

NEW Leadership™: Empowering Women to Lead

Training College Women for Political Leadership

NEW Leadership™ was created by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) in 1991 to teach college women the value of civic engagement and the importance of having women in positions of political leadership.

In order to assess the impact of NEW Leadership™ and evaluate its success in meeting the stated program goals, we conducted a survey of NEW Leadership™ program alumnae. Our analysis of the survey results confirms that NEW Leadership™ has been successful in inspiring the vast majority of alumnae to participate in politics, educating them about the political process and the importance of increasing the numbers of women in political office, as well as increasing their overall confidence levels and leadership skills.

The NEW Leadership™ program offers students an opportunity to develop the skills necessary to become effective political actors and establish networks with like-minded peers and successful political women. During the six-day residential program, students learn from educators in the field of women and politics, are mentored by women public leaders with a variety of roles in politics and policy making, and participate in hands-on skills building workshops. NEW Leadership™ encourages participants to embrace their own leadership abilities and to consider politics and the public sector as they plan their careers.

The success of the early NEW Leadership™ programs led CAWP in 1999 to establish the NEW Leadership™ Development Network, a national network of colleges and universities committed to women's political leadership education. Development Network partners work with CAWP to establish statewide or regional NEW Leadership™ programs on their home campuses. At the end of 2009, there are 16 active NEW Leadership™ programs serving college women in 20 states, with three additional programs planned for 2010 and 2011.

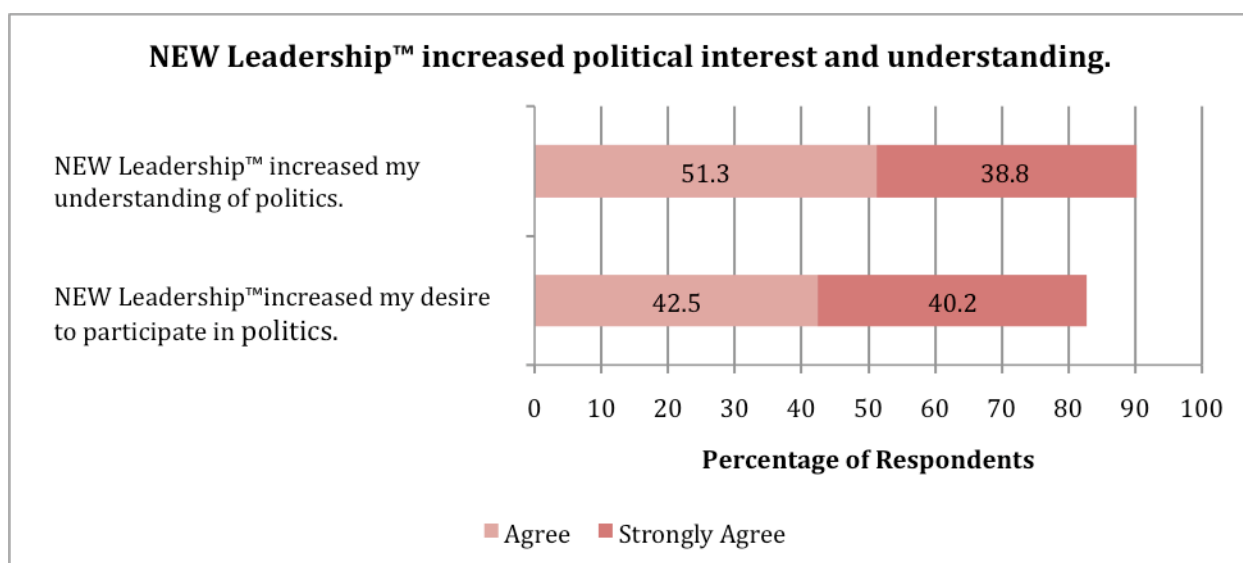
Participants in NEW Leadership™ are undergraduate women representing a variety of backgrounds and academic majors. Each class includes a diverse group of students from a range of socioeconomic, ethnic, racial and educational backgrounds. NEW Leadership™ participants develop leadership skills by participating in workshops such as public speaking, lobbying, conflict resolution and networking. NEW Leadership™ students learn how they can influence politics and public policy by participating in activities such as; training in direct action organizing; testifying in support of or opposition to a bill in a mock legislative session; and working in small groups to research a public policy issue and prepare a presentation aimed at influencing policy outcomes. The program emphasizes public and political leadership, but the students acquire skills that are useful in any career or leadership position.

Political Interest and Understanding

NEW Leadership™ teaches college women about leadership and politics. While many different leadership programs and opportunities are available to college students, very few focus on political leadership, and we know of no other programs that specifically train college women for political leadership.

A basic understanding of politics and the political process is necessary in order to become an effective political actor. NEW Leadership™ was designed to teach students about the political process and to provide information about how to engage the process at various levels. The survey results confirm that the NEW Leadership™ programs have been successful in teaching students about politics and encouraging them to become more involved.

The vast majority of respondents agreed with the statement, “NEW Leadership™ increased my understanding of politics” (90%). A significant majority (83%) also agreed that “NEW Leadership™ increased my desire to participate in politics.”



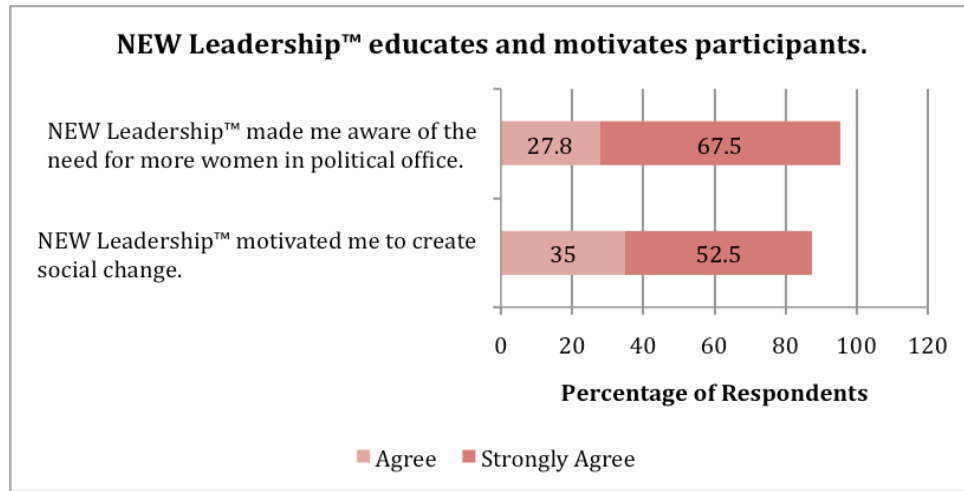
Women and Politics

Although women constitute the majority of the U.S. population, voters, and college graduates, only a small fraction of our elected leaders are women. The under-representation of women in positions of political leadership, coupled with traditional notions of gender and political power and the idea that politics is a “dirty business,” often serve to discourage young women from getting involved.

CAWP’s research (and that of others) shows that women’s involvement in politics brings different perspectives and priorities to political decision-making. NEW Leadership™ strives to educate a new generation about the significant role that women have played in American politics and the importance of having women involved in political decision-making. The survey results indicate that

this message is getting through. Over 95% of the respondents agreed with the statement, “NEW Leadership™ made me aware of the need for more women in political office.”

Historically, women have been marginalized from the political arena and encouraged to focus on social welfare and service activities. We strive to motivate NEW Leadership™ students to move beyond the traditional service roles that many of them already are involved in (such as volunteering at shelters, camps and religious organizations) and to understand the ways that politics and public policy can effect social change on a much larger scale. Over 85% of respondents agreed that “NEW Leadership™ motivated me to create social change.”



Leadership and Confidence

Our experience with NEW Leadership™ alumnae suggests that one of the program’s most transformative effects on participants is increasing their confidence in themselves and their own leadership abilities. Our observations were borne out in the survey results. Significant majorities of respondents agreed with the statements, “Participating in NEW Leadership™ increased my leadership capabilities“(89%) and “NEW Leadership™ increased my overall self-confidence” (85%).



In addition to improving their self-confidence, participating in the program made many students feel connected to their peers and the women leaders involved in the program. NEW Leadership™ alumnae become part of a network of current and future women leaders who share a commitment to shaping the public agenda and making a difference in their communities.

The connection between leadership and confidence can be further understood by examining responses to the open-ended survey questions. The survey contained two-open ended questions that asked how participating in NEW Leadership™ changed what they thought they could accomplish in government and politics, and in what ways participating in NEW Leadership™ helped them become better leaders.

While respondents gave a wide range of answers, two significant themes emerged: the importance of increased self-confidence and being encouraged to take risks and strive beyond self-imposed or presumed limitations based on gender.

In responses to the question, “In what ways did NEW Leadership™ make you a better leader?” many of the alumnae referred to increased confidence as a major factor in becoming a better leader. A significant proportion also cited self-confidence in response to the question “In what ways did participating in NEW Leadership™ change what you thought you could accomplish in government or politics?”

Respondents described achieving a sense of self-recognition and expressed newfound confidence in themselves and their leadership potential, along with a rejection of previously imposed assumptions or barriers to women in leadership.

“During NEW Leadership™ my self-confidence improved significantly. In the past this has been my biggest impediment, but now I'm able to take risks and encourage myself to be resilient. This boost in self confidence has been incredibly empowering!”

“I left NEWL with a greater feeling of confidence in my own ability to lead and my ability to create change. I also left feeling the world of government and politics was much more accessible than I had previously thought.”

“With the help of NEW Leadership™ I became a better leader because it encouraged me to have more confidence. After the program, I felt more comfortable applying to positions of power, and I found it easier to go for opportunities I would not have done in the past.”

The Importance of Role Models

In a media environment that thrives on corruption, scandals and partisan bickering, young people often confront a very negative view of politics and politicians. Student interaction with political women from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences is a significant component of the NEW Leadership™ program. The students learn first-hand that many of the negative stereotypes about politicians are inaccurate. They meet women who are dedicated public servants and represent a wide range of backgrounds, family and educational experiences, and in many ways are not so different from themselves.

The women leaders who participate as faculty and speakers at NEW Leadership™ serve as important role models and often become part of the political networks that the students begin to develop during the program. The significance of interacting with women leaders who serve as mentors and role models was identified as an important factor by many of the respondents in terms of what they thought they could accomplish in politics. In the open ended questions, many of the responses referred to being inspired by the women leaders they met during the program, as well as the other participants.

“Exposure to professionals, students, politicians and women from all walks of life helped to define my own sense of self and give me an idea of those qualities I most wanted to develop.”

“I was able to really see how women who are fantastic leaders change the world every day. The most important part of the experience for me was seeing these examples. These women inspired me to realize my potential.”

“It gave me the confidence in my own leadership abilities...It also helped me see how other women had chosen to lead, and showed how diverse female leadership options are.”

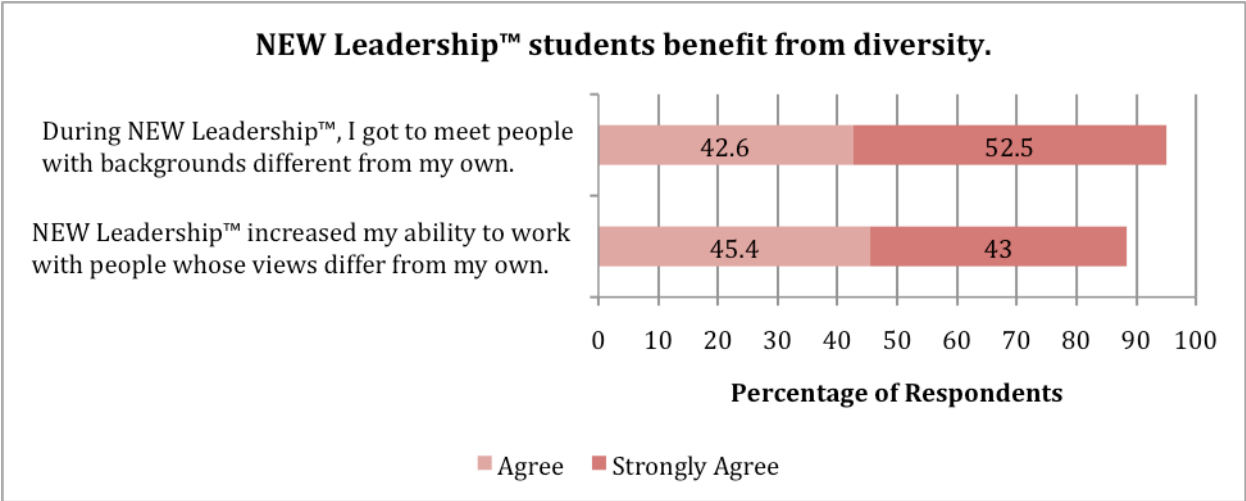
“We had a lot of strong interesting women participating in the panels, they talked about their experiences and how they became involved in politics. They are just normal women who wanted to create a change in their communities, and that is something we all identified with.”

Leadership in a Nation of Diversity

The United States is becoming an increasingly diverse nation. Political leadership in the 21st century will require the ability to work with diverse groups and constituencies. NEW Leadership™ programs reach out to actively recruit non-traditional students and those from underserved populations. Each year, we include students of non-traditional age and diverse ethnic, racial, educational backgrounds and socio-economic status. In addition to including a diverse group of speakers and participants, encouraging discussions about diversity is a critical aspect of the NEW Leadership™ curriculum.

Despite the diversity of the U.S. population, we know that most people continue to live and socialize primarily with people like themselves. NEW Leadership™ creates a situation in which students will meet and interact with people that they might not otherwise get to know. A large majority of respondents (95%) agreed with the statement “During NEW Leadership™ I got to meet people with backgrounds different from my own.”

This also creates an opportunity for the participants to practice working with people who have different views and opinions than themselves. A majority of respondents (88%) agreed that “NEW Leadership™ increased my ability to work with people whose views differ from my own.”



Once again, these opinions reappeared in the open ended questions. In response to the question “In what ways did NEW Leadership™ make you a better leader?” a number of respondents cited the importance of valuing the opinions of others and learning to work with people who hold different views as significant leadership skills.

“NEW Leadership™ exposed me to many people of differing political beliefs. Though we all came to the table with different views and agendas, we were challenged to find common ground.”

“I became more comfortable working with people from different backgrounds or interests, something that is definitely needed in politics!”

“It helped me work on my ability to listen to and value the views of people who disagree with me”

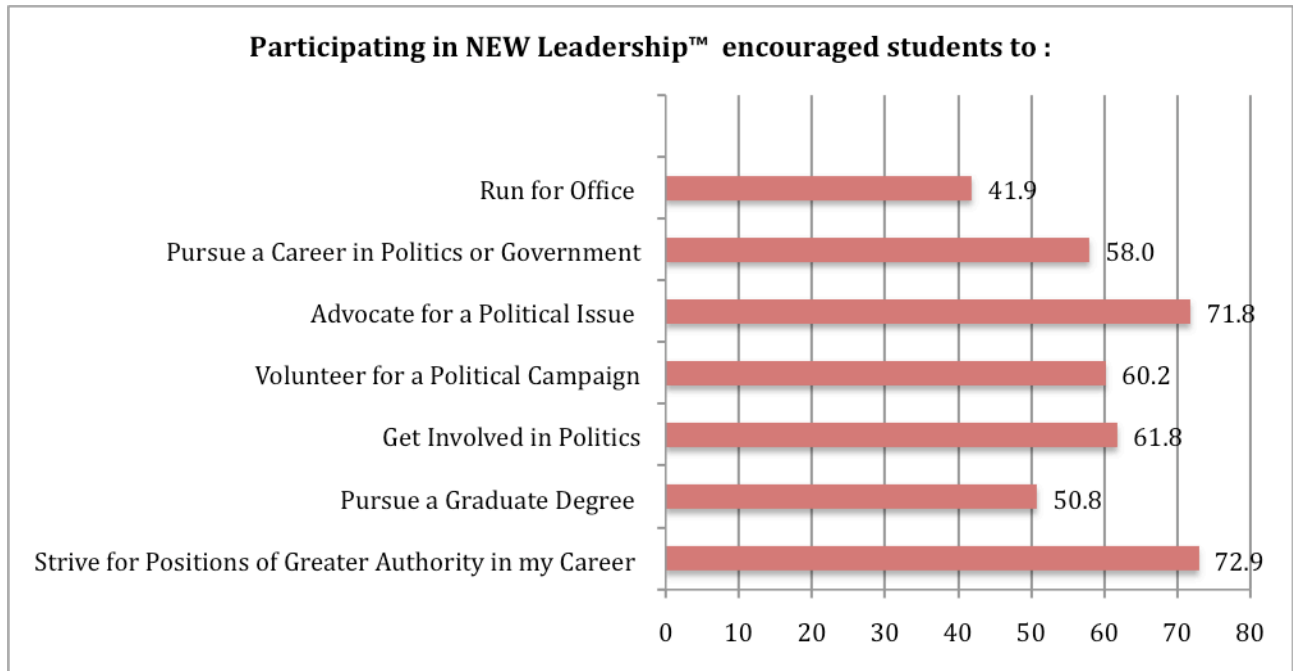
“The greatest thing that NEWL did for me was to have us working with not only a diverse group of women but with a wide spectrum of opinions and ideas. Because of this, I became a better listener, more tolerant of other opinions/ideas, and more creative in problem-solving, which are all important qualities in being an effective leader.”

Looking Toward the Future

The results of the 2009 NEW Leadership™ alumnae survey confirm that NEW Leadership™ is an effective program for inspiring and educating college women for political leadership. The majority of NEW Leadership™ alumnae are still relatively young (88% of the respondents are under the age of 35) and we know women tend to run for office later in life, so it may be a while before we see the full effect of the program reflected in our elected political leaders.

But getting women elected is not the only measure of success. Many of our alumnae report that participating in the program encouraged them to get more involved in politics (62%), advocate for a political issue (72%) and volunteer for a political campaign (60%), and over half say they have been encouraged to pursue a career in politics and government (58%). These are all important indicators of the immediate positive impact of the program.

Research shows that women often need to be encouraged to run for office, whereas men are more likely to say that the decision to run was entirely their idea. At NEW Leadership™ college women are encouraged by peers and mentors to become involved in the political process. They begin to understand the important role that politics plays in their lives and in their communities. As a result of participating in NEW Leadership™, they are less likely to view themselves as outsiders to the political realm and may therefore choose to enter into electoral politics at a younger age than women of previous generations.



In addition, the dramatic increase in self-confidence reported by NEW Leadership™ alumnae can serve to counter the discouragement women often encounter when striving for leadership positions. NEW Leadership™ helps these women expand their horizons and opens up new options for them as they begin to come into their own as leaders.

Methodological note: The survey was conducted online through “Constant Contact” in 2009. Out of approximately 3,700 NEW Leadership™ program alumnae, we had 2,345 active email addresses. A total of 856 completed surveys were recorded for a response rate of 36.5%.

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