

Developing Leadership During Adolescence: The Experiences of Women University Presidents

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Researchers argue that much of who we are is developed during childhood and youth. Yet, little exploratory research has been conducted regarding experiences, activities, personalities, and perceptions of successful leaders during these years. I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with ten women university presidents to investigate perceptions and experiences related to the lifetime development of leadership skills, abilities, and competencies. The lived experiences of these women were investigated using the phenomenological research methodology so that “voices” could be heard and unique insights examined. This paper explores a portion of the research on adolescent personalities, school and activities, influential individuals, and significant events and challenges.

The adolescent years are an incredibly important developmental time for all individuals. It is a vital time for young women to develop confidence and self-esteem, learn new skills and competencies, discover strengths and weaknesses, and increase their understanding of self and environment. Since leadership is also a network of relationships (Ahn, Adamson, & Dornbusch, 2004), experience and opportunity in building healthy relationships with a host of different people and organizations is critical during these years. Adolescence is a dynamic time full of positive and negative experiences, challenges, and opportunities that all seem to impact people in some way for the rest of their lives (Hartman, 1999).

Researchers have continued to voice support for the exploration of early histories in “shaping women’s thinking and enabling them to aspire” (Cubillo & Brown, 2003, p. 289) to leadership positions. Looking at what has affected their growth and development is a vital piece in evaluating the leadership development of young girls/women. Understanding the “foundation of successful women and the early experiences that instilled self-confidence and leadership traits” (Matz, 2002, pp. 3-4) can assist parents, advisors, and leaders in providing programs and experiences that may be helpful in facilitating the development of important leadership competencies. This is particularly important as one study (Anonymous, 2005) reported that girls consistently felt they couldn’t be leaders and perceived being a leader as a negative image. Sills (1994) and others (e.g., Erickson, 1989; Stiles, 1986) believe that adolescence (between seventh and twelfth grades) is the optimal time for teaching leadership skills to young girls because of the research findings that show that girls become less confident, less ambitious, and less assertive during these years. These researchers found that girls between the ages of 12 to 14 are on the “brink of making important decisions which will influence the direction of their futures” (Sills, 1994, p. 61). It is clear that girls who become leaders have somehow developed positive views of themselves as well as an understanding of how to transform obstacles into challenges that can be overcome (Cantor & Bernay, 1992). This paper will explore these and other issues that will be helpful in understanding the development of the high level women leaders.

I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with ten women university presidents to investigate their perceptions and experiences related to the development of leadership skills, abilities, and competencies throughout their lives. This paper explores a portion of this research focused on the adolescent experiences, characteristics, and memories of women university presidents as they relate directly or indirectly to possible leadership development influences. The

women described how these experiences may have somehow influenced the development of their own leadership skills and competencies. It centers on the following: adolescent personalities; youth activities; leadership positions and experiences; employment; influential individuals; and significant events, challenges, and opportunities.

Research Methods

Between January and March of 2005, 25 women university presidents were invited to be participants in this research study. They were given details of the study and were asked for a two-hour block of time to meet for in-depth interviews at their universities. The invited women served as current presidents (or recently retired presidents in one case) of primarily research public and private higher educational institutions. These women were invited via email messages sent directly to them (although many were diverted directly to the president's assistant or administrative assistant). Twelve accepted the invitation to participate, and interviews were scheduled with the ten who could meet with me between March and June of 2005. Eight of the ten served as presidents or chancellors of strong, well-known research institutions or university systems while two were presidents of well-known teaching-focused comprehensive institutions with strong scholarship expectations. Nine of the ten served in public institutions with only one being from a private. Eight were Caucasian and two were African American women. Four of these women were in their fifties and six their sixties. This study was designed as a qualitative interview project that used the phenomenological research approach.

Interview questions were drafted based on this research methodology, an extensive review of the literature, and the review of other instruments measuring similar constructs for different populations or at lower levels of leadership. They were open-ended probing questions designed to extract all types of information about the presidents' experiences and perceptions of becoming leaders. Some follow-up questions were similar attempting to encourage the presidents to search deeper for additional answers and rich descriptions. The interviews lasted approximately two to three hours each.

A number of steps were utilized to analyze the interviews. First, all interviews were transcribed in full by the researcher and a temporary assistant. Second, each interview was analyzed to categorize responses throughout the interview into specific sections. Third, all of the related responses (comments, perspectives, and stories about their mothers) from all ten interviews were then combined into separate categorized documents. Next, each interview transcription and analysis were reread to identify key ideas and phrases about the presidents' experiences related to each particular category. Fifth, all interview phrases or statements were then grouped by topic. The primary themes that emerged from the interviews were then noted. Finally, the presidents were asked to review the themes and results via email or phone. They were asked to provide additional perspective and insight into their experiences that may not have been captured in the original interviews. Because of the large amount of data collected, only their adolescent years are discussed in this paper.

Results and Discussion

Personality

There were some particularly interesting themes that emerged from the interview data regarding the women's personalities during adolescence. The women were generally respectful, reflective, smart, self-directed, and helpful. Many women also used the word *obedient*, but more in the sense of following the rules not necessarily blindly conforming to them. A few presidents

mentioned an insecurity or lack of confidence, particularly during seventh and eighth grades. However, during high school all of the presidents described themselves as having good self-esteem and a sense of competence as well as being confident and generally comfortable with themselves. One president explained,

I was still immature, bashful, and not very confident in seventh and eighth grades, but I was always a good student. In 9th grade I suddenly became more outgoing and confident. I'm not sure why, but there was definitely some kind of transformation.

It is clear that none of the presidents were confident in all areas of their lives, but each was undoubtedly confident with at least some of their abilities. One woman stated, “*I was very confident in my own abilities during this time in my life; however, I wasn't always confident in my position or place.*”

Four women specifically mentioned that they were not easily intimidated by others, particularly peers. One stated, “*I was confident and never let anyone intimidate me.*” Most were generally outgoing as they entered their high school years. One president's experience was typical:

I was active and involved in my youth. Some would probably say I was bossy. I liked leading things and was comfortable with it. I wanted things to happen, and I learned that if you want to do something then you have to take charge to make it happen.

It is important to note that, although confident, a few women did describe themselves as “*soft spoken*” during these years.

Some of the women spoke in detail about popularity. Being popular was certainly more important for about half of them than it was for the others. Some of the presidents were in popular groups, while others were not. One explained: “*I wanted to be in the right group. I wanted to date the right boys. I wanted to be accepted and to be popular.*” Although all of these leaders-in-training wanted to have friends and be accepted, many did not care as much about being in the “*right crowd.*” It is clear that they all needed a support system; in all cases they were seeking support.

The women demonstrated their strong academic skills and also continued to develop a passion and love for learning. One explained, “*I was attentive and wanted to learn; I loved to learn.*” They enjoyed their formal and informal educational experiences and often noted the joy they found in developing themselves by participation in activities or serving in leadership roles. Sills (1994) reported that in general, female youth during that time often acted naïvely and hid their intelligence and abilities. This was not the case with these university presidents. Besides being confident in their abilities, they also developed their self-awareness and self-reflection skills. For example, one president commented,

I learned to keep my mouth shut about how well I did. I discovered people didn't want to hear about it. I continued to be reflective as I viewed the world around me and tried to find my place in it.

As Katira (2003) explained, it must have taken self-reflection and conscientious decision-making to learn behavior and “new ways of being in and with the world” (p. 254). Researchers (Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990) have noted that there is a remarkable difference between genders with regard to the use of reflective learning both about self and about self in relation to others. Women report a much higher rate of lessons learned from this type of activity. This was the case for these presidents. Researchers (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992) also argue that self-aware individuals will have more accurate self-assessments. Accurate self-reports are linked to effective leadership, self-esteem, intelligence, achievement status, and locus of control.

The combination of being self-confident and dependable, working hard, and having a good mind (being smart) seems to be at the crux of comments like “*I was bright*”, “*I got good grades*”, “*I kept on top of my homework and did well in school*”, and “*I was a good student and always did beyond what was required.*” One president stated that she was confident in her ability to do any kind of work. Another explained, “*I was a hard worker, determined, and competent.*” Interestingly, all of the presidents spoke about their desire and ability to work hard during these years. As most teenagers these presidents also wanted to enjoy life and have fun.

All of the presidents continued to have high expectations for themselves, and they also seemed to thrive on the expectations of others regarding rigor and excellence. Similar to Hennig and Jardim’s (1977) findings, these women set for themselves an ideal in achievement. They were self-motivated, independent, goal-oriented, competitive, and self-directed. I found that my participants had “strong voices and a keen sense of competency” as did Stephen (2003, p. 51). As youth, the presidents continued to have strong achievement needs. All of these women were active and involved during their high school years. They seemed to enjoy having multiple responsibilities, duties, and roles. They liked to do well, and they liked to get things done. One president explained, “*I loved doing things really big and important!*” Another stated, “*I was self-motivated and liked to get things done. I was always interested in figuring out how to make things better.*” A third president explained, “*I had strong accomplishment needs as a teenager. I was a bit compulsive, but I had a lot of fun. I was driven in many things in my life and was excited to succeed or have others succeed.*”

These ten presidents displayed little fear of success, which was somewhat different for young women of that generation. Similar to Woo’s (1985) findings, these presidents also “seemed strongly focused on goals and comfortable with their achievement.” They were also beginning to be comfortable with power and influence in small ways.

Three of the presidents told stories about their sensitivity to criticism. These women listened to feedback from many sources and “*sometimes took too much to heart.*” It seems that most (if not all) of the women had some sensitivity to negative feedback. The ability to self-reflect seems to have been an imperative element to assist these youth in being able to separate criticism from their identity and confidence and then still be able, in some way, to use at least a portion of the criticism to effectively improve and develop.

The presidents were certainly practicing many behaviors in their youth that would make them leaders. They were learning which behaviors worked and which ones did not based on observing the results of experiences and listening to feedback. They were getting practice in reading their environment and learning to adapt. They were developing the ability to learn from their mistakes, which they and others (Katira, 2003) argue is invaluable. Astin and Leland (1991) also found that effective leaders have a willingness and capacity to learn from any experience—even mistakes and failures. In fact, during this time they were beginning to hone the ability to look at failure as an opportunity to learn. Bennis (1989) stated that good leaders learn from their experiences. A host of writers (e.g., Hoy & Miskel, 1996; Pankake, Schroth, & Funk, 2000a, 2000b) have also cited examples and research about high performing leaders learning from mistakes and failures better than low performing leaders.

As others (Hennig & Jardim, 1977) have reported, the women were also clarifying and developing their values and concepts of self at this stage. They were beginning to search for and find their voices. As Lyman (1995) argued, “developing voice is key to developing women’s sense of themselves as leaders.” By the end of high school the presidents were beginning to value their own voices. They had a strong need to influence. In fact, they were also exhibiting

control. They wanted a sense of control over their environment. They didn't like being acted upon but wanted to understand how to influence their environment. They were managing their environment through their choices (e.g., activities, network, goals, and reactions). They were setting boundaries for themselves. They were also starting to recognize and work within a system perspective. In many ways they were already practicing leadership.

Youth Activities

The presidents reminisced about all of the activities in which they were involved during their youth. It has been said that "leadership development is an unintended consequence of many activities" (Sagaria, 1988, p. 9). Researchers (Guido-DiBrita & Batchelor, 1988) have found that all student activities and organizations "play an especially critical role as a laboratory for leadership development in which students learn, are tested, succeed, and sometimes fail" (p. 51). Hence, I analyzed all emerging themes related to their activities during adolescence (see Table 1).

Table 1

As a youth I participated in...		
Adventurous activities	Future homemakers	Picnics
Band trips	Girl Scouts/Brownies	Physics club
Basketball	Hanging out with friends	Politics
Camps	Hebrew school	Riding club
Chemistry club	Hiking	Running for office
Choir	Honors society	School activities
Chores	Ice skating	Service projects
Church activities	Informal sports	Sewing
Clubs	International club	Shopping
Crafts	Latin club	Skiing
Dance	Lecture series	Social groups
Dating	Marching band	Sororities
Debate	Math club	Speaking contests
Dramatic productions	Orchestra	Student government
Family activities	Pep club	Waterskiing
Field hockey	Piano	Yearbook editing

The presidents spoke of the types of activities they enjoyed during their youth. One explained,

Band was important, so from seventh through twelfth grades I played in every football game. It was a small town. I loved band. It was an organization with a purpose. You had a job and could see how everything fit together. We marched, we played instruments, we went to the games, and we made a lot of noise.

Another stated,

I was the class treasurer and was in charge of a magazine sale. I did great. I had opportunities to motivate and influence people. It was exciting, and I enjoyed that. I liked getting things done. Sometimes others volunteered, but I did a lot myself because I just wanted to get it done. I was beginning to have real accomplishment needs as opposed to power needs. I think they've turned out to be very useful personality traits.

It seemed that many of the presidents were not as interested in titles as being in places or positions to influence and make a difference. Although many of the presidents were involved in student government, some were not. A few presidents said that there seemed to be no benefit to

taking “*all kinds of time and energy to run for office in high school.*” They fulfilled their accomplishment and achievement needs in other less structured forums.

All of these presidents enjoyed being involved and engaged in a variety of activities from sports to music to school leadership. One president commented, “*I was very engaged in the things that were very much a part of high school life at that time.*” One explained: “*I was involved in so many things and got positive feedback.*” They were busy by choice and learning to lead in areas they enjoyed. They were finding places in which they could excel or at least be good enough to enjoy. They were also seemingly seeking out supportive groups as they were developing competence, which is not purely an internal process, but rather a multi-dimensional interaction between an individual and her environment (Loeffler, 2000). A sense of competence can actually become an “ever-increasing force in women’s lives as it dictates what activities women will or will not attempt” (Loeffler, 2000, p. 5).

Because of the presidents’ self-reflective natures or abilities, they were also continuously learning about their activities, interests, situations, and selves. For example, one president reflected,

Through participation in a number of efforts during my secondary education years, I learned that I needed to either be in charge or else be working with certain people to accomplish things. I didn’t want to be involved just to be involved. I wanted to get things done. I needed to get things done.

Again, the notion of learning from mistakes and failures is a threaded theme through many of the presidents’ comments regarding their adolescent activities.

I ran for a visible office in our high school student government and lost. I did a lot of reflecting on what I might have done differently and why I didn’t have the support I thought I had. I learned early that the practice of studying your mistakes/failures is a very important learning experience. This has been an important part of my leadership development. Maybe some of it is actually from taking on responsibility that I don’t mean to take on and then analyzing failures and learning from them. I believe this is an important part of what defines me today. My failures may have been more useful in my growth and development than my successes.

Interestingly it appears that, for most of these women, when the activity or experience no longer provided learning and developmental opportunities, they moved on to something else. They lost interest and motivation when they believed there was nothing left for them to learn. They seemed to thrive on challenge.

There was also a sense that these women wanted to influence (possibly even control) their environment through some of their adolescent activities. It also appears that nearly every activity they chose to participate in was social-oriented. Membership, leadership, and even just basic involvement in their activities meant that they were continually interacting, connecting, and building relationship with others, particularly adults and peers.

Competitive activities, including getting good grades, continued to be a theme throughout the presidents’ youths. Although there were not competitive sports available for young women in many parts of the country (pre-Title IX) when the presidents were growing up, a few did have the opportunity to participate on organized sports teams. Other researchers have also found leadership development opportunities with sports participation (Astin & Leland, 1991; Hennig & Jardim, 1977; Rayburn, Goetz, & Osman, 2001). In addition to learning competitiveness, sports provided women the opportunity to develop and learn goal setting, fair play, networking, teamwork, prowess, rules, principles, and values. Sports participation is just one realm of

competitive activities in which these women participated. However, it is important to note that, whatever the activity, these women seemed to seek out learning experiences that provided them with three things: competition, cooperation, and autonomy. They loved competition (even if it was only with themselves). They thrived on developing relationships and participating in activities that housed cooperative opportunities and challenges. And finally, they flourished when they had independence, decision-making authority, and problem-solving responsibilities and opportunities.

All ten of the women spoke of activities related to writing and speaking and the development of these related competencies throughout junior high and high school. Three were editors of their school papers. A few of the presidents participated on high school debate teams. During that time period, young women in general were rarely included on such competitive teams with young men. Two presidents reminisced about the opportunities that had to speak and write at school and in church settings during adolescence. Both were asked to serve in leadership positions in their church organizations and were even asked to speak to the full congregations from childhood. By the time they were in high school these leaders-in-training were fairly comfortable with giving speeches and presentations to children, youth, and adults.

These women sought education in virtually all their experiences as others (Robinson, 1996) have also found. There are also some new themes that seem to span much of the youth activities data. First, in addition to thriving on a sense of accomplishment, as already discussed, these women liked finishing things. They enjoyed projects with specific conclusions. They were very task-oriented and enjoyed the completion of events, projects, and assignments. Second, during adolescence the data shows that the presidents began to understand there could be different ways to accomplish the same objectives. When they encountered roadblocks, they would figure out other options. These young women began to see that there was rarely one path to achieving any goal. And lastly, they were rewarded in different ways for their involvement in various activities. More directly, they were being rewarded for their gifts. These rewards came in various forms like positive feedback from peers and adults (other than their parents and close family members), invitations to participate or lead other groups or activities, awards and recognitions, and internal feelings of pride and accomplishment. It was clear that other people had confidence in them, and this also served as a type of reward. Interestingly, what seemed to serve as one of the greatest rewards for these women was the confidence, encouragement, and support that came from those individuals (often teachers) who held them to rigorous standards.

Leadership Positions and Experience

Next I explored the presidents' perceptions of formal leadership positions and experiences during adolescence. First, I asked the presidents when they first remembered being in a leadership role. One said, "*I started taking leadership roles early on. However, I'm not a politician so I did not run for student government offices. My roles were based on discipline and academics.*" Another explained that she organized neighbors and kids on the block to clean and sweep the streets and sidewalks. She said, "*We got the block looking pretty neat.*" One president explained,

I don't remember there being 'leaders,' but I was involved in the decision-making. We created lots of things. I was active and engaged in deciding dates of dances, the name of yearbook, the school colors, and things like that. My ideas were valued. I enjoyed having many balls in the air at the same time. From these experiences I think I developed more

confidence and I improved my skills in speaking, expressing ideas/opinions, and definitely multitasking.

These leaders-in-training seemed to be aware (consciously or unconsciously) of their leadership choices. They sometimes seemed to pick venues that provided opportunities for them to lead or manage in some way or at least provided the opportunity for them to control or influence their surroundings through their choices. Although informal leadership can be helpful for a young women's development, it seemed that leading in a formal setting also provided growth opportunity for these women. Their leadership choices were generally service-oriented, confidence-building, and competency developing and strengthening. They were learning leadership by doing—not just theorizing about it. They showed the ability to self-start and seek out situations that would be beneficial for them. They were beginning to find the power within themselves to make a difference.

The presidents mentioned a variety of formal leadership positions during adolescence: club (president, vice president, or secretary) (9); student government (4); girl scouts/Brownies (3); school paper editor (3); community service (3); church youth (3); sorority (2); band quartermaster (1); children's music director (1); and future homemakers (1). Club leadership was the most common form of leadership for these women at that time. One president spoke of her experiences: *"I became the president of everything I joined. People saw me as strong and capable. I was very organized and worked hard. People want you involved if you open your mouth and talk about how things could be done better."*

After serving for a number of years in club leadership positions, one president figured out something that then guided her future leadership decisions. Again, this is an example of the presidents' unique abilities to learn and reflect at this age. She said,

When I was a senior somebody wanted me to be the VP of something, and I said, "No, I don't want to do that because you never get anything done as a vice president. I'll be the president." I understood that the president was the position I needed to be in to really influence.

One research study (Rayburn et al., 2001) reported that women learned more leadership in school than at home, work, community, or in a religious/spiritual setting. I found similar results. However, the presidents also found opportunities to lead in venues outside the formal school environment such as Girl Scouts or Brownies, sororities, church youth groups, politics, and community service. The presidents stated that most of these leadership opportunities were also helpful in a variety of ways for their development.

Two presidents stated that they *"didn't seek leadership positions as a youth."* Of course this does not mean that these women did not *lead*. They did not seem to care about formal leadership titles at least during their teenage years. Yet, many of the examples they cited still included informal leadership within the framework of some kind of organization.

The women made similar comments regarding how they stepped into leadership positions. Most did not remember particular people telling them that they had leadership skills and encouraging them to become leaders. The presidents either became involved by going to meetings and voicing their opinions or someone would ask them to serve in certain positions or to accomplish certain tasks. One president said that she probably positioned herself so that she would be asked. Years ago one researcher (Ernst, 1982) explained that most women in this era waited for professional development opportunities to be handed to them. This was not the case for these presidents. Most mentioned that teachers or administrators would request their involvement in leading efforts or serving in formal leadership positions. Many of these requests

included working on small tasks, not necessarily large visible work. It was clear that people around these women seemed to know that they had the skills and abilities to make things happen.

Employment

The presidents mentioned they held a number of paid jobs during high school. Three of them were waitresses and seemed to have fond memories of the experiences and the competencies gained. These presidents spoke of the various skills acquired from being a waitress: multitasking, interpersonal relations, and political competencies (for example, being courteous and attentive to get more tips).

Three presidents work in retail. One found it very boring saying, “*It was a lot of standing around, and I don’t like to stand around.*” Yet another one loved retail because it was challenging explaining,

I was good at sales. I was a service-oriented person. I remembered client’s names. I was willing to work later hours. I enjoyed the opportunity to buy at a discount. I was a good producer. I strengthened my skills in networking and persuasion through this job. I was the one who could be counted on.

At a glance these two quotations might seem opposite; however, there is an underlying theme that should be considered. The first quotation came from a president who worked in a low- to middle-end retail store. She was paid the same rate per hour no matter her performance. It was a fairly reactive and passive environment. She wanted to keep busy, but she didn’t have enough to do. On the other hand, the other woman worked in a high-end retail store that was busy and challenging. She was paid commission for her sales and was rewarded for putting forth increased effort. She liked being held accountable for her performance. There was clearly a difference in motivation for these presidents. I expect that if the first president worked in the same environment as the second, she would have enjoyed her job more.

Three of the university presidents were instructors with supervisory responsibilities of some kind during their youth. One taught ice skating and had management responsibilities that came with it. She enjoyed the organizational and leadership opportunities this gave her. Another taught swimming lessons and was also a lifeguard. She explained, “*I loved teaching swim lessons. I liked the different levels and watching my students grow and develop. I became the head lifeguard. I wanted to be able to do everything.*” Again, the themes of autonomy and influence/control seem to surface in many of these and other quotations. Their choices were generally service-oriented, confidence-building, and competency-developing.

Another president had been a camp counselor for many years. She not only helped supervise and organize the children, she also had opportunities to teach and educate them. She said,

I was a fulltime camp counselor during the summer with about 60 kids. They were always getting into fights so I had a lot of practice with conflict management. I thought of it as helping people get along and be okay together. Working as a camp counselor helped me learn to work with different types of people and motivate them. I paid attention to who was there and figured out how to get things done. I practiced my problem-solving skills.

This quotation highlights a few important themes that span various sections of this chapter. First, this president was able to practice new skills—something all the presidents enjoyed going. Second, she was able to work, interact, and build relationships with different types of people. And third, she was given the opportunity to problem-solve. All of the presidents thrived on opportunities to problem-solve in any kind of situation, including employment.

Many presidents mentioned they did odd jobs like cleaning house and babysitting. One of the presidents was a secretary in her father's business. She learned to type well, which she thought was a very helpful skill in life; yet she saw the dark side of a family business and knew that she did not want to be involved in similar businesses when she got older.

Interestingly, three of the women had families who did not allow them to work regular jobs. Two of them were the African American women interviewed. One explained, "*The kinds of jobs that were available to an African American woman at a high school level in the summer were not jobs that my parents wanted us to take.*" This president continued to learn lessons of injustice, discrimination, and class issues through experiences and situations such as this.

Based on the presidents' responses, employment experiences taught them a variety of leadership skills and competencies. As other researchers (Rayburn et al., 2001) have found, adolescent employment opportunities can teach skills like multitasking, responsibility, negotiating, communicating, planning, organizing, and dependability.

Influential Individuals

When I asked each of the presidents to speak about the individuals who influenced them during their adolescence, most of them smiled. They had fond memories of a variety of individuals who they felt had made some kind of impact on their lives. The presidents used a variety of words to describe all of the individuals who had influenced them in some kind of memorable way. These included terms like role model, mentor, coach, advisor, supporter, sponsor, friend, and example. They mentioned the following individuals: parents (10); English teachers (7); peers (5); math teachers (4); Latin teachers (3); relatives (3); church teachers and neighbors (3); family friends or nanny (2); chemistry, biology, economics, Hebrew, history teachers (1 each); camp counselors (1); and principal (1)

All ten presidents spoke of the continued strong influence of their parents during these years. The importance of parental relationships and influence during these years is well documented (Astin & Leland, 1991; Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Hennig & Jardim, 1977). Most of the presidents mentioned that their parents' continued to encourage them to learn, be educated, use their minds, and aspire for college. Similar to what other researchers (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Hennig & Jardim, 1977) have also found, the presidents' homes continued to be generally stable and enriching.

Some broad themes emerged from these interviews. First, it was clear that all of the presidents had authority figures that saw their gifts and talents and demanded quality and rigor. Although many of the parents of the presidents fit this criteria, all of the women had a least one (most had more) other adult who did this. Their self-confidence increased when other individuals demonstrated trust and confidence in them and their opinions (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995). As Fels (2004) explained, "Without earned affirmation, long-term learning and performance are rarely achieved" (p. 54). Second, as already noted (Wells, 1998) the women in this study learned a great deal from relationships and connections with others. Van Velsor and Hughes (1990) found that women have a remarkable capacity to learn from other people. Wells (1998) noted with women entrepreneurs that the foundation of what shaped their self-images was in the relationships with others. Images of themselves were formed as they were reinforced and rewarded by people they respected. They were also exposed to authenticity and were changed by it. Third, partly through the positive influences of others, each participant began finding her own voice, realizing a sense of empowerment, and discovering a power within. Other researchers (De la Rey, & Suffla, 2003; Wells, 1998) also found this to be the case with future women leaders.

Outside the presidents' immediate families, the individuals who had the greatest influence were teachers, peers, and other adult figures.

All of the university presidents had teachers in high school that made a profound influence in their lives in some way. One said, *"I had great teachers in high school, some of which I wanted to be like and some of which I did not want to be like. Interesting, I learned from both types."* Sometimes it was the one-on-one attention given by a teacher: *"I had many great teachers in high school. They continually worked with me and would often pull me aside and work with me individually."*

Other times the presidents were influenced just by being one of many students in a particular teacher's classroom: *"Teachers were influential but none really gave me personal encouragement."* These women spoke most highly about teachers who had passion about their subject areas. The word "passion" emerged over and over in this interview data. The presidents described themselves as being passionate during high school, and they appeared to be strongly influenced by teachers who were passionate about their own subjects and lives.

One of the most interesting similarities among these women was that seven of the ten spoke of the strong influence of at least one high school English teacher. One explained,

She was an amazingly challenging teacher who really pulled out things that I think most of us never thought about. We had lots of writing assignments and lots of challenges around things like vocabulary development. She wrote the most provocative thing in my yearbook: "No lesser lights for you..." It has stayed with me forever. She was really challenging me to be all I could be. She was very important in my life.

This president loved being challenged and appreciated this woman because of her rigor and encouragement. She clearly remembered this yearbook inscription over 40 years later. Another president reflected on the following incredibly powerful experience:

Ms. Wyman was our high school principal and also the English teacher. She was strong, powerful, and impressive. She was a force to be reckoned with. The day the Brown v. Ferguson ruling came out of the Supreme Court, I met her in the hallway. I had been at the school for play practice. She uncharacteristically looked troubled and upset. She said that the Supreme Court had just ruled, and the day would come when there would be blood in the hallways. She was so troubled. That was all she said. At first I thought she was a bigot, but she wasn't. She understood the cultural clash that was coming and was ahead for schools in the south. She knew the impact that it was going to have. She was looking ahead with a kind of grief that it couldn't happen some other way...that it had to come to force to make it happen. I was in a totally segregated school.

Years later I understood things. I met a person of color at a professional meeting who asked if I knew a black individual in my small hometown. I did not. We then realized that I would have never have had a way to know her. The isolation of the two worlds was absolutely complete, and none of us noticed it.

This experience gave a young girl a profound look at the issue of discrimination during those years and in years to come. In fact, this woman's current institutional priorities centering on the issues of diversity speak to the possible impact of this initial experience. This event also served as feedback to this president by giving her a vote of confidence that she would be able to think through what was said. In fact, this single experience may have forced her into a reflection that was far beyond her years and experience. It very possibly helped her with an increased realization that the injustice in the world was now in her own life and hometown.

There are some interesting characteristics that emerge from these stories and statements. The teachers had passion, they respected these young women enough to demand rigor, and they made it possible for the presidents to succeed.

Four of the presidents stated that their math teachers were influential as well. One explained, *He made math come alive for me. He was a pretty significant influence in my life at that time. When I went to college, my intention was to major in math. That is the kind of influence he had on me. He saw potential and he pushed and jostled me. He would ask me how to solve problems. He put me on the spot because he thought I could do it, not because he was trying to embarrass me. I always knew that.*

The comments from the other three presidents highlighted the competence and commitment of the instructor, the joy they had from interactions with these teachers, the one-on-one attention (one called it a unique relationship), the way the teachers challenged them, and the specific methods the teachers used to teach. All four of these women (and others) spoke of the importance of learning math and how that kind of logical thinking is an important leadership competency.

In sum, the influential educational authority figures had a number of common characteristics. These individuals had confidence in the presidents, challenged them, and gave them appropriate and accurate feedback (appraisal support). They held them to rigorous and demanding standards while making it possible for these leaders-in-training to succeed if they worked hard and were engaged in the learning process. The teachers were passionate about their topics and about the education of youth. They enjoyed teaching and made it an interactive and uplifting experience for the presidents. And finally, they provided encouragement and support.

Although all presidents spoke of their peers during their adolescent years, five of the women felt that their peers were particularly influential and important in helping them develop leadership skills and competencies. One said she *“learned from friends who were more experienced.”* Another explained that *“I planned to go to college because they planned to go to college.”* Some researchers (Rayburn et al., 2001) argue that peers were often seen as more influential during adolescence than were teachers or parents. Although important, I didn’t get the sense from the ten presidents that peers were necessarily more influential for their development of leadership skills than were adult figures. It is clear, however, that friendships were vital for effective human development during these years. Although all of the women mentioned friendships during these years, the five that stated their peers were very influential seemed to do so for one reason. The friends that made a difference in the presidents’ leadership development were those who gave them candid and accurate feedback.

All of the presidents made general statements regarding their interest and ability to observe and learn from others. During these years it appears that the presidents had the ability to observe systems in which they could see fairness and rigidity. They had the ability to step back and discover meanings. The influential individuals around them helped them understand (through openness and discussion) issues and events. Somewhere in these women’s childhoods and youth they had adults who let them speak openly and freely. They had adults who provided examples of rational and accurate discussions where two or more sides of issues could surface. Somewhere during their youth they were able to express their opinions in a rational forum where the conversations (sometimes arguments) were enjoyable and enriching. Their voices were not hushed (at least in some settings) by adults who weren’t worried about being viewed as the “authority.” They were allowed and encouraged to think critically. They were encouraged to find their own voices.

Significant Events, Challenges, and Opportunities

Throughout the entire set of interview questions, the women spoke of memorable events focused on their adolescent years, and they shared what they learned from each of them. The events and challenges not yet covered revolved primarily around such issues as health, financial struggles, and moving. Although discrimination and injustice has already been addressed, it is important to note that four Caucasian presidents told of situations where they first discovered discrimination existed. They seemed to struggle with these issues and situations even though they were not the ones discriminated against. Some events focused on seeing race discrimination around them. A number of presidents also mentioned the type of discrimination that comes from the issue of popularity vs. non-popularity during these years. The African American women also spoke briefly of race issues and the types of challenges and opportunities that came with those.

Three presidents talked of health issues in their families. One spoke of challenges with her diabetic sister. One spoke of a personal injury that took years of physical therapy. She remembered thinking “*I’ll be darned if this knee isn’t going to bend, and I’ll be darned if I’m ever limping.*” She worked hard and fully recovered. Two spoke of their fathers’ health issues. One father had an accident when she was in tenth grade. She spoke of the strength of her mother during this time and how she took charge. She explained,

This taught me not to expect life to be predictable, to just not think that things are just going to be wonderful all of the time—that hard times are going to come. This was an important lesson to learn. I have used it throughout my life and have been better for having learned that.

Family moves were other challenging events for these women. One spoke of the types of activities she was planning to participate in before her parents announced that she would be moving. She had been very involved in school and was traumatized by the move. She said, “*It took me a year to kind of get into creating a place for myself in a new environment. I can say now, looking back, that it was good for me and taught me a lot.*”

Many of the presidents had opportunities to discover that they could overcome difficult events and situations, and then exercise or gain some control over the next steps. As one researcher (Katira, 2003) explained, “The way leaders embrace the struggles and strife that life throws at them is a telling tale of their strength of character...To me, this ability to transform moments of struggle into constructive, positive and transforming learning situations is a sign of a true leader” (p. 254). Some character traits that surfaced as the presidents spoke about these events include tenacity, sense of obligation, caretaking desires, and capacity to overcome challenges. They seemed to learn these things from life itself. The ability and desire to learn from things around them seemed to serve these presidents well during adolescence. It definitely helped prepare them for college and professional lives.

I asked the women about any recognitions or awards they received during this time. Some mentioned being prom queens or winning speaking or other types of contests. These kinds of recognition did not seem to mean a great deal to these women. In fact, they weren’t even sure there was a link in anyway to developing leadership. Two women did share experiences of awards that made a difference in their lives. The reason was because they came with enriching opportunities for experiences and growth. The awards or honors that had long-term meaning or value for these presidents were the ones that came with opportunities for growth and development. As mentioned previously, they thrived on experiences and rewards that provided them with opportunities to learn, including the exposure to the broader world.

Conclusion

The results of my study are supported by the work of Kaminski (2003) who outlined the following four stages of leadership development. During adolescence the presidents had a melting pot of experiences that provided them the opportunities to begin learning how to do the following:

1. *Find their own voices*: They learned to speak out and continued to realize that their opinions mattered. They focused on basic self-esteem;
2. *Develop basic skills*: Through schooling, activities, and influential individuals, they improved their written and oral communication skills and learned to work under the direction of others. Their focus was on developing skills and confidence;
3. *Figure out the politics*: They were learning how to get things done in the existing political context. Their focus was at an organizational level, and they were developing an understanding of political and institutional factors; and
4. *Mobilize others*: They were developing and directing projects that they choose and stayed committed to them. Their focus was on having a long-term impact.

By the time these women entered college they had already build a solid leadership competency foundation build on these four proposed stages.

The university presidents learned and developed important leadership skills and competencies during their adolescent years. Although young women may have different developmental preferences and processes for various activities and skills, it is clear that competency development during adolescence is imperative for the development of leadership skills and abilities to occur.

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