions their students asked reminded participants of those questions and concerns that once faced them during their freshmen experience. Therefore, participants understood the value of being a few years older than their students and further removed from their freshmen experience. Participants gained a deep understanding of the effort that goes into teaching and the intentionality behind lesson planning and classroom instruction. Participants realized that the learning environment was just as important as the actual content delivery.

### *Essence*

The participants' experiences took place within a small group learning community. The learning community was described as complex with both structural and relational elements. Participant behavior was contingent on a variety of elements that impacted the learning community. Elements that drove participant behavior included (a) how the learning community was organized, (b) what role participants played within the community, (c) what participants were responsible for, and (d) the types of relationships that were formed. Participants discovered a tremendous amount of personal growth and development through self-awareness.

Participants described learning communities as fun, interactive environments that emphasized relationships and showed an appreciation for diversity. Participants viewed their roles and responsibilities as multifaceted. Through fulfilling the class leader responsibilities, participants expressed a range of emotions, from being overwhelmed and nervous to being excited and proud. Throughout this process, relationships emerged between enrolled students, class leaders, and leadership studies faculty. The combination of task completion and developing relationships throughout this experience helped participants view leadership as both rational and emotional.

Participants indicated both personal growth and development through a continued reflection of their role, as well as finding meaning from their class leader positions. Students became more aware of their own leadership skills and behaviors. Participants found meaning in their work by connecting their experiences with their future vocational aspirations while others indicated that the position had a significant impact on their college career. Overall, participants enjoyed their experience because of the relationships created throughout the semester.

### ***Recommendations for Student Development Practice***

The present study informed the student development profession, student affairs practitioners, and faculty about the importance of undergraduate teaching opportunities. This study attested to the importance of turning classrooms and programs into learning, leading, and teaching opportunities for undergraduate students. Recommendations for student development practice include creating opportunities for undergraduate teaching, peer mentoring, and providing adequate support for peer mentors.

### ***Undergraduate Teaching and Peer Mentoring***

Participants mentioned how valuable being a class leader was to their leadership education. The cognitive, personal, and instrumental learning research of Micari, Streitwieser, and Light (2006) reported that cognitive growth occurs when students gain a greater understanding of the academic discipline at hand. Participants gained a deeper understanding of course material because they were asked to teach the material to other students. Teaching leadership concepts and applying the concepts to a learning community enhanced participants' abilities to move from theory to practice and become skillful leaders.



The recommendation for student development practice is to create opportunities for undergraduate students to lead team projects in the classroom. Student leaders gain confidence in communicating and speaking in front of people, perceiving non-verbal cues from the audience, refining interpersonal skills, and in their teaching ability (Micari et al., 2006). This study's participants reported learning to attend to non-verbal student cues to determine level of interest or engagement in a course discussion, assignment, or task. Participants also reported that they developed communication, task delegation, and facilitation skills. Overall, participants gained confidence in leading groups.

The recommendation is to encourage more undergraduate teaching opportunities on campus to provide students with transferable skills that will assist them in future careers. Instrumental growth refers to students' understanding of how important their facilitation experiences would be in their professional growth and vocational goals (Micari et al., 2006). Participants identified a close connection between being a class leader and their desire to enter the teaching profession. Four participants indicated a strong preference to continue as an education major or to look for other teaching-related opportunities such as being a teaching assistant within their major. Business majors indicated the importance of learning how to manage a group of students while an engineering student appreciated the leadership and relationship-building experience as one that wouldn't be available in engineering curricula.

The recommendation is to be intentional about building high impact practices into classroom experiences and extracurricular opportunities. The cognitive, personal, and instrumental gains of student group leaders might motivate faculty, staff, and administrators to be more intentional about creating future undergraduate teaching opportunities for students. The present research challenged institutions to evaluate the efficacy of large lecture classrooms

and consider integrating learning communities within those classes across campuses. Learning communities benefit all students: they promote student engagement in the academic material and provide leadership growth opportunities.

### ***Adequate Support***

Student affairs practitioners and faculty need to be intentional about creating meaningful and purposeful training programs to assist peer mentors with their work. Peer mentors manage significant roles in a learning community. The present study indicates that participants bore responsibility for (a) both the physical and relational elements of a learning community; (b) lesson planning, grading papers, and leading groups; (c) playing the roles of mentor, facilitator, or instructor within the learning community; (d) building relationships with students, peers, and faculty; and (e) understanding how their work pertains to their own personal development. With this much responsibility,

Practitioners will want to create training programs that focus on developing the facilitation skills of peer mentors or class leaders. Newton and Ender (2010) noted that the peer leader's role is determined by the environment or the task at hand. Participants discussed the importance of the environment in theme one, which highlighted the peer leader's management of both physical (size, location, space and time) and relational (openness, safety, diversity) environmental elements. At times, the peer leader needed to be in charge and at the center of the group activity, and at other times, he or she allowed members of the learning community to take the lead. To do this successfully, students needed to perceive the need and adapt accordingly, needs that correlate to theme two's focus on facilitating classroom discussions.

Newton and Ender (2010) identified five principles of peer leader relationships: (a) show respect and dignity for others, (b) understand personal bias and avoid imposing it on others, (c)

deal appropriately with persons for whom you feel some aversion, (d) interact appropriately with persons for whom you feel attraction, and (e) know and manage emotional responses while helping another. Student leaders' ability to develop caring relationships rests on these principles. Accordingly, they need to be accounted for in future training programs of class leaders. Recommendations for student development practice include teaching Newton and Ender's five principles of the peer leader relationship.

### ***Implications for Future Research***

Future research opportunities to learn more about the developmental aspects of a class leader's experience in a learning community included but are not limited to, academic performance, Chickering's (1993) seven vectors, Komives's, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen's LID model (2005), relationships, ethical elements of peer mentoring (grading papers), gender, race, and engaged teaching and learning.

Undergraduate student leadership, especially in a teaching role, is worthy of additional exploration through both an academic and developmental lens. Academically, it would be interesting to research how serving as a class leader impacted a participant's academic performance for that semester and in future semesters. The present study suggested that serving as a class leader motivated participants to continue one's leadership education, but why participants wanted to pursue their leadership education was unclear. Developmentally, it would be important to chart class leader growth using Chickering's (1993) seven vectors of student development. The present study found close connections to developing competence, managing emotions, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, and developing purpose, but failed to provide sufficient findings on moving through autonomy toward

interdependence and developing integrity. Future research could take the existing transcribed interviews from participants and code to analyze Chickering's (1993) seven vectors of student development.

Future research could analyze how the class leader position influenced one's leadership identity. The Leadership Identity Development (LID) Model emphasized the importance of teaching leadership and facilitating the learning of leadership as it pertains to developing a leader's identity (Komives et al., 2005). Key categories of the LID closely align with the seven themes of the present study including developmental influences, developing self, group influences, changing view of self with others, and broadening view of leadership (Komives et al., 2005).

Relationships and responsibilities played a pivotal role in the experience of the participants. Relationships with students in the learning community, with other class leaders, and with faculty emerged as important from the participants' reflections. Participants reported that they felt there was a learning community among class leaders. Accordingly, future research could analyze the peer relationships between class leaders. The peer group is the single most important influence on students' growth and development during college (Astin, 1993). Using Astin's (1993) and Tinto's (1993) findings on peer groups and peer mentors, future studies could analyze class leaders to find deep meaning within the relationships among peer leaders and how they were developed as a cohort. Future research could be conducted on the weekly class preparation meetings. Research could examine how much time is spent on learning content versus how to facilitate content or create lesson plans. Other elements explored in future research include class leaders time spent with other class leaders working on course material.

Additionally, no research has been conducted on the benefits of weekly class preparation meetings.

The implications of these relational experiences for future research include designing a study to focus specifically on how participants established meaningful relationships with their students and what constituted a meaningful relationship. Given the fact that an average learning community consisted of between 12 to 15 students, how many meaningful relationships would emerge throughout the course of a semester? The close relationships between participants and their learning community students could prompt practitioners to create training programs focused on boundaries between peer mentors and mentees. Grading and evaluating student work was a predominant theme that emerged in the research. The ethical implications of peer mentoring in terms of relationships, boundaries, and grading papers could be of benefit to explore.

The current study did not establish coding to differentiate between the experiences of men and women. Gender influences leadership identity (Komives et al., 2007), and understanding the perceptions of men and women peer leaders and their interactions with enrolled students could be of value. Gender analysis could be structured through a discussion of task centered and relationship centered leadership characteristics.

Examining multicultural students who served as class leaders would inform student life professional staff and leadership faculty about their leadership experiences in learning communities. Learning communities have been called high impact practices because they allow students to take responsibility for their learning, leading to student investment and commitment, but research has shown that racial minority students do not get involved in learning communities (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Learning about the experience of multicultural students leading a learning community of predominately White students (and vice versa) would contribute to

greater understanding of leadership identity, development, and relational aspects of leading groups from the perspective of multicultural students.

Future research on engaged teaching and learning in the classroom would be of interest after discovering what participants learned about building a classroom community. Participants learned how to establish and build a safe learning community. Participants learned the value of creating space for multiple voices during group discussions. Many of the participants saw their efforts as successful if students were not falling asleep, looking at the clock, or non-verbally communicating signs of boredom or apathy. Participants even went as far as thinking about how they could make other learning environments more engaging or similar to their learning communities. Participants observed how their instructors or professors could better lead students in a classroom. Future research in this area could include classroom engagement and teaching strategies that promote engaged learning. One could assume that participants received more training on effective and engaged teaching practices than university faculty because it was their first time teaching a group of their peers. Future studies on first year faculty and the support provided for first year faculty to promote student engagement in the classroom would be of interest to explore.

Future research might consider student leadership in other academic disciplines or within other learning communities. This study's findings are unique to the participants and this institution. Generalizations should not extend to other student leaders or their learning communities. For example, would class leaders within introductory biology, sociology, or geography classes have similar experiences as those within a leadership studies course? Future research could explore the impact learning communities could have on student learning in large lecture courses.

## *Summary*

This study highlighted the value of both the learning community and the development of participants serving as learning community leaders. Through a phenomenological approach, the study discovered what class leaders experienced when leading groups. The data were analyzed and seven themes emerged: (a) physical and relational elements of a learning community, (b) class leader responsibilities, (c) roles of class leaders, (d) caring relationships, (e) self-awareness, awareness of others, and (f) connections to vocation, and leadership education.

When summarizing what happened in the learning community, participants reflected on both the physical and relational elements of a learning community. The size, space, time, and location of a learning community impacted how a class leader approaches the relational aspects of creating an open, safe, and diverse community of learners. Class leaders were responsible for grading papers, creating lesson plans, and leading groups. Participants felt responsible for helping students transition into college and being an advocate for the leadership minor. The relational elements of being a class leader were prominent throughout the study. Three main relationships emerged including the relationship with students, other peer leaders, and with faculty. Through establishing relationships and exercising leadership, participants acquired or enhanced communication, task delegation, and facilitation skills. Additionally, participants expanded other communication and social influence skills such as flexibility, confidence, organization, and patience. Overall, participants learned what it meant to manage a learning community, be responsible for a group of learners, and develop relationships.

When summarizing their own personal development, participants emphasized self-understanding, others, and finding purpose in their work as class leaders. They described development through affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes that occurred over time.

Participants moved from viewing leadership as positional to process oriented and realized that modeling appropriate behavior was just as important as facilitating course content. Participants became aware of the differences that existed between students in their learning community as they pertained to involvement and establishing peer relationships. Participants found teaching to be purposeful, and because of their experience in the learning community, expressed an interest in attending graduate school, teaching, and continuing to work with college students. Participants found more meaning in their own leadership education, which inspired them to continue with their education and keep reflecting on their own leadership development.

Overall, participants enjoyed their experience and mentioned that relationships and an appreciation for diversity were two major benefits of their learning communities. The two key elements of a learning community included shared learning and creating a safe learning environment. While participants were able to identify the benefits and elements unique to their learning communities, they saw their role within the learning community as a mentor. Being mentors gave participants an identity on campus.

The stories and reflections of the participants in the study clearly explained what class leaders experienced and how they experienced it. Future class leaders should consider reading the findings of this study to better understand the position's expectations, responsibilities, and anticipated outcomes. By learning from the experiences of others, future class leaders will be more prepared to have an impact on their students while undergoing a unique educational experience.

Undergraduate students need opportunities to teach and mentor their peers. Positive outcomes of such experiences include (a) a better understanding of course material, (b) new relationships, (c) and personal development. These outcomes closely aligned with previous



research on the value of learning communities (Engstrom & Tinto, 2000; Erickson et al., 2006; Laufgraben & Tompkins, 2004), peer mentoring (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993), and student development models (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Reiser, 1993; Komives et al., 2005). The results of the present study could be used to create new undergraduate teaching opportunities for college students. Rethinking large lecture classes and being intentional about forming learning communities within a large lecture class would prove to be beneficial to the educational experience of the mentor, leader, or teaching assistant. With its opportunities for reflection and metacognition, the high impact practice of leading a learning community is learning, teaching, and, in turn, more learning at its best.

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## Appendix A - Class Leader Requirements

### LEAD 212 Class Leader Requirements and Expectations Introduction to Leadership Concepts - Fall 2010

1. Class Leaders will be responsible for attending their assigned section of Introduction to Leadership Concepts during the fall semester. Class leaders will be assigned to teach on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday based on class schedule and availability.  
  
Tuesday 9:30-11:20 or 1:30-3:20  
Wednesday 11:30-1:20 or 2:30-4:20  
Thursday 2:30-4:20
2. All Class Leaders are **required** to attend **mandatory** class prep meetings. These meetings are designed to inform class leaders of course content, group activities, assignment dates, and class announcements. Class prep meetings will be scheduled on the day you teach.
  - Tuesday Sections will meet from 3:30-4:20 on Tuesday
  - Wednesday Sections will meet from 4:30-5:20 on Wednesday
  - Thursday Sections will meet from 4:30-5:20 on Thursday
3. Class Leaders must have a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.0 and be in good standing with the University.
4. Class Leaders are required to at least be in their third year of college. Class standing is based on years in college, not number of credit hours.
5. Class Leaders must be willing to commit significant hours outside of class to prepare, plan, grade, meet with students, and assist with group community service projects. (Outside class time will range from 3-8 hours a week depending on course content.)
6. Selected class leaders will be required to complete a 6-week course (once a week) focused on the core content and teaching material introduced in the large lecture sections of LEAD 212. The course will run from 7:30 am-8:20 am on Wednesday from March 24-April 28.
7. Class leaders will be required to attend an extended one-day (8 am-10 pm) training session in August to prepare for the fall semester. (note: Classes begin on August 23<sup>rd</sup>)

8. Class Leaders are paid \$500.00 a section. Class Leaders may teach more than one section.
9. Class Leaders are expected to support the mission of leadership studies and develop knowledgeable, ethical, caring, and inclusive leaders.

We want to emphasize the importance of identifying K-State Students who have a great deal of energy, are extremely organized, are well versed in the academic content of leadership, have first hand leadership experience as student leaders, and will genuinely work hard to personalize their students' small group experience.

For questions, please contact:

Candi Hironaka  
[Cpitts@ksu.edu](mailto:Cpitts@ksu.edu)  
785-532-6909

Mike Finnegan  
[mikefinn@ksu.edu](mailto:mikefinn@ksu.edu)  
785-532-6500

Trisha Gott  
[tcgott@ksu.edu](mailto:tcgott@ksu.edu)  
785-532-6504

## **Appendix B - Protocol Questions**

When responding to the following questions, please do your best to recall specific episodes, situations, or events that you have experienced while fulfilling your position as a class leader. I am seeking vibrant, precise, and inclusive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you including but not limited to behaviors, involvement, relationships, what you learned, what you have gained, thoughts, and feelings that have emerged from your experience.

Note to participant: This interview is being recorded. This interview is being conducted toward the end of your experience as a class leader to allow you to reflect on your overall experience. You have previously signed a consent form indicating your consent to this interview that stated that you may withdraw from the study at point during the process. If you were to withdraw from the study, your position as a class leader will not be affected. This interview is being recorded; do you wish to proceed?

**(1) What have you experienced as a class leader in the classroom?**

- a. What kind of relationships have emerged from this experience?
- b. What situations have influenced or affected your experiences in the classroom?
- c. What characteristics would you use to describe your experience as a class leader?

**(2) How has your role as a class leader shaped your impressions of a learning community?**

- a. How would you describe your small group?
- b. What are your perceptions of your student's academic involvement within the group?
- c. Describe the types of relationships you have observed within the group.
- d. What characteristics would you use to describe your group?

**(3) What have you learned from your experience as a class leader?**

- a. What have you learned about leading groups?
- b. What has this experience taught you about leadership?
- c. How has this experience affected your personal growth and development?
- d. How has this experience contributed to your leadership education?

**(4) How has this experience impacted your college career?**

## Appendix C - Demographic Form

Please provide the following demographic information as a research participant: IRB content. If you have not signed the IRB form, please do so prior to completing the demographic form. Please complete questions 1-10 with short answers.

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age \_\_\_\_\_
3. Race: please circle one  
American Indian or Alaska Native      Asian      Black or African American  
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander      White      Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. Ethnicity: please circle one      Hispanic or Latino      Not Hispanic or Latino
5. Gender: please circle      Male      Female
6. Academic Major \_\_\_\_\_
7. Resident of Kansas: please circle      Yes      No
8. Year in School: please circle one      Freshmen      Sophomore      Junior      Senior
9. Courses completed in the Leadership Studies minor: please circle completed courses  
LEAD 212      LEAD 350      LEAD 405      LEAD 450
10. Are you a returning class leader: please circle one      Yes      No

Please use additional space on the back of this form to completely answer each question.

11. During your time at college where have you lived? Please check all that apply:

\_\_\_\_\_ Residence Hall  
\_\_\_\_\_ Greek Housing (Fraternity/Sorority)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Scholarship Housing  
\_\_\_\_\_ Off Campus Housing  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify if checking other)

Thank You.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D - Contact Summary Form

Adopted from Miles and Huberman (1994)

Date of the Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of the Interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Length of the Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of the Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: Mike Finnegan

1). What were the main issues or themes that emerged in this interview?

2). What information was obtained on the target questions?

3). What else seemed interesting, important, or salient?

4). Are there any follow up questions which would need to be considered?

Other thoughts:



## Appendix E - Invitation Letter to Participants

April , 2011

Dear (participant name),

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research on the experience of being a Class Leader. Your role as a Class Leader is an extremely important position for the School of Leadership Studies and I am excited about the possibility of your participation. As a Class Leader, you have a unique opportunity to teach the academic discipline of leadership to a group of first semester freshmen. As an instructor with the School of Leadership Studies, I value your contributions to our school and the time and energy you place on creating lesson plans, facilitating small group discussion, and coordinating active learning exercises for your students. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate many of the ideas we discussed in our initial conversation. The phenomenological qualitative research model is designed to capture a comprehensive description of what it means to be a class leader. The focus of this study is on your experience about which I hope to answer four basic questions:

- What have you experienced as a class leader in the classroom?
- How has being a class leader impacted your college experience?
- What have you learned from your experience as a class leader?
- How has being a class leader shaped your impressions of a learning community?

Through your role as a participant, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of your experiences as a Class Leader. You will be asked to document specific episodes, situations, or events that you have experienced while fulfilling your position as a Class Leader. I am seeking vibrant, precise, and inclusive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you including but not limited to behaviors, involvement, relationships, what you learned, what you have gained, thoughts, and feelings that have emerged from your experience.

Once again, I value your participation and look forward to working with you as you explore your experiences on a deeper level of what it means to be a Class Leader. Your participation will be extremely beneficial to my dissertation research, the School of Leadership Studies, and the further development of Class Leaders. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any point without affecting your status as a 212 class leader. If you have further questions please contact me at 785.532.6500 or by e-mail at [mikefinn@ksu.edu](mailto:mikefinn@ksu.edu). I will be in contact with you in the near future to schedule an interview. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes in length.

Sincerely,

Mike Finnegan

Doctoral Candidate, Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs  
Kansas State University

## Appendix F - Call Script

Researcher contacts participant

Introduction: Hello participant name, my name is Mike Finnegan and I'm a doctoral candidate in the Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs in the College of Education. I'm sure you are excited for the fall semester to begin. (pause for potential comment from participant).

I'm contacting you to see if you would be interested and willing to participate in my doctoral research focusing on the lived experience of class leaders. If you are interested in participating in this research, I will be happy to send you a formal invitation outlining your responsibilities as a participant in the study. In short, I would be asking you to complete a demographic form and one interview at the end of the semester so you can reflect on your experience as a class leader. The interview will take approximately 40-60 minutes. Are you interested in participating?

**If the answer is yes** – Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Would you like to schedule an interview during the month of February or March?

Thank you for scheduling an interview. I will send you the list of interview questions one week prior to our interview so you can be familiar with the questions. I look forward to working with you and thank you for your involvement with this study.

Good luck with your spring semester!

Good bye!

**If the answer is no** – Thank you for taking the time to consider this opportunity. I respect your decision and wish you the best of luck as you prepare for your classes this spring.

Good bye!

## Appendix G - Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of what undergraduate students experience when they are asked to teach and facilitate a group of first semester freshmen as a class leader for Introduction to Leadership Concepts Class, LEAD 212. As a participant in this study you will be interviewed once during the spring semester for approximately 60 minutes and asked questions that relate to your experience as a class leader. The interview will be scheduled around the participants' availability between April 1 and May 31. The interviews will be audio taped, transcribed, and available to each participant for their review. Participants will have the opportunity to include any additional remarks after reviewing their interviews. Participants will be asked to complete a demographic form, which will ask students about their educational background and leadership activities. The demographic form should take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Participants will be asked to participate in the study from April, 2011, through May 31, 2011, reflecting back on their experience as a class leader during the fall of 2010.

There are no known risks in this study. Your participation will help inform the researcher and the School of Leadership Studies on how to support, train, and develop Class Leaders to reach their full potential as a student leader. Through active reflection of your experience by participating in this study you will be able to learn more about your lived experiences and leadership development as a Class Leader.

Participant information, demographics, and interviews will be kept confidential and participants will remain anonymous.

- CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): J. Michael Finnegan, 103 Leadership Building, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, 785.532.6500, [mikefinn@ksu.edu](mailto:mikefinn@ksu.edu)
- PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Dr. Doris Wright Carroll, Major Professor, 328 Bluemont Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, 785.532.5949, [dcarroll@ksu.edu](mailto:dcarroll@ksu.edu)
- Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research, Involving Human subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, 785.532.3224, [rscheidt@ksu.edu](mailto:rscheidt@ksu.edu)

I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits as a class leader, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

**I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.**

Participant Name [printed] \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Co- Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H - Thank You Letter to Participants

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear (participant),

Thank you for taking the time to visit with me and participate in an extended interview sharing your experiences as a class leader. I appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts, feelings, reflections, and unique situations.

You will find the enclosed transcript from your interview. Please take the time to review the transcribed notes for accuracy and to verify that the interview accurately captured your experience as a class leader. If you feel that any of your responses did not fully capture your experience, you can add comments that would further elaborate your experiences. You can send your comments back on the transcribed interview, e-mail them to my attention, or schedule another meeting to tape record your additional thoughts or corrections.

Please return the reviewed transcripts to my attention at the following address: Mike Finnegan, School of Leadership Studies, 103 Leadership Building, Manhattan, KS 66506.

Thank you once again for your time and participation. All your information will be kept confidential and I'll make sure to send you a copy of the final analysis.

All the best,

Mike Finnegan  
[mikefinn@ksu.edu](mailto:mikefinn@ksu.edu)  
785.532.6500