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## The Association between Gender and Repeat Attendance to National Leadership Forum among High School Students

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this non-experimental study was to determine if there is an association between gender and repeat attendance at National Leadership Forum (NLF). Participants were a convenience sample of 87 high school students that attended NLF at a liberal arts university in central Arkansas. The participants completed a survey to indicate their intent to return to NLF in the future. An analysis of the results revealed no statistically significant association between gender and participants' indication of their intent to repeat attendance. Therefore, the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

### INTRODUCTION

*National Leadership Forum (NLF)* is a weeklong leadership conference for high school students (grades 10-12) held at a university in central Arkansas. The program has a rich history dating back to 1956 and was developed by the American Studies Institute (ASI) in collaboration with Civitan, Kiwanis, Optimist, and Rotary clubs to teach American values and leadership skills to high school students (Duke, 1997). Local civic clubs from the southeast United States recruit and sponsor the high school students who attend each year. According to Komives and Johnson (2009), the development of leadership in high school plays a central role in college leadership outcomes, later on, making attendance at a leadership training desirable for motivated high school students.

### CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE TRENDS

Conference developers rely on specific factors to ensure that their conference will be well attended and that the attendees would likely return in subsequent conferences. According to Ricketts, Priest, and Lastly (2007), conference participants' age should be an important element for future planning and curriculum development. Bell (2009) concludes that the attendee's affinity is to a specific type of conference when the conference is built around age-appropriate formal and informal learning opportunities: specifically a development-focused conference.

Interestingly, a common characteristic found by Aherns, Cox, Burris, and Dykes (2015) among conference attendees was they currently or previously held a leadership position in the service organization. According to Tkaczynski, Arli, and Hussey (2016) holding an office gave participants motivations to attend to "better equip me in my current leadership role" (p.12) and time to socialize with like-minded peers.

Another consideration for conference repeat attendance is the participant's perceived strong interpersonal relationship development with other attendees and conference staff

(Redding et al. 2017). Conference activities that increase the quantity and strength of the participants' ties to conference peers and conference staff result in a significant increase in future attendance. It is thus important for conference organizers to consider the perceived expectations of participants and work to meet these expectations. Pope, Isely, and Agbetunsin (2016) examined the likelihood of a participant to return to the event, and it was determined that by a positive experience that exceeded expectations, a participant would have a high chance to return to the event. Interpersonal relationships built, developed ties to peers and staff, and an experience that exceeds expectations were trends found to increase repeat attendance to a conference.

### MEASURED VALUE OF ATTENDING A CONFERENCE

Potential conference attendees develop a perceived value of attending a conference and recognize a measured value to attend the same conference again. A study by Rosch (2018) examined the degree to which participants repeatedly attended formal leadership development and reported elevated levels of leader self-efficacy, motivation to lead, and leadership skills. Similarly, Rosch, Simonsen, and Velez (2015) identified gains in leadership capacity resulting in higher attendance in leadership training opportunities.

Hogan (2018) assessed the effectiveness of the leadership program design and reported that participants valued "opportunities to network with peers, opportunity to apply content to practical examples and scenarios through case discussion, and ongoing opportunities for personal reflection and development of leadership vision and potential are perceived as highly beneficial throughout program offerings" (p. 28). Likewise, high school students reported growth in leadership abilities after attending summer leadership programs, according to LeMire, Achetenberg, and Opp (2017), especially growth in *servant leadership skills* which is defined, in part, as the ability to enable others to take action through cooperation.

Fritsch, Rasmussen, and Chazdon (2018) found that the most significant skill outcomes were measured by attendees that had not experienced formal leadership programs prior to attending a leadership training. Specifically, McNae (2015) revealed young women valued developing their leadership narratives and adult mentors and embraced strength-based learning. These findings by McNae indicate that gender has some role in leadership development interests. Similar results were obtained by Robinson and Walters (1991) in their study of Future Homemakers of America (FHA), where 92.7% were female respondents that highly valued leadership development and training.

### EFFECTIVE MARKETING FOR ATTENDEES TO RETURN TO A CONFERENCE

Effective marketing with a clear focus needs to be upheld for potential participants to be able to cut through the clutter to see what the forum is about. Emphasis on leadership theory, such as developing skills and character, should be promoted to draw interest for potential attendees (Chen & Uysal, 2002; Tkaczynski & Arli, 2018). Tkaczynski et al. (2016) emphasized

that marketing materials need to make attendees aware of the event theme and how the conference can improve their current or potential leadership roles.

Johnson and Chapman (1979) suggest that it is vital for marketing material to be written on a reading level for the intended audience. Tkaczynski and Arli (2018) found that because participants attend for personal development reasons that can improve leadership abilities, the language must be clear and understandable in marketing materials to be effective.

In all, there has been little investigation on the effects of gender on attendance or repeat attendance at a leadership development training. Prior work in this area has focused on age-appropriate curriculum, determining perceived value of attendance, and effective marketing to the audience for repeat attendance to leadership development training. However, the relationship between gender and repeat attendance to a leadership conference is yet to be properly investigated. The purpose of the present study was to investigate if there is an association between gender and participants returning to NLF. It is hypothesized that there is an association between gender and whether or not a participant would return to NLF

## METHOD

### SAMPLE

A convenience sample of 87 high school students that attended NLF at a liberal arts university in central Arkansas was drawn for this study. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the sample.

### INSTRUMENTATION

The primary instrumentation for this study was the "National Leadership Forum 2019 Student Survey" that was created by the researcher. This instrument has 18 items. The eight multiple-choice items were used to obtain demographic information about age, gender, home state, rising grade, conference group, intent to return to the conference, and speaker preferences. The seven open-response items were used to obtain opinions on the NLF program, and three Likert scaled items relating to material heard at the conference. Reliability and validity are unknown at this time.

### PROCEDURE

Once the IRB approval was obtained for this nonexperimental study, NLF attendees were asked to participate in a survey after the last lecture session. The electronic survey was made available with a link that was provided on the screen. A paper version of the survey was offered, but there were no attendees that requested it. The NLF attendees were free to choose to participate and were not encouraged or coerced to participate. The students who completed the survey were considered to have given their informed consent. Once the administration was complete, the surveys were scored by the researcher. To analyze the data and test the hypothesis, one method of analysis was used. The Two-Variable Chi-Square test was used to determine the association between repeat attendance and gender. The hypothesis was examined at an alpha level of 0.05.

	Male (n = 22)					Female (n = 65)					
	Alabama	Arkansas	Florida	Kansas	Tennessee	Alabama	Arkansas	Florida	Kansas	Tennessee	Total
Age	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
14	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	5 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	5 (100)
15	2 (10.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	1 (0.05)	0 (0.00)	1 (0.05)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	20 (100)
16	4 (17.00)	0 (0.00)	1 (0.04)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	15 (0.00)	2 (0.08)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	24 (100)
17	11 (31.00)	0 (0.00)	2 (0.06)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	18 (50.00)	1 (0.30)	1 (0.03)	1 (0.03)	0 (0.00)	36 (100)
18	1 (50.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	1 (50.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	2 (100)

## RESULTS

A two-variable Chi-Squared test was performed to explore the association between gender and indications of repeat attendance. There was a violation of the cell size requirement of the test requiring that 80% of the cell must have expected frequencies equal to or greater than five (Lowry, 2019). Because of this violation, a Fisher’s Exact Test was conducted for this case and the results revealed no statistically significant association between gender and participants’ indication of their intent to repeat attendance (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Association between Gender and Repeat Attendance to National Leadership Forum

Repeat Attendance Indicated	Female	Male
Yes	n = 54 (83.08%)	n = 20 (90.91%)
No	n = 11 (16.92%)	n = 2 (9.09%)

The results revealed no statistically significant association between gender and forum participants’ indication of their intent to repeat attendance.  $\chi^2(1) = 0.79, p = .500$  (Fisher’s) Cramer’s  $V = 0.095$ , a very small effect size (Cohen, 1988); therefore the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

## DISCUSSION

### FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study did not reveal an association between attendees’ gender and their indication of an intention to repeat attendance to the National Leadership Forum. The research hypothesis, therefore, was not supported. Although this hypothesized association was not confirmed by the data, the findings in this study provide a good first step for further investigations that may help educators and school administrators to better understand those factors that motivate students to participate and persist in leadership preparatory programs such as NPF. As indicated in prior work, some of these motivators may include how closely attendees identify with the conference (Bell, 2009; Redding et al, 2017), having the opportunity for higher levels of participation – such as holding an office (Aherns et al., 2015; Tkaczynski et al., 2016), or even the age of participants (Ricketts et al., 2007). It is possible that any one of these factors individually or in combination may provide a useful

explanation of repeat attendance at leadership conferences among school-age participants.

### LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to the study. Not only was the sample size relatively small, thus limiting generalization, but the sample also had a proportionately larger number of females than males. While these proportions are representative of population regular NLF attendees, it did not represent the population of potential attendees. Furthermore, the instrument used in this study may have posed limitations to measurement accuracy. For instance, there was evidence of conflicting responses suggesting that some respondents could have misunderstood some of the open-response items. Finally, the survey did not include items to allow for the issue of repeat attendance to be probed on the basis of prior attendance behavior in addition to self-reported intentions.

### FUTURE RESEARCH

As is the case with exploratory studies, the findings of the current study raise many questions that warrant further investigation. What factors are the best predictors of repeat attendance to NLF? Would use data from the previous two years provide additional insight into other potential motivators of repeat attendance? Why do female students attend NLF at much greater numbers than their male counterparts (75% to 25%)? How might the use of qualitative strategies such as focus groups provide a meaningful context for understanding this phenomenon? Future studies that explore these questions and take into consideration the limitations identified in the current study are recommended.

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