

# The Experiences of Minority Female Student Leaders at Azusa Pacific University

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In this qualitative study, the researchers looked at the experiences of minority women in student leadership at a predominately white, private, Christian liberal arts university in Los Angeles County, with a full time undergraduate population of approximately 4,000 students.

The goal of the study was to answer the following questions:

1. What are the motivational factors that cause minority student women to seek out leadership positions?
2. What are the sources from which minority student women leaders receive support?

The method for data collection included individual interviews with six different women holding student leadership positions. The researchers contacted various offices at the university including Multi Ethnic Programs, Associated Student Body, and Residence Life to ideally obtain a mixture of students with various leadership experiences and backgrounds which included African American (3 students), Asian (2 students), and Latina (1 student). Directors from these offices referred the researchers to students who would be good candidates for interviews and have insight to offer on this topic. The women were contacted via phone or e-mail and were eager to share their experiences.

Each of the interviews were conducted and recorded in quiet, private settings, and each of the women were asked the same set of open-ended questions, with some additional questions throughout the interview if deemed appropriate or for clarification purposes. The list of questions used for the interviews is included in appendix A.

Once the interviews were recorded and transcribed, the researchers coded the data by themes. In addition to coding the interviews themselves, the researchers used the opinions of several unbiased reviewers to help determine themes found throughout the interviews. Analysis of the interviews produced eight major themes which affected the women in their leadership positions: Support, role models/mentors, motivation, Ignorance and assumptions made by white

students, prior leadership experience, adapting to the environment, and a belief that God is in control. Some of the themes are broad and encompass a number of “sub-themes”. They are presented below in no particular order.

### *Support*

Minority women in student leadership experienced support in a number of different ways and from a number of different groups or individuals. The support which began earliest in their lives was that from their parents. Many of the women shared how one or both of their parents instilled a strong work ethic in them and encouraged them strive to set and attain high goals. They had high expectations set for them by their parents. One woman explained: “I’ve always been very active ever since I’ve been a young girl- like my mom has always said- an idle mind is the devil’s workshop- you know- growing up on that- so ever since I was in junior high I was in student council and always been very active in sports or whatever it may be . . . she just put that in me. So like when I came to APU it was already- there was no option but to get involved- you know?” Another student shared: “Education’s always been like a part of me and my family. I don’t remember having a whole lot of talks about it, it’s just always been a big thing. . . . And, my mom’s a teacher too. So that’s also a big part of why I am very much like college and school and educational minded. So, that support from home has been a huge blessing.” And, when asked what types of things encouraged you to seek out leadership positions at APU a student responded: “My parents, my parents definitely”.

Peer influence can also make a huge impact in a student’s life- and the influence can be either positive or negative. The support from their peers made a tremendous positive impact on many of the women in this study. These peers also serve as role models, mentors, and counselors through tough experiences. “I think a lot of my support, too, comes from my friends

and peers and just um, ya know, a lot of them are minorities so they have similar issues and bonds and so um, we can relate more on levels and issues we face . . . my friends encourage me so much even into applying for the position in ASB. Because I'm like 'I don't know, I don't know if I want to do it' but they're like 'yeah, you'd be so good at it'".

Many students also are supported by their supervisor or university administration. One Latina student said of her supervisor: "He encouraged me to apply for a position, and he is Mexican, he has a Mexican background, so he was definitely very supportive, more than in just developing my leadership skills, but in being faithful to my heritage and who I am and not just doing something because of my skills but working those two things alongside of each other." Another shared: "She had stretched me a lot- she is very supportive of me but at the same time she challenges me so much- and I think because both of us are from Asian background- she understands what it is to be a minority but she faces it just in the face and doesn't allow anything to just get over her". Student's impression of receiving support from the administration is often more varied. This is probably due in large part to administration often not being as visible, as well as their need to make unpopular decisions. As one student commented: "It's hard because a lot of students don't see what leaders see . . . they don't see it so that's kinda hard to really explain to people- like 'no, no- just give em some time'". Many of the women commented about how they feel support from the Dean of Students and the Associate Dean. They are also seeing commitments to diversity made by the administration through the addition of positions such as the Special Assistant for University Diversity and an admissions counselor who specifically targets minority students. As one student shared:

I do feel that the school does want to support because you know, one of their things is diversity, one of their big things, like we want to push diversity, we support diversity, and our president says that, and uh, you know I honestly feel that slowly but surely we are, like, really living up to that. I do think that they are men of their words. Some people are

like- they don't believe- they are just sayin' it to say it- but I honestly believe that they mean it but they understand that it takes time- and some people don't understand that- they are like I want this now . . . but you know, it takes time.

The largest source of support was found to come from the Multi-Ethnic Programs Office, from the Director of the office, as well as from the programs that the office oversees. Almost every student involved in the study shared about how they see the impact made by the MEP office and how they feel supported by it.

(The director) is a very big support to a lot of us as minorities because she's there, she's open, she's there to listen, and she feels our pain, she sympathizes, she understands, and she's willing to work with us to help us make a difference, even if it's just to vent, or if it's to actually make a change. She has our back 100 percent and um and I think that makes it more open and inviting for us to be in that office.

However, many have a concern that too much of the school's diversity initiative falls on this office. They would like to see other departments take up more of a role of supporting diversity whether it is through co-programming or physically showing up and supporting their activities. One woman commented: "That's nice, to know that they're (supporters) are coming from different places in the school, it's not just all my peers who support me, but it's coming from the administrator people and faculty and staff and students and things. It's a good mixture, but it's still not the whole."

#### *Role models / mentors*

As discussed in the literature review, a common theme within much of the literature on educational leadership is the need for role models in leadership positions in which students can look up to (Romano, 1996; Lips, 2000; Whitt, 1994; Armino et. al, 2000; Patton & Harper, 2003). This study confirmed that role models make a profound impact on minority women in student leadership. The students shared how it is encouraging for them to see other minority women in leadership- whether they are faculty, staff and administration, or other students. And,

most often their mentors are also minorities, most likely because they can understand the struggles. As one woman shared:

I know that they (APU administration) are working to get more minorities into positions on campus and that would inspire us to just have these types of figures and role models. There's nothing wrong with the one's we have, they're great people, it's just kind of like we need to diversify so that I can have someone to look up to as a leader. I have a role model before me who's saying, 'yeah, you can do this'. We do have great people, and that's fine, I really respect them and admire them. It would just be nice to have some people who are like me; I want to be able to say, 'look, they're Black, and they're in leadership'. Things like that just lift our spirits and encourage us.

### *Motivation*

Some students said that they do not know how they got into their leadership positions- that they did not intentionally seek them out. They felt in some ways that the positions were placed as an opportunity in front of them or that leadership is just innately in them. One woman responded: "I just wanted to be involved – I didn't really actually seek out leadership positions - wanted to be involved and it just so happened that whenever I do stuff I am like a magnet- . . . leadership stuff no matter what it is."

In other ways, there are many motivations for students seeking out leadership roles, whether they are conscious or unconscious. One is simply an "I can do it" attitude. Many of these students have an internal drive that pushes them on to accomplish their goals. They have been raised with the mentality that they can accomplish anything that they set their minds to. For example: "And so I think a lot of minority women are kind of like, 'no, we can do whatever we want'. I think, I don't wanna like stereotype or classify, but there's a lot of minorities who come from single parent households where the mother is like that dominant figure."

Another motivation is simply a desire to serve as one woman commented: "We just want to serve and love people – and it's just a joy to serve – it's kind of weird to be thinking that that's a position." A third motivation comes through the Multi-Ethnic Leadership program which is a

scholarship program designed to have minorities more involved in leadership. To receive the scholarship, they must hold a leadership position on campus. Many of the students would hold these positions regardless of the scholarship, but for some, it is a good incentive. Leaving a legacy and making a difference within the campus community is also a powerful motivation. As one woman stated:

I feel that I'm at a place where there's changes that need to be made, and I can contribute somehow to help that and that effort. I think part of it is even my sister because she was really big on this campus in setting an example with her and her friends. Just their example is kind of like passing the torch on to me. If we all just give up and stop working together, nothing's ever gonna come of it. I think we see the potential and we know it's there. There's a group of us that we just gotta do what we gotta do.

And another shared: "I had mentors like . . . they kinda enforced that in us as well- the school- if you love the school you wanna keep making it better so do whatever you can to make the school better- and we say the legacy they were leaving- so . . . like we see that and we're like carrying the torch and keeping it going."

A final motivation, unfortunately, is the need to prove themselves. There were many comments made similar to what this student shared: "I think there is equal opportunity – I think it is just from the initial take – it's like they feel you out to see what type of person you are – just the fact that you aren't a white student- so from the initial start it is kind of hard but after they get to know like what kind of person you are it is like equal ground- it is like you have to prove yourself." The women shared that they felt as though they were fighting assumptions from the beginning- that their classmates or university administrators didn't see them as capable as the white students, or that they didn't realize that they held certain leadership positions.

#### *Ignorance and assumptions made by white students*

In response to the question- Do you feel supported by the whole community or just certain facets one student responded: "I think it is just from certain people, because there re a lot

of people who just ask, ‘why do they need that? . . . they live in America, and they should get used to living with White people.’” Another continued: “. . . there is a lack on knowledge and a lot of ignorance on our campus. A lot of times people don’t realize that it’s ignorance, and they just kind of push it to the side. So, I think that’s probably one of our bigger issues on campus and trying to figure out how do we overcome that and how do we encourage people to grow.”

Or in response to the question- How is APU lacking in supporting you as a minority student leader- another student responded: “I would probably say assumptions- when people first look at me and they are like- they don’t think I am the person that’s in charge when they walk into a room and start directing their questions to someone else. . .” Another shared her response to experiencing being treated differently: “. . . then I got to know her (another student) a bit better and got to know that she is from a background where she has never had any ethnic exposure and that was a first for her and realizing that that was a stretch for her.”

Assumptions also keep students from being involved. They peg themselves or an organization a certain way and assume that it is not for them. They assume that certain leadership positions require a specific ‘cookie-cutter’ type of leader or that the BSA (Black Student Awareness) is only for Black students. One student shared about her passion about this topic:

We find our comfort zones- but there are way more white students in the MEP office then there ever has been before. I’m like ‘come in here’. At first they tiptoe in, walk around, and I’m like ‘what’s up?’ and then after they are there for a while they are like ‘okay- this is cool’ and then they come back. Same thing with BSA, like we have had a good amount of whites students come in this year. Cause they all thought it was like an all black club- . . . I wear a little button that says ‘you don’t have to be black to join BSA’ and they are like what? And I am like no, come, it is for everybody. And they come and they love it.” Or the fact that minority student leaders need to encourage other minority students to get outside of where they only see themselves “like no, get out there and do it. You don’t just have to be a member of Amigos, or a member of Pacific Islanders or Black Student Awareness, you know, get involved.

Students do experience discrimination, whether it is intentional or not and there is an enormous need for education and exposure on both sides. Whether they realize it or not, students enjoy the opportunity to share as well as to learn. One student shared: “I want to be an asset, and I want to be asked questions. . . . don’t assume that because I look different or I may talk a little different, that I’m any different.”

#### *Prior leadership experience*

Many of the women in the study had been involved in leadership prior to the position that they were in during college. These leadership positions included formal positions during high school or informal positions in their homes. These experiences gave them confidence in themselves and their abilities, as well as nurtured skills that they would apply to their current positions. With the exception of a few specific positions, women students today are stepping up to leadership roles more frequently than men are.

#### *Adapting to the environment*

Adapting to the environment was also a theme seen through the interviews. The students have a desire to find how they can fit into this environment- some “give in” simply to be able to make the situation work, while others felt very strongly about not losing themselves in that process. However, they do realize that changing the environment of the school is a process, and that it takes time. One student observed: “It’s kind of like, reach one person at a time. And it’s really hard in that sense to say what can we actually do. There’s still so much to do and a long way to go. So, it’s really just taking it one person at a time and seeing where things can go.” And another shared: “I don’t blame APU, it’s something that they’re working on, it’s a process like I’ve been saying the whole time. But, I know it does have its effects. It wears us out. There’s a lot of things that we have to fight for to get implemented at this university.” And

another continued about her understanding of the process: “. . . one thing Joy always says is you can’t change the whole school at once- you do it little by little, one person at a time, two people at a time, whatever it may be- because that one person could affect their friends, and their friends could affect somebody else.”

It is not just realizing that things will take a while to change, but it is important to recognize that minorities have needs. As one student commented:

I think that the minority needs to have a bit of an edge because maybe they don’t have the money to go to this school, or they didn’t have the money to buy this so the education was better. And that kind of thing, that’s why it’s going to be hard to get everyone on the same playing field. Because there’s a lot of stuff that has to change. I wouldn’t want to be hired just because I was a minority, but if I was good enough for the job and they hired me like that, then ok. But if they don’t think I am qualified and they hired me just because I am a minority, I think that’s wrong because I think that it will also give minorities a bad rep. because if you can’t do your job, then all Asians can’t do the job.

### *God is in control*

APU is a Christian Liberal Arts university, and it was evident through the students’ responses. Even through the tough experiences, when it is hard to understand why things are the way they are, they say: “. . . APU is where I have to be. This is where God has placed me. And, all the doors that have been opened have been opened for a reason”, “. . . but I think that God put me here because this is where I can make the most difference” or “Obviously God put you there for a reason whether you are a token (minority) or not. And, pray and say God you can I be used? Use me to the fullest ability and God will if you have a open hard and a open mind.” They feel strongly that God has placed them in their position and given them these experiences for a reason, and that He has an ultimate plan through it all.

To answer our first research question: What are the motivational factors that cause minority student women to seek out leadership positions? Through this study, it was observed that minority women have a number of motivational factors, as discussed above, including: opportunity, to serve, for scholarship, being encouraged by advisors, feeling a need to prove themselves, as well as those who are drawn to student leadership positions tend to have a strong internal drive which was fostered through their childhood with how their parents raised them and the values that they instilled in them. Also, they have a strong desire to make an impact on their communities- whether it is through diversity issues, or through an area of interest to them such as music. They want to contribute somehow in a positive way to the people around them, as well as to mentor and bring others along to share the vision. On a whole, the women in the study wanted to create lasting changes within the community.

3. What are the sources from which minority student women leaders receive support?

As a whole, minority women in student leadership on the Azusa Pacific University campus find receive support from a variety of sources. The researchers' finding was that students do not necessarily feel like there is a lack of support specifically for women. One woman stated: "As far as women in leadership, I don't pay attention a whole lot I guess to the difference between support that guy leaders get and the women leaders get. I just think that I haven't been on the lookout for it, so, I don't think that I notice it a super lot." In fact, the majority of students stepping up to leadership positions on campus are women as a student shared: "What AMIGOS is doing is just three girls, men didn't step up. In MESA for next year, it is three girls again; there aren't many men stepping up, even as minorities. I think it just plays a role not just for minority women, but women in general. Women are just stepping up into leadership positions, which is great." The primary need for support was in respect to being a woman of color and helping with the challenges that come with that.

Analysis of this research prompts possible suggestions for change or improvement. The first suggestion would be to expand support of diversity outside of the Multi-Ethnic Programs office. Other departments on campus could be intentional about verbally affirming what the MEP office is doing as well as partnering with them in various programs throughout the year. Students, faculty and staff could also show support to the office by stopping by to visit or to attend events or meetings. To the women interviewed, having individuals physically present was found to be a strong statement of support.

There is also a need to continue to add minority women to student as well faculty and staff positions. With greater diversity among the university leadership, there would be additional role models and mentors for minority women students to be encouraged by, which would in turn, likely lead to a greater number of minority students in leadership.

It was also found that there is a need to educate and expose students who have not experienced ethnic diversity. This could be accomplished through diversity panels in the freshman Beginnings class as well as through educating current student leaders how they can use their one on one interactions with other students. As one woman commented: “. . . just having conversations with people about different things and different issues and people being open and that kind of stuff is my way of trying to do something as an individual.”

Finally, there it would be beneficial to encourage faculty, staff and student leaders to, when they see someone with potential, encourage them toward a couple specific leadership roles. It was mentioned through the interviews that while many students will seek out leadership positions, there are many others who may need more encouragement and some prodding. Through this support from others, students might be more likely to take on roles which they wouldn't ordinarily pursue on their own.

In summary, it appears that on a whole, minority women in student leadership at Azusa Pacific University have a good experience. They are provided with opportunities to serve in areas that they have passions for, and find support from a variety of different sources including peers as well as faculty and staff. It was also found that they didn't face as many obstacles being women as they did because of their ethnicity. They felt that more women stepped into leadership roles on the campus than men did, and that they didn't see a differentiation in treatment between men and women in these positions.

This does not negate the fact that there are certainly areas that need to be improved upon. Students did say that they felt that they experience discrimination whether it is intentional or unintentional, see a need for more minority role models and mentors within the faculty and staff, and feel a need to educate the student body about diversity issues. This could be accomplished through the university continuing its efforts toward creating professional positions to promote diversity within the university, diversifying the faculty and staff as well as the student body, and taking advantage of educational opportunities concerning diversity.

## Appendix A

### Standard Interview Questions:

#### **Background Questions:**

- What is your racial background? Did you grow up around others of the same racial background?
- Are you a first generation college student?
- What leadership positions are you currently involved in at APU? Have you held any other leadership positions at APU?

#### **Motivation:**

- What caused you to seek out a leadership position at APU?
- What do you feel that you bring to the leadership position?

#### **Support:**

- Do you feel supported in your leadership position?
- In what ways do you feel supported?
- In what ways is APU lacking in supporting you as a minority, woman student leader?
- In general, are you happy with the minority support network at APU?
- Is there anything you would change about APU's support of minority student women in leadership? Could the support system be improved?
- Do you feel supported by the APU community as a whole, or only by certain facets of the APU community?
- Can you give any examples of being supported by the APU community as a whole?
- Can you give any examples of being supported by specific facets of the APU community?

#### **Equal Opportunity:**

- In what ways do you feel, or not feel, that you are given equal opportunities as White students at APU?
- Have you felt that you have even been given a leadership position because of your minority status? If so, how does this make you feel?

#### **Effectiveness/Impact:**

- How are you actively influencing/contributing to the change on APU's campus?
- Throughout your time here at APU, in what ways have you seen growth in the support and acceptance of student minority women in student leadership?