

Cognitive Development at Texas A&M University Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership

In the spring of 2006, over 1200 Texas A&M undergraduate students participated in the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), sponsored by the University of Maryland, College Park. Their theoretical framework was based on the Social Change Model of Leadership, and 54 institutions participated.

One key focus of the study was cognitive development, defined as a measure of one's growth in critical thinking. For the purposes of the MSL students completed both a scale representing their cognitive development (CD) and a scale representing a pseudo-pretest of cognitive development prior to college. The cognitive development scale asked students to rate their growth in college in their ability to see relationships between ideas, learn on their own, critically analyze ideas, and learn more about things that are new to them.

The key findings from the MSL related to cognitive development are presented below. Each of these findings provides some insight into our practice as student affairs professionals. Perhaps the most important implication for our practice is to continue to emphasize the parts of the college environment that have a positive impact on the leadership efficacy of our students. In particular, to emphasize cognitive development we need to encourage students to have a positive relationship with at least one faculty mentor. We also need to place greater emphasis on providing opportunities for our students to discuss a variety of socio-cultural issues with each other, with us, and with faculty. See the summary of MSL findings regarding socio-cultural discussions for more information on this important topic.

Key Findings

- The strongest predictors of perceived cognitive development at TAMU were socio-cultural discussions and having a faculty mentor.
- There is a positive relationship between perceived cognitive development and both being involved on campus and holding a leadership position.
Correlations 0.20 and 0.22 respectively. ($p < .01$)
- Students at TAMU indicate a higher level of cognitive development in college than their perception of their development before college.
CD mean: 3.11 (SD=.59, n=241) Pre-test mean: 2.92 (SD=.52, n=241)
- Women tended to rate themselves higher on cognitive development in college than men, but lower before college. In addition, there was a greater difference for the women from pre-college to current perceived level of cognitive development.
Men: 3.05 (SD=.63, n=102) Women: 3.16 (SD=.56, n=139)
Men pre-test: 2.97 (SD=.52, n=102) Women pre-test: 2.88 (SD=.52, n=139)
- Freshmen tend to rate themselves higher on cognitive development than seniors.
Freshmen: 3.24 (SD=.59, n=79) Seniors: 2.97 (SD=.56, n=56)
- Conservative political views seem to be linked to a lower perceived level of cognitive development.
Conservative: 3.04 Middle-of-the road: 3.21 Liberal: 3.18
(SD=.59, n=128) (SD=.55, n=85) (SD=.68, n=28)

Both cognitive development and the cognitive development pre-test were based on a 4-point scale.

For more information about the MSL, see <http://leadershipstudy.net>. For information specific to Texas A&M students, see <http://studentactivities.tamu.edu/leadandserve/msl> or contact Krista Bailey at (979) 845-1133 or kbailey@stuact.tamu.edu.