

Perceptions of Leadership of Alfred University Students:  
An Analysis of Qualitative Data from the Multi-Institutional Survey of Leadership

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## Abstract

Alfred University (AU) participated in the Multi-Institutional Survey of Leadership (MSL) in 2009. The qualitative data generated from AU students was analyzed in this thesis to answer several research questions. The main research question asked: do Alfred University students' definitions of leadership vary depending on their gender and year in school? This research question then indicated several sub-set questions:

1. What were the common themes regarding how leadership is defined as reported by AU men?
2. What were the common themes regarding how leadership is defined as reported by AU women?
3. What markedly different themes can be identified as attributable to gender?
4. Do these themes reflect the Social Change Model of Leadership at work; i.e. do the ways in which AU students define leadership become more change -and community based- as they acquire more exposure to leadership development?
5. What themes are prevalent at each academic year (i.e. first-year, sophomore year, etc)?

Using verbatim responses to the MSL, the data were analyzed in the context of the Social Change Model of Leadership, using horizontalization, thematization, semantic mirroring, and frequency counting as interpretive methods. Findings indicated the following general extractions: The most overarching leadership definitional themes were 1) leadership involves the completion of a task or goal; 2) leadership is about unifying a group; 3) leadership requires an understanding of group dynamics and taking others' feelings into consideration; 4) leadership involves a level of confidence; and 5) leaders must be willing. With regard to leadership as reflected through gender, more men (than women) reported leadership as aligned with task and goal attainment, while more women (than men) defined leadership as collaborative and relationship-based. As students progressed from first year to senior year, their definitions became more complex, sophisticated and more reflective of the group process values and the community values of the Social Change Model.

Ultimately, Alfred University hopes to foster leadership development to guide future leaders during and after their college years at AU. This thesis helped AU administration understand how AU students understand leadership and identified areas where more intentional leadership education has the potential to create a campus-wide culture of leadership aimed at creating social change.