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# EXPLORING THE INTIMACY OF RESEARCH: UNVEILING THE IMPACT OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP ON LOW-INCOME COLLEGE STUDENTS

LEADING SOCIAL CHANGE, INC.

Research has an unparalleled intimacy, serving as a beacon that illuminates the paths leaders can take to better serve their communities. In the realm of higher education, where the stakes for student success are high, research not only enhances our understanding but also provides actionable insights that can transform both student and staff experiences. This transformation becomes even more critical as the same research methodologies used to uplift students can be adapted to enrich the professional development of staff, thereby strengthening the overall educational environment. By exploring the connection between leadership practices and student outcomes, particularly within vulnerable populations, we can gain a deeper understanding of how leadership at all levels a powerful tool for can be fostering academic success and retention. This approach ensures that the principles guiding student progress are mirrored in staff development, creating a cohesive, supportive ecosystem that benefits the entire academic community.

## **Introduction**

Higher education has consistently adapted to meet the needs of evolving student demographics and societal demands (Moreland, 2022; Storberg-Walker & Torracco, 2004). A growing proportion of college students in the United States come from low-income households, with one in three college students falling into this category (Moreland, 2022; Castleman & Goodman, 2018; Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). These students face greater risks of not

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completing their college education (Moreland, 2022; Cabrera et al., 2012; Lumina Foundation, n.d.).

In response, many colleges and universities have developed initiatives aimed at supporting low-income students to improve retention and academic success (Keller, 2001; Lumina Foundation, n.d.). Staff leaders in higher education play a critical role in these efforts through their leadership practices, which can significantly impact student outcomes (Moreland, 2022; Khoshhal & Guraya, 2016; Graham, 2013).

Brooke Moreland's (2022) study, *Organizational determinants in higher education: A quantitative analysis to interrogate the impact of the transformational leadership capacities of staff leaders on low-income college student retention and academic success*, employed a quantitative approach to investigate the relationship between the transformational leadership capacities of academic and non-academic staff leaders and the retention and academic success of low-income college students. The study used the Social Change Model of Leadership (SCM) as its theoretical framework, which promotes collaborative leadership practices aimed at fostering social change (Moreland, 2022; Higher Education Research Institute, 1996).

### **Problem Statement**

The study sought to determine whether the transformational leadership capacities of academic and non-academic staff leaders in higher education influence the retention and academic performance of low-income college students.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by two primary research questions:

1. What impact, if any, does mean staff leadership capacity, as measured by the eight constructs of socially responsible leadership, have on the grade point averages (GPA) of low-income college students?
    - **Null Hypothesis (H01):** Mean staff leadership capacity has no significant impact on low-income college student GPA.
    - **Alternative Hypothesis (HA1):** Mean staff leadership capacity has a significant impact on low-income college student GPA.
  2. What impact, if any, does mean staff leadership capacity, as measured by the eight
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- constructs of socially responsible leadership, have on the retention of low-income college students?
    - Null Hypothesis (H02): Mean staff leadership capacity has no significant impact on low-income college student retention.
    - Alternative Hypothesis (HA2): Mean staff leadership capacity has a significant impact on low-income college student retention.

## **Methodology**

This quantitative study employed deductive reasoning to test the hypotheses. The Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS-R2) was used to measure the transformational leadership capacities of staff leaders, focusing on the eight constructs of the Social Change Model: consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, common purpose, collaboration, controversy with civility, citizenship, and change.

The study's target population included full-time academic and non-academic staff leaders who had direct interactions with low-income college students during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years. The student population consisted of 652 low-income students from the 21st Century Scholars program. Data were collected through a combination of self-report questionnaires for staff leaders and secondary analysis of institutional data for student outcomes (Moreland, 2022).

## **Data Analysis**

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Pearson's product-moment correlation was employed to investigate the relationship between mean leadership capacity and GPA, while logistic binary regression was used to explore the relationship between mean leadership capacity and student retention (Moreland, 2022).

## **Results**

Despite the extensive literature supporting the positive impact of transformational leadership in educational settings, the study found no statistically significant relationship between staff leadership capacities and the retention or GPA of low-income college students. These findings were surprising given the established connection between transformational leadership and positive student outcomes, as documented in previous research (Moreland, 2022; Anderson, 2017; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

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**Discussion**

The lack of significant findings may be attributed to various factors, including the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted traditional interactions between staff and students and may have affected the implementation of leadership practices. Additionally, the use of self-reported measures may have introduced response distortions, such as social desirability bias, which could have influenced the results (Moreland, 2022; Brown, 2016; Gignac, 2018).

**Conclusion**

While this study did not find a significant relationship between transformational leadership capacities and the outcomes of low-income college students, it highlighted the need for further research in this area. Future studies could explore the impact of transformational leadership in different educational contexts or with different student populations, and qualitative research could provide deeper insights into the specific interactions between staff leaders and low-income students. By continuing to explore the role of leadership in higher education, we can better understand how to support vulnerable student populations and ensure their academic success and retention.

Research holds a profound intimacy, offering us a unique lens through which we can better understand the intricate dynamics that shape our lives and society. This closeness with research allows us to dig deeper into the nuances of leadership and its impact, not just on students but on the broader academic community. Even when studies, like the one at hand, do not yield significant findings, the very act of exploring these questions can be transformative. It underscores the importance of continually asking, probing, and refining our understanding.

This process of engaging intimately with research doesn't just advance knowledge—it also has the power to improve the structures that support society. For instance, while the study may not have found a direct link between transformational leadership capacities and the outcomes of low-income college students, it nevertheless brings to light critical areas where further inquiry is needed. This ongoing exploration can reveal insights that drive positive change, both in educational settings and beyond. By continuing to investigate the role of leadership in higher education, especially through an intimate and detailed approach, we can better equip ourselves to support vulnerable populations. This, in turn, strengthens the fabric of our educational institutions and society at large, ensuring that leadership practices

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evolve in ways that truly make a difference.

This article reprised the following publication:

Moreland, B. (2022). *Organizational determinants in higher education: A quantitative analysis to interrogate the impact of the transformational leadership capacities of staff leaders on low-income college student retention and academic success* (Publication No. 30242665) [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana Wesleyan University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Note: Citations are found within the original publication.

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