

Undergraduate Collegiate Female Leadership Programs in Public Universities Within the

State of Michigan

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### **Abstract**

My thesis project will examine what types of undergraduate leadership student programs exist for young women attending the fifteen public universities within the State of Michigan. Within the analysis, questions that will be explored include: What universities offer undergraduate female leadership programs; If a public university does offer an undergraduate female leadership program, in which department does the program reside? Further content analysis will be done on each found organization including its design and intent, chosen curriculum as well as the membership selection process. Part of the analysis will include what scholarly research, literature, and programming is used to guide the organization's pedagogy. As part of the review and analysis, a chart will be created that looks at the differences between the universities and their programs as well as their similarities. A final discernment about the "best practices" that exist within undergraduate female collegiate leadership programs will be made. This codified knowledge will be created in order to guide the development of future female collegiate leadership programs.

*Keywords:* Leadership, female, college

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**Biographical Note**

My name is Olivia Snyder and I am currently a junior student, graduating this upcoming December. My major is Communication and I also have two minors in Applied Leadership Skills and Journalism. My future goal is to attend graduate school to study Training and Development. First, I would like to pursue a career in corporate communications and marketing. This project ties my goals and passions together because it would be a great example of my abilities to future graduate schools and employers while also giving me the ability to make an impact on future female students and the programs they may have the chance to participate in during their college careers. I chose this topic in particular because I wanted to not only be able to discover new information, but be able to help future female college students similar to myself. I became passionate about my subject matter of choice after taking “COM 380: Women in Leadership” during my sophomore year in college. My current thesis mentor taught this course and showed me that although there is a wide array of information available pertaining to women in leadership, there are gaps within this research that exist. Though these gaps are plentiful, I wanted my own research to be a step in the direction of closing these gaps. After this revelation, I became more and more interested in researching these gaps of knowledge, which is how I developed my thesis topic. I also have an interest in this subject matter because of my collegiate experiences. Having served in leadership roles in several capacities, most notably as President of my sorority and as an Orientation Group Leader and Orientation Assistant on campus, has peaked my interest in female leadership at the collegiate level which fueled my passion of learning more about my

chosen topic. I have been lucky enough to have formal and informal mentors to guide me through these leadership roles, but I have not personally benefitted from any one particular women in leadership program during my collegiate years. After noticing that other Michigan public colleges have programs like these, and that Oakland does not have one specific program of this nature, made me want to research this topic even more.

My goals for this project are highly extensive. It is important to me that I empirically examine what types of undergraduate female collegiate leadership programs exist at public universities in Michigan. Next, I would like to discover the general curriculum of these programs and what the goals of the program are. Lastly, after doing so, I aim to synthesize the information gathered on the different programs. After synthesizing this information, I will create a best practices model that can be used to shape future women in leadership programs at four year universities.

By examining the collegiate women in leadership programs offered, the number of programs as well as their intended focus will be discovered. Additionally, by analyzing the program pedagogy, the similarities and differences across the curriculums will be discovered. Some are expected to have an academic focus and others to be co-curricular in design and purpose. Lastly, by codifying this knowledge, a model can be created that can guide the development of future female collegiate leadership programs. It is my intention that this best practices model will be used by future educators who are looking to implement female leadership programs, or even for us to improve programs that currently exist.

It is my hypothesis that almost every public four-year university in the State of Michigan will have some sort of university funded women in leadership program available for female undergraduate students. Although I expect there to be many differences in the

department host of the program and what the focus of the program is, I think that the common tie between them all will be the fact that they exist on college campuses today, which is different than past years in higher education.

### **Current Research**

Within the current research on undergraduate female leadership at the collegiate level, the spectrum is broad and lacks an empirical focus on public universities within a specific State. Haber (2011) found that when studying women in leadership at the collegiate level, women at this stage in their lives described leadership, as “Leadership is an activity, a relationship, and a process one undertakes with others. It also, though, includes a focus on tasks and the challenge of balancing of these approaches was instrumental in the women’s leadership effectiveness” (p. 95). This definition of leadership is important because it shows the meaning of leadership for the group of people that participate in these types of programs as well potentially informs program designs.

“Leadership Out Front and Behind the Scenes: Young Women’s Ambitions for Leadership Today” from the book *Women in Leadership in Higher Education* (Keohan, 2015) focuses on women in leadership at an ivy league institution, which showcases the gap of research between collegiate women in leadership programs at public universities versus the research that currently exists on programs at private universities (Keohan 2015). The study found that the heads of most pertinent organizations on Princeton University’s campus were male. These facts lead researchers to study why women may not take on these leadership roles at Princeton University, which indicates a gap in knowledge exists. It was fascinating to learn that more male leaders existed on campus at Princeton University, and

lead me to wonder about what types of programs are supporting women on campuses, since there is an obvious lack of women taking on roles. This lead me to the idea to explore the types of programs that support women looking to pursue leadership on college campuses.

Another aspect of leadership at its most basic form is explored by Kezar (2000) when taking into account ethnicity and gender. This author discovered that “a major limitation of previous research is that most of the leadership models-trait, behavior, power and influence, cognitive-were based on research using mostly Caucasian, male samples” (n.p.). As noted earlier, no empirical study of female undergraduate collegiate leadership programs in public Michigan universities currently exists. This thesis will fill this gap of knowledge by surveying the status of such programs with the state and then codifying the programmatic knowledge. The 15 public universities within the State of Michigan cover the scope of institutions that serve local, regional, national, and international interests.

My research synthesizes the women in leadership programs offered for females at the 15 public four year universities in Michigan. By gathering this data, the similarities and differences between each curriculum will allow for the creation of a best practices model for an undergraduate collegiate female leadership program. This synthesized knowledge will help to inform future university leadership as to what type of programs exist and what might be worthwhile to establish if one does not exist currently.

### **Methodology**

In order to explore this topic in depth, careful and intentional processes must be used to preserve the validity and integrity of my research. I carefully laid out a project plan in order to simplify the research stage of this undertaking.

Before beginning my research on my chosen topic, I wanted to clarify my mental scope of this issue by doing a larger analysis of the current state of women's leadership on a national scale. I decided that this would help me later in the process to understand the current trends on college campuses, so I planned on starting my research path here.

Next, I honed in on my chosen research topic. I created a list of all of the public universities in Michigan. I was able to gather further information on which universities fell into this category from government websites. I only planned to research four-year schools that were public and had their main campus somewhere in the state of Michigan.

Next, I created a chart using Microsoft Excel in order to organize my future research. With my thesis mentor, I was able to narrow the scope of my research at this point. It was decided that my research would look at the following factors of programs: University Name, Program Name, Program Focus, Department, Educational Resources, Coordinator Name, Website and Number of Students. With finding out more information on these factors of each program, it will be easy to compare each program to one another to see similarities and differences that exist between them.

In this research process, I encountered a challenge that I had not quite expected. I realized early on in the process that even though I hypothesized that most college campuses will have programs for women in leadership, this was not at all the case. This effected my research process because I had a shift in focus. I planned on exploring each program in-depth to see what the similarities and differences are at a close-up view. This was impossible to do when there weren't many programs to explore to begin with. For this reason, I had a small shift in my research focus after beginning my research process, but I was able to adapt the remainder of my research accordingly.

To begin the formal research into this matter, I conducted an extensive web search on programs that exist at colleges. When I found that a campus has a women in leadership program, I entered as much of the information into my research chart as possible based on the program's website. When I saw that there were many things left to find out after looking online, I started my program coordinator interviews to gather more information on the factors of each program that I was exploring, as listed earlier.

Using contact information found on the institutions' websites, I contacted multiple program coordinators on each campus in order to determine the necessary information. I did most communication through email because I found that most of the coordinators that I was reaching out to were faculty on college campuses which meant that they were busy and not always near their office phone. Email was my most effective method of contact by far with this population. It was also a challenge to find a faculty member who coordinated these programs. This was not always doable because occasionally, a program would be department sponsored and lead by a committee, rather than one individual. In these cases, I was able to contact the best fitting individual who could provide me with further information on the program.

I was able to develop a set of questions and information I am seeking to discover in order to ensure that I am searching for similar information at each of the universities with active programs. By gathering one set of questions that I asked all of the interviewees, my research was kept consistent and accurate.

After reaching out to them, if I did not hear back from them after five business days, I planned on following up once again with another email, or even a phone call if there was a phone number available to me. To my surprise, I found that everyone was responsive to me



within this time frame and more than willing to help. I believe this is due to the nature of my project. Since I was conducting a scholarly project, by interviewees who are scholars themselves, were very cooperative with me in order to provide me with all information that was needed for me to continue my research process.

At this point in my research I encountered another challenge: one important criteria that I had throughout the research process is to only include university-funded programs. After talking to many program coordinators, I learned that the programs that I thought to be university-funded from my online research, were actually oftentimes student-led and funded organizations that lacked the structure and funding that a university funded program would have held. This is to ensure that the final best practices model accounts for programs that can be university-sponsored. This specification is crucial for the advancement of women in leadership, because once a university puts money towards a program, it is a public commitment to the advancement of women on whole. This was a roadblock to my research because it extended my research process. If the program that I thought to be the universities' women in leadership program was actually a student-led and funded program, did another program exist at the university that did fit the qualifications I was looking to meet?

The research for this project was very circular in this way. Just when I thought that I understood a particular program or had the information that I needed in order to move forward, I realized that sometimes it was not at all what I was looking for and that in reality, a program with the qualifications that I was looking for did not exist at that specific school. This revelation was disheartening for me, being a strong supporter for women in leadership – at all stages in a woman's life.

After all stages of the initial research process were completed, I analyzed this comprehensive chart of women's collegiate leadership programs and noted the similarities between programs to see what practices are most commonly used, and if there are any outliers within the research. I compared all of the factors charted against one another and found that although there were many similarities between programs, there was also much variation between them as well.

I then analyzed these results to create a "best practice" model of a leadership program using my findings. I did this based on what scholars say women typically need further training and support on, and based off of which practices came up most commonly in my research. If it was widely used, I believed that there must be value in the practice. I did look at this with a critical eye though, to ensure that what was popular was also aligning with the scholarly knowledge that I had found.

Resulting from this project, I have a comprehensive listing of all of the women in leadership programs that exist at the collegiate level at publicly funded Michigan universities. This list cites multiple factors of the programs and compares them to one another. This listing will be in the form of an organized chart that will allow for ease of understanding and synthesis. The most commonly used curriculum in Michigan public institutions will be apparent.

I am speculating that because of my synthesis, analysis from myself and other researchers can be made about the best practices in female leadership programs. The analysis drawn from my project can help to inform faculty who are also interested in creating a female leadership program at their own universities. It is my hope that where I found that these programs do not exist, my findings can inspire change on college campuses and

provide an easy transition into the creation of a program to support undergraduate women interested in lifelong leadership.

Personally, I hope that this project will quench my thirst for knowledge of female leadership. I am a strong advocate for women and have enjoyed taking leadership classes throughout my college career, so I believe that this project will combine my two passions and help to further the progressive change that universities may lack on their campuses. I am aware that this phenomenon of women in leadership programs has not always existed on college campuses, so another potential outcome of this project could be awareness of programs. This could spark excitement for future or current college students and help them to demand programming on their own campuses if needed.

### **New Knowledge**

The research conducted was very telling of the current state of female leadership on a larger scale, outside of the college realm. This is the most obvious indicator that what I was finding was accurate, because it was aligned with the current state of women's leadership in the outside world, which is simply put, lacking.

To explore the current state of leadership on a larger scale is imperative to understanding the issue I explored in my own research. For example, according to a report by the American Association for University Women (AAUW) titled "Barriers and Bias", women are much less likely than men to be in leadership positions. This is shown in almost every industry that the group explored. For example, the AAUW notes that 75% of U.S. State legislators are male, while 25% of State Legislators are female. In the corporate world, 63% of executives are white men, while only 24% are white women, with other races of

women holding a very small percentage of executive titles (Quick Facts from Barriers and Bias).

This data is important to explore before looking at the data I found because it paints the picture for why women in leadership programs are needed at the collegiate level. While women in leadership programs seem like just an additional expense for universities to fund, it is imperative to see that there is a gendered leadership gap in the United States today, and programs need to be put in place to reverse this trend, similar to the programs that I spent time researching.

It is also important to look at the current state of women in leadership in the United States before looking at university programs that exist because it supports my research data. After seeing that such a strong gendered leadership gap exists in the country, it shifted my research hypothesis. Originally, I assumed that all universities would have some sort of women in leadership program, but after seeing the poor state that women's leadership is in on a national scale, I lowered my expectations for my research and assumed that many schools would not have programs.

Throughout this synthesis I will be referring to Figure 1, which is the aforementioned chart I created throughout my research process in order to track my data collection of the many colleges and their women in leadership programs, or lack thereof. The trends I discuss in the following paragraphs are based off of the data found on this chart.

At the most basic level of my research, I was shocked that the number universities that held programming for female leadership at the collegiate undergraduate level was far fewer than I had anticipated. After studying all fifteen public universities, it was disappointing to see that the majority of public four-year universities in Michigan do not

currently have a funded women's leadership program in place. As previously mentioned, originally I did not take this fact into consideration when creating my hypothesis, so I was very shocked to see this data.

Next, I will analyze each of the factors that I looked at in relation to the data found. I chose to research eight different factors of the programs, all of which I will analyze and synthesize my findings.

The first area of research for me was to gather all of the colleges that fall under the list of "four year public universities that have their main campus in the State of Michigan." This includes fifteen colleges in Michigan, which is definitely a higher number than I had hypothesized there to be.

The first factor of collegiate programs I looked at was the name of the program. As expected, there was a heavy amount of diversity in the names of the programs (at colleges that did have programs at all). The most common name that I found amongst all of the programs was "Women's Leadership Institute." Two colleges called their programs by this same name. These schools are Michigan State University and Oakland University. This information will help guide the title of a potential program in my best practices model after analysis of all data.

Program foci also varied. The most common theme of program focus was professional development. This classification means that the goal of the program was career preparation oriented as a way of teaching leadership to young women. Other programs focused on activism and community engagement, which focused mainly on women's rights and social issues in order to teach leadership. Another outlier was University of Michigan Dearborn's program which was strictly educational meaning that the program was to teach

about the topic of women in leadership using scholastic methods. Again, there was a wide array of program foci that will be taken in consideration in order to create a best practices model program.

Next, I looked at the department in which the program fell under at the university. It was not surprising to me that the programs fell under various departments and worked to meet different goals at each respective university. Some programs were under departments of their own, while others fell under student affairs divisions such as Housing or Student Activities. This differentiation is due to the topic of study of the programs. Leadership, without the consideration of gender, does not submit to one academic discipline, so it is only assumed that a narrower scoped topic – women in leadership, would likewise not submit to one single academic department or office. It was frequent that programs would fall under the gender studies discipline or women’s resource offices, but I often found that these programs had different program foci as well. Academic based programs tended to fall under liberal arts colleges of study, while programs that focused on social activism and women’s issues tended to fall under the student affairs divisions. One unexpected department that many of these programs fell under was various diversity and inclusion offices. I did not hypothesize that women’s leadership would be considered a topic of diversity, but I can see how a conservative college would consider this to be the case because women’s leadership has historically not been an area of study, so nowadays it can be considered a “diverse” topic. This was noteworthy in my research because it illuminated how modern my topic of study really is. It explains why the gap of knowledge exists that I am attempting to bridge with this project – since this program is such a new concept, it is only natural that research has not filled the gap yet.

Looking at resources, I was surprised to see that most programs varied year to year, or were not scholastically based in nature, so they did not rely on any sort of academic resource. Many program coordinators noted that they would rather rely on action oriented learning through speakers, conferences, volunteer projects, or conversation on social activism. It was not common to find a single book that each participant was required to read to be a member of a program. This is again, different than I hypothesized. I assumed that based on the funding from the university itself, most programs were going to have more of an academic focus to them, requiring academic resources, but this was not at all the case based on my findings.

Next, I looked at the coordinators of these programs. To no surprise to me at all, I found that all of the directors of these programs under investigation are women. Although it is intuitive for the programs to be run by female leadership, it was nonetheless shocking to see because I hypothesized that there would be at least a little bit of gender variation. I think it is important to have both genders involved in this topic because female leadership effects both genders. This pattern is something that I will reflect on when writing my best practices model.

The next factor that was synthesized was the website in which most information was found under regarding the program. I included this information so that those who wish to start a women's leadership program at the collegiate level can easily access current information regarding programs. Most of these websites listed are links of off the college's own websites, but there was one outlier that used Facebook as a main hub of information about the program.

The last factor of study that I observed was the number of students that participate in these programs. It was encouraging to see that some groups were “open” for all women to participate. Although having a selective group has its benefits, having the opportunity for all women interested in leadership to reap the benefits of programming is exciting to see. On the opposite side of the extreme, programs like Oakland University and University of Michigan Ann Arbor had very selective programs that allowed for specialization in training and development of their hand-picked undergraduate women. Many program coordinators noted that the “open” programs were due to the fact that it was difficult to engage students and get them involved in membership, so anyone who was interested was welcome to take part in group activities. I noticed that the majority of the programs that were by application or invitation only, tended to be more academically rigorous schools where more interest in programs like these may exist.

The diversity of these programs was very thrilling to discover. Although there was much variance across different universities, a select few programs stood out for providing students with exceptional leadership experiences on their respective undergraduate campuses.

### **Best Practices Model**

From the research, there are obvious trends within the programming currently available at Michigan public universities. The trends display what practices are most commonly used in the programs and what types of programming isn't as widely used across the state. Based on the current trends in undergraduate leadership programming, I have developed a best practices model so that future coordinators of future programs can reference



it in order to build their own unique programs at their respective institutions. The creation of this new knowledge on what is considered the best practices in undergraduate female leadership programming will ultimately improve the greater world community. Because of the lessons learned through programming, women will graduate from these programs feeling empowered, confident and ready to take on challenges in leadership positions. This will help train and develop future leaders so they can in turn serve the community in their future leadership roles.

The best practices are displayed below in chart format, in Figure 2. As reasoning for why the given factors were chosen, patterns from data collected were used in order to create this new model. I used commonly used practices in order to determine best practices. Additionally, in Figure 3, I have created a mock syllabus for the program that incorporates specific program ideas gathered from the various programs I have researched.

This model can be used at any institution, although it was modelled specifically after practices at public four year universities, so it is assumed that it could be successful at other similar schools.

The name of the program would be “Women’s Leadership Institute” based on the commonality that was found amongst the programs researched. This title speaks to the academic nature of the program and does not limit the program to studying one sector of women’s leadership.

The focus of the program would be to educate and professionally develop college women. Looking back on my personal leadership experiences in my college career, undoubtedly my educational and professional achievements have shaped me most to be the

leader that I am today, so I believe that the inclusion of both of these foci is imperative to an enriching program.

The department that the program would be hosted under would most definitely be an academic department, most likely one in the liberal arts. These colleges have different names across institutions, but typically it is something similar to “College of Arts and Sciences.” I believe that the program best fits under this college because it removes any gender bias from the program. For example, the program has a certain connotation in society if it is hosted under the gender studies department or a student affairs division, that would be removed if it is hosted under a liberal studies department. Also, I think that housing a program under an academic department in general is important because it brings the focus of the program from just a social group to an interactive learning experience.

Resources will be dependent on how the program coordinator wants to lead the program. I do think that on a general level, the current state of women in leadership should be taught so that the students have a solid understanding of the social and political climate surrounding the topic, and then deeper topics can be elaborated on after this foundation is laid down. A mix of professional development, social activism, service learning and scholastic research to create a program syllabus would be a best practice because it gives students a sampling of many of the important aspects in women in leadership, which can be further explored by the student if they so desire.

The program coordinator should rather than just being one person, be a board of multiple professional leaders from various industries that bring a wide variety of wisdom and experiences to share with the students. Both men and women should be on this board in order for students to have the most real-life simulation of what leadership in the corporate world

after college is like. Additionally, having men at the table in these meetings will allow both men and women to be more understanding of the topic and provide many perspectives on the issue.

This program should be marketed and advertised using online tools. Most of the programs I researched had a linked website to the university's own official website. This is helpful in order for the largest amount of students to be able to find more information on it. This is a great practice to use, but it should be also supported by social media, similar to how Northern Michigan University uses Facebook to advertise their program. College students are typically very active on social media, so by using a combination of the college's website and social media accounts, the biggest number of students would be able to be reached and thus marketed and advertised to the maximum amount of students.

Although it is desirable for as many students as possible to know about these programs at universities, this does not necessarily mean that programs are best suited to be open to anyone who would like to participate. Due to the nature of the topic, this curriculum is best suited for a smaller, controlled number of students in a cohort. This will allow for relationships to be built among the leaders and will allow for camaraderie amongst one another. This is important because it will allow women to build a strong network of support that they can rely on professionally and socially in their upcoming careers. Additionally, this will allow for programs to be specialized into the topics that are best suited for the group, rather than teaching simplified, broad ideas. This allows the program coordinator to bridge the students' learning gaps. The program will have some sort of application and interview process to narrow the candidate pool. Students should represent a variety of majors and

backgrounds in order to create a diverse learning environment that will simulate the professional world.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, although various methods of undergraduate collegiate women's leadership programs exist across the State of Michigan, best practices can be observed when looking at trends amongst them. Using these best practices to create future programs at universities who lack programming as of right now will be instrumental to the advancement of women in future leadership roles. The research conducted defied many hypotheses that I had prior to my research, which shaped how I continued to research the more I became invested into this project. By conducting this research, new knowledge was created and a service to the larger scholastic community was contributed that will serve future women. Looking to what has been done in the past can positively shape the future of women in leadership. Since conducting research, although I have hope that society is progressing in the direction favoring women in leadership, women need to be proactive in their fight for success. "My advice to women (or men) seeking leadership roles is to be open to opportunities as they arise----either accept them when they are offered or seek them out" said Dr. Ora Pescovitz, President of Oakland University (Dr. Ora Pescovitz, personal communication, 2017 October).

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**FIGURE 2:** Best Practices Model for Undergraduate Female Leadership Programs at Public Four Year Universities

Program Name	Program Focus	Department	Resources	Coordinator	Website	Students
Women’s Leadership Institute	Professional Development and Education	College of Liberal Studies/Arts/ Sciences	TBD – chosen based on student need as determined by faculty program coordinator but must be academic in nature and incorporate a variety of hands-on experiences	Board of professional male and female leaders from a variety of industries and age ranges	Use of college official website and creation of program specific social media accounts	Selective –number will vary based on size of the campus

**Figure 3 - Women's Leadership Institute: Syllabus****Meetings:**

- The cohort will meet once a week.

**Topics Covered (more topics TBA):**

- Negotiation
- Body language (female vs. male in regards to leadership)
- Creating a personal brand
- How to network
- Interviewing tips
- Leadership style assessment
- Mentoring others
- Using your personal voice

**Mentorship:**

- Each student will be paired with an alumni mentor who is a professional in the student's current field of study. Students will shadow their mentor in their workplace and meet regularly for career related, academic related and educational related discussions

**Cohort:**

- Application to the cohort will be by invitation only. Applicants will be brought in for interviews if selected. Then, the cohort will be chosen based on interviewees.

**Duration:**

- The program will begin in September and will end in April.