Perceptions of male students enrolled in a single-gender personal leadership development course revealed that males were more relaxed and felt greater freedom to have honest and open class discussions. Likewise, they felt the lack of a female perspective in class discussions hampered them having a complete view of personal leadership.

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Student Perceptions of a Collegiate All Male Personal Leadership Development Course

Introduction

It has been debated and researched whether students placed in a single gender classroom learn better than students in a coeducational classroom. However, little research has been conducted to determine the perceptions of the students in these classrooms as to the learning that is occurring. Do they believe the experience was more or less beneficial to them as a learner? What are the positive and negative aspects of a single gender class as perceived by the learner? This study sought to determine the perceptions of male students enrolled in an all male personal leadership course. Specifically the study sought to determine if

Literature Review

Many studies have investigated the value of single gender classes for females (American Association of University Women, 1994; Canada & Pringle, 1995; Koppel, Cano, Heyman & Kimmel, 2003; Pollina, 1995), but few studies have focused on the outcomes of males in single-gender classes. The majority of studies found relating to single-gender classes focused on the secondary level.

Sharp (2000) found that high school students enrolled in single-gender classes tend to improve the academic performance of males; creates an environment that is less distracting to both genders; and is motivating to the students.

The National Association for Single Sex Public Education (n.d.) found that lower academically performing males enrolled in high school single-gender classes showed statistically significant improvement in their grades. In addition, this organization also found that all male classes allowed for better social development of males, as there was less pressure in males to take on a masculine role to prove themselves. In essence, males were more relaxed in single-gender classes.

An Australian study allowed ninth grade males to selectively place themselves in single-gender math and English classes in the middle of the year. The researchers found that while there was no significant difference in math scores of the single-gender classes, there was a significant increase in English scores for the single-gender classes (Mulholland, Hansen & Kaminski, 2004).

When single gender learning groups were studied in a college accounting class, males learned equally well in the single-gender and the coeducational groups, while females in single-gender groups showed greater learning than females in the coeducational group. In addition, females preferred to work in all female groups, while males reported no difference in between all male or coeducational groups (Debarthe, 1997).

Thorp, Cummins and Townsend (1998) found that women in an all female section of a collegiate leadership class had stronger self-perception of their ability to work with groups, lead others, make decisions, and understand themselves than did women enrolled in a coeducational section.
Taylor’s 1998 study of males enrolled in a collegiate single gender leadership course revealed that no factor enhanced students’ leader-centered attitude or group-centered attitude, although the male students’ perception of their leadership skills was stronger after the conclusion of the leadership course. When students enrolled in the all male class were compared to students enrolled in the coeducational class, the study revealed that each group learned the same.

Although these studies focused on student academic success and attitude towards leadership, no studies could be found that documented male students’ perceptions, towards being enrolled in a single-gender leadership class.

**Methods**

An instrument consisting of five open-ended qualitative questions and one quantitative question was developed by the researchers to determine the perceptions of male students in a single gender class. The instrument was analyzed for face validity by the researchers. Using the constant comparative method (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), responses to the qualitative questions were sorted and grouped by common answers. The responses to the quantitative question were summated.

A purposive population was used for the study (n=26). The population consisted of male students who enrolled for a collegiate personal leadership skills course. Two sections of the personal leadership skills course were scheduled for the same hour and after enrollment one section was designated as an all-male section and one section was designated as an all-female section. This research is part of a larger study and only reflects the perceptions of the male students.

**Findings**

The first question asked was, “How do you believe that learning about leadership in an all male verses a co-ed class has helped your leadership development?” The majority of the responses (n=16) indicated that the atmosphere of the class was more “open” and that they felt freedom to express themselves more freely without the fear of offending women. The second most popular response (n=10) to this question was that the lack of females provided fewer distractions and therefore more opportunity for learning. Some of the answers were, “I paid more attention in class because I was not looking at pretty girls” and “I felt less distracted.” The third most popular answer to this question (n=7) related to a commonality among their peers. Because the class was all male, students felt they could more easily relate to their peers.

Question number two asked, “How do you believe that learning about leadership in an all male class versus a co-ed has hindered your leadership development?” The most popular answer (n=11) was that without women the female perspective to leadership was missing. Answers such as, “You lost the insight into leadership that women can provide” were common. The second most popular response was that it the all male class made no difference (n=7). The third most popular answer (n=4) was that the lack of women in class decreased the male’s motivation to attend class, “Not having women here makes it harder to go to class.”
The third question asked, “Have you behaved differently as a student in an all male class? Please explain.” Nine students stated they were more relaxed in class and they were more inclined to “clown around” and “act immature.” In addition, nine students stated that because there were no women to offend, they felt a greater freedom to respond honestly. Three students stated they didn’t behave differently at all.

Question number four asked, “Do you believe you would have learned more or less about leadership in a co-ed class? Why is this?” Eight students stated they do not believe they learned any more or any less, “If you want to learn, you will learn in any given environment.” Five students stated they would have learned more if females had been available to provide insight into the feminine leadership perspective. One student stated, “I believe a co-ed class would have been beneficial because in leadership we deal with both genders, not only males.” The third most popular response (n=4) was they would have learned less in a co-ed class because of the distractions. “I believe I learned more since I have my mind on learning the material and not looking at the women in the classroom.”

The final qualitative questions asked, “If you have another opportunity to participate in a same gender leadership development class, would you do so? Why or why not?” Most students said they would participate in a single-gender leadership class for a number of reasons: “I had a lot of fun in this format,” and “I felt more comfortable.” Likewise, eight students stated they would not enroll in a single-gender leadership course. “I just think co-ed is more beneficial,” “In the world outside of college there is not segregated gender jobs, so I don’t see class as productive.” Four students were unsure.

For the quantitative question, students were asked to “Rate your overall feeling regarding your experience in this class” by choosing either “strongly disliked,” “disliked,” “liked,” or “strongly liked” as a response. Sixteen students chose “liked,” four students chose “strongly liked” and four chose “disliked.” One student chose “strongly disliked.”

Conclusions/Recommendations/Implications

Although the male students enjoyed the freedom and relaxed atmosphere of a single gender class, they missed the perspective that female classmates bring to class discussions. Interestingly, the males readily admitted that it was easier for them to focus and pay attention in class without the visual distractions of women in the classroom. A possible compromise may to retain the single-gender format, but to bring in a panel of females so the feminine perspective of leadership topics can be shared with the males.

This study supports the findings of Sharp (2000) that single gender classes help more learning to occur because students are not distracted by the opposite sex. This study also supports the findings of National Association for Single Sex Public Education (n.d.) that males are more relaxed, which allows for greater learning, in a single-gender class.

The final two questions provided interesting responses. Although 20 students stated they either “liked” or “strongly liked” the experiences in the class, only 11 students stated they would participate in a single-gender leadership development class again. While at the same time, only five students “disliked” or “strongly disliked” their experience in the
class, yet eight students stated they would not want to participate in a single-gender leadership development class in the future. Additional research should be conducted to more fully understand the apparent incongruence of these answers.

It is recommended that male students be provided the opportunity to enroll in a single-gender personal leadership development class. At the same time, an instructor should be obligated to provide multiple opportunities for women to enter into essential discussions in an all male class to provide the female perspective of personal leadership.

References


