

Leadership for Social Change: Findings from Chinese College Students

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The purpose of this survey was to explore status of Chinese college student leadership and influences of their leadership learning. The findings indicated that Chinese college students valued honesty and integrity, but were lack of self-confidence, self-reflection and self-awareness. They had responsible attitude and intention, but were lack of civic responsibility in action. Students who have studied leadership have shown more positive attitudes and behaviors in Socially Responsible Leadership. It is argued that Chinese college students might be able to improve their social responsibility and social adaptability through leadership learning especially social responsibility leadership development.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, higher education is perceived as playing a critical role in developing the leadership capacity of college students both in USA and China (Astin, A. W., & Astin, H. S.,2000; Roberts, D. C.,2003; Xi,J.R.,2012; Weng,W.Y.,2013).Leadership development and the preparation of a socially responsibly citizenship have long served as central goals for colleges and universities (Mitsifer,D.I.,2012). According to National Plan for medium and long-term education development (2010–2020), social responsibly is deemed essential in education development and also the core value of college student leadership in China. Empirical research focused on college student leadership are kept no pace (Dugan, J. P.,2008; Posner, B. Z.,2004), and less of them focus on social responsibly as the key competency of college student leadership in China(Diao,J.et.al.,2013; Tao,S.L.,2015).

Since 21st century, some colleges and universities in China have been developing their students' leadership through various approaches. Firstly, summer community activities and summer camps are platforms to developing students' leadership. Secondly, student Party School and Youth League School are the pioneers of student leadership training in China. For example, East China Politics and Law University, Shanghai Traditional Chinese Medicine University have designed leadership programs for student leaders. Thirdly, Formal college leadership courses are offered at some emerging elite Colleges such as 21ST Century Talent College in East China Normal University, Marxism Institute in Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Yuanding College in Shanghai Sea University.

The number of curricular and cocurricular leadership programs has increased rapidly in some universities across the country such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, Chengdu,etc.(Xi,J.R.,2012;

Lu,D.P.,2008; Zhang,Z.Q.,2011). Student leadership education is considered as a new way of civic education and value education in China (Weng, W.Y.,2013).

Based on the latest version of the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS) with 68 items, 1200 college students from 6 universities in China were targeted. The purpose of this survey was to explore status of college student leadership and influences of their leadership learning on Socially Responsible Leadership.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

Recently, socially responsible leadership was considered as the main approach for college student leadership and is broadly used in college campuses across the US and the world (AACU,2007; Hoy, A. et.al.,2008). The model defines leadership as “a purposeful, collaborative, values-based process that results in positive social change” (Komives,S .R., Wagner, W.,2009). These values operate at the individual level (consciousness of self, congruence, commitment), the group level (collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility), and the societal level (citizenship). Collectively, they contribute to an eighth leadership value of change for the common good (HERI,1996). Table 1 provides definitions for each of the values associated with the model. This survey was based on the adapted version of the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS), which is a total of 68-item instrument associated with eight core values in the social change model of leadership (DeVellis, R. F.,2003).

The questionnaire is divided into two parts: the first part is self-designed "basic information" with 11 items including personal information and leadership learning and development information; the second part is "Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS) " with a total of 68 items. Responses fall along a Likert-type continuum ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with individual items reflecting aspects of students' knowledge, attitudes, or skills. The scales were created using confirmatory factor analytic techniques. The reliability and validity of the instrument has been tested across multiple studies each yielding consistently high results (Dugan,J.P., et.al.,2008; Dugan,J.P., Komives,S.R.,2010).

Based on this study, reliability for the SRLS of 68 items was 0.944, whereas reliability for eight core values ranged from a low of 0.633 on controversy with civility and common purpose to a high of 0.83.

TABLE 1
VALUE DEFINITIONS FOR THE SOCIAL CHANGE MODEL OF
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Value	Definition
Consciousness of Self	Awareness of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate one to take action.
Congruence	Thinking, feeling, and behaving with consistency, genuineness, authenticity, and honesty towards others; actions are consistent with most deeply-held beliefs and convictions.
Commitment	The psychic energy that motivates the individual to serve and that drives the collective effort; implies passion, intensity, and duration, and is directed toward both the group activity as well as its intended outcomes.
Collaboration	To work with others in a common effort; constitutes the cornerstone value of the group leadership effort because it empowers self and others through trust.
Common Purpose	To work with shared aims and values; facilitates the group's ability to engage in collective analysis of issues at hand and the task to be undertaken.
Controversy With Civility	Recognizes two fundamental realities of any creative group effort: that differences in viewpoint are inevitable, and that such differences must be aired openly, but with civility. Civility implies respect for others, a willingness to hear each other's views, and the exercise of restraint in criticizing the views and actions of others.
Citizenship	The process whereby an individual and the collaborative group become responsibly connected to the community and the society through the leadership development activity. To be a good citizen is to work for positive change on the behalf of others and the community.
Change	The ability to adapt to environments and situations that are constantly evolving, while maintaining the core functions of the group.

Source: Higher Education Research Institute. A social change model of leadership development: Guidebook version III[M]. College Park, MD: National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs. 1996.

Data Sources

Data for this study were collected between March and May of 2014. The survey sampled 6 comprehensive universities in the East, middle and West China by using random convenient sampling principle. 200 students from junior and senior grades of each university were targeted.

To ensure high return rates, 1200 questionnaires were distributed and collected in person by operators in the six universities, under the guidance of the researchers. The questionnaires were given to teachers who asked students to fill in the questionnaires in their classes.

Of the 1200 questionnaires distributed, 1159 (96.6%) were returned, with 381 (32.8%) from the two east universities, 391 (33.7%) from two middle universities, and 388 (33.5%) from two west universities. These returns included 526 (45.4%) men and 633 (54.6%) women. Basically, the proportion of female students in universities is slightly higher than that of male students. In 2013, female undergraduate students accounted for 51.78% in China according to China Education Yearbook. In China, there are four grades in Chinese undergraduate education. The questionnaires were completed by 284 (24.5%) first grade, 305 (26.3%) second grade, 299 (25.8%) third grade, 271 (23.4%) fourth grade. These students were born between 1990 and 1995. The survey samples were basically balanced in all grades. Based on the above data, it can be seen that the sample data of this survey is basically consistent with the distribution of the sample population. Accordingly, the survey can also reflect the overall situation of Chinese university students to certain extent.

RESULTS

Current Status of College Student Leadership

Individual Level: Valuing Honesty and Integrity, but Lack of Self-confidence, Self-reflection and Self-awareness

The survey found that only 49.7% of college students think they know themselves well, 58.5% of college students think they are confident, and 24.8% of college students find it difficult to be introspective (Table 2). College students generally do not understand themselves and lack the ability to reflect on themselves, so they can not build enough self-confidence.

College students pay attention to the authentic and integrity, 85.8% of the students agreed that "I am genuine ". But only half of college students believe that their behaviors are consistent with their beliefs.

College students generally have higher sense of responsibility. 86.3% of college students think, "I hold myself accountable for responsibilities I agree to." But they are lack of congruence, only 65.8% of the students think that "I follow through on my promises", 66.4% of the students agree that "I stick with others through difficult times". Compared to other social groups, college students are relatively simple and sincere, but due to lack of resilience, they might be afraid of facing difficulties and run away from responsibility, not stick to their previous commitments and promises.

Group Level: Having Cooperative Attitude and Willingness in Mind, but Lack of Cooperative and Open-minded in Action

Students generally agree with the importance of group common goals or common values, and are willing to work together with others to make their group better and have a strong sense of responsibility for their group. Meanwhile, there are relatively less students are involved in activities that contribute to the goals of the group. This also proved that some students are lack of congruence as showed in Table 3.

Societal Level: Having a Responsible Attitude and Intention, but Lack of Civic Responsibility in Action

College students have a responsible attitude and intention, 87.7% of the students thought that "I work with others to make my communities better places", around 85% of the students thought they had responsibilities to their community, and valued opportunities to contribute to the community (Table 4). However, they are less willing to take the time to do things for others (71.5%) and lack of "civic responsibility to the greater public" (60.4%).

TABLE 2
VALUES IN THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Variables	Items	Agree, strongly agree	Unsure	disagree, strongly disagree
Consciousness of self	I am able to articulate my priorities.	63.6%	29.4%	7.0%
	I could describe my personality.	62.9%	29.2%	7.99%
	I am usually self-confident.	58.5%	29.5%	12.0%
	I am comfortable expressing myself.	53.0%	30.1%	16.9%
	I know myself pretty well.	49.7%	38.6%	11.7%
	Self-reflection is difficult for me.	24.8%	21.7%	53.5%
Congruence	I am genuine.	85.8%	10.8%	3.49%
	Being seen as a person of integrity is important to me.	79.3%	15.4%	5.2%
	My actions are consistent with my values.	69.1%	24.6%	6.3%
	My behaviors reflect my beliefs.	68.8%	25.8%	5.4%
	It is important to me to act on my beliefs.	64.3%	24.2%	11.5%
	My behaviors are congruent with my beliefs.	57.1%	31.9%	11.0%
Commitment	I hold myself accountable for responsibilities I agree to.	86.3%	10.2%	3.5%
	I can be counted on to do my part.	79.4%	15.9%	4.7%
	I stick with others through difficult times.	66.4%	26.1%	7.5%
	I follow through on my promises.	65.8%	28.4%	5.7%

TABLE 3
VALUES IN THE GROUP LEVEL

Variables	Items	Agree, strongly agree	Unsure	disagree, strongly disagree
Collaboration	I enjoy working with others toward common goals.	85.9%	11.0%	3.1%
	I am able to trust the people with whom I work.	81.1%	16.7%	2.3%
	I actively listen to what others have to say.	79.0%	16.9%	4.1%
	Collaboration produces better results.	75.7%	20.6%	3.6%
	Others would describe me as a cooperative group member.	66.1%	29.7%	4.2%
	My contributions are recognized by others in the groups I belong to.	60.8%	34.0%	5.3%
	I am seen as someone who works well with others.	57.8%	32.2%	10.0%
	I can make a difference when I work with others on a task.	49.3%	44.0%	6.6%
Common Purpose	It is important to develop a common direction in a group in order to get anything done.	89.0%	7.2%	3.8%
	I contribute to the goals of the group.	84.6%	12.9%	2.6%
	Common values drive an organization.	84.5%	11.7%	3.8%
	I work well when I know the collective values of a group.	82.0%	15.4%	2.7%
	I contribute to the goals of the group.	76.0%	19.8%	4.3%
Controversy With Civility	Hearing differences in opinions enriches my thinking.	85.4%	14.6%	5.9%
	I respect opinions other than my own.	82.4%	13.0%	4.6%
	Creativity can come from conflict.	80.8%	12.3%	7.0%
	I value differences in others.	75.9%	17.5%	6.6%
	I share my ideas with others.	75.3%	18.7%	5.9%
	I am open to others' ideas.	67.3%	24.4%	8.4%

TABLE 4
VALUES IN THE SOCIETAL LEVEL

Variables	Items	Agree, strongly agree	Unsure	disagree, strongly disagree
Citizenship	I work with others to make my communities better places.	87.7%	9.3%	3.0%
	I believe I have responsibilities to my community.	86.5%	9.5%	3.6%
	I value opportunities that allow me to contribute to my community.	84.3%	12.8%	2.8%
	I participate in activities that contribute to the common good.	80.8%	14.2%	5.0%
	I give my time to making a difference for someone.	71.5%	22.1%	6.4%
	I believe I have a civic responsibility to the greater public.	60.4%	30.1%	9.5%

Influence of Leadership Learning on Socially Responsible Leadership

Regarding to leadership learning status, students were required to choose multiple option. 401 (34.6) out of 1159 students responded that they had never learned leadership programs. Within those that had learned leadership, mostly (33.6%, 389) learned leadership by leadership lectures, 19.8% (229) learned leadership by reading books and watching videos, 17.8% (206) by selective leadership courses, and 17.1% (198) by the required leadership programs.

According to rank test of non-parameter test (Mann-Whitney U test), this study found that there were statistically significant differences in the total score and 7 values of leadership in addition to "Controversy With Civility" (Table 5). Students who have learned leadership had better leadership values, behaviors, or attitudes and related knowledge and capacity than their peers who have never learned leadership.

Therefore, students who have studied leadership have shown more positive attitudes and behaviors in Socially Responsible Leadership.

TABLE 5
INFLUENCE OF LEADERSHIP LEARNING ON SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

Variables	Means of Rank		Z	P (N=1159)
	student who have learned leadership (n=758)	student who have NOT learned leadership (n=401)		
Congruence	588.01	564.86	3.021	0.003**
Collaboration	607.32	528.35	3.842	0.000***
Common Purpose	612.33	518.89	4.554	0.000***
Commitment	602.96	536.60	3.241	0.001**
Citizenship	611.92	519.66	4.488	0.000***
Controversy With Civility	588.01	564.86	1.123	.261
Consciousness of Self	609.83	523.61	4.186	0.000***
Change	612.22	519.09	4.521	0.000***
Total	614.28	515.20	4.795	0.000***

Note : *** P<0.001, ** P<0.01, * P<0.05

DISCUSSION

A preliminary study of 1126 college students in five universities in Shanghai also indicated that college students who participated in leadership programs or courses had a higher level of Socially Responsible Leadership (Diao, J., et.al.,2013) than college students who did not participate in related programs. Another survey of 1238 college student leaders from 17 universities in seven provinces in mainland China also confirmed this result (Tao, S.L.,2015). The students who learned leadership showed more civic awareness and to be more actively involved in community activities.

Leadership as a global competency is very popular in current Chinese college students. Over 90% of college students have strong desire to learn leadership (Tao, S.L., 2015; Huang C., 2011). This survey also showed that about 20% of college students took the initiative to study the relevant leadership books and videos by themselves.

The survey in 2010 showed that 64.1% of college students in Shanghai had not participated in any form of leadership learning(Weng,W.Y.,2011).Four years later, the study found that the proportion of undergraduates who had never received leadership education fell by about half (34.6%).College students who had learned leadership had more positive values in Socially Responsible Leadership. Participating in college student leadership programs can significantly improve the leadership of college students (Liang F., et.al.,2015).

In this study, most college students learned leadership through lectures. It is recommended that colleges and universities could strengthen action-based leadership learning, such as summer social practice, community practice and community service and so on. By providing students with more practical activities, students can learn by action and not only by listening. Therefore, they may develop their leadership in real life situation and dealing with the real problems they are facing in everyday life. Moreover, they can enhance the level of their congruence, self-awareness and self-confidence through participating in practical activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the cultural differences, this study used SRLC as a survey instrument and found that SRLC may also be applicable to Chinese college students. Chinese college students may also enhance their social responsibility leadership through leadership programs or courses, lectures, and self-study. According to National Education Development Plan 2010-2020, Chinese college students need to improve their social responsibility and social adaptability. It is argued that Social Responsibility Leadership might be an effective leadership development model and provide an applicable instrument (SRLC) for Chinese college students leadership development. Further Research and practice are highly necessary on the specific learning methods and teaching materials of social responsibility leadership, and further evaluation on following leadership learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In this paper, the research was sponsored by China Scholarship Council and National Social Science Foundation (Project No. 12CKS044) and by China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong (Project No. CELAP2017-YJ-06).

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