

Center for American Women and Politics

NEW Leadership™ Alumnae Survey Report

National Education for Women's Leadership (NEW Leadership) is the centerpiece of CAWP's initiative to educate and empower the next generation of women leaders by encouraging college women to take on public leadership roles. NEW Leadership consists of a week long residential program during which college students learn about women's leadership and women's political participation and meet with women leaders from a variety of roles in politics and policy.

During the program students participate in workshops to develop leadership skills such as public speaking, conflict resolution, networking and advocacy training. Participants then put these skills into action during a political action simulation in which students work in small groups to research a public policy issue, develop strategies and make a presentation aimed at influencing policy.

Participants in the NEW Leadership™ program 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. At the summer institute, students develop a network of current and future women leaders who share a commitment to shaping the public agenda and making a difference in their communities.

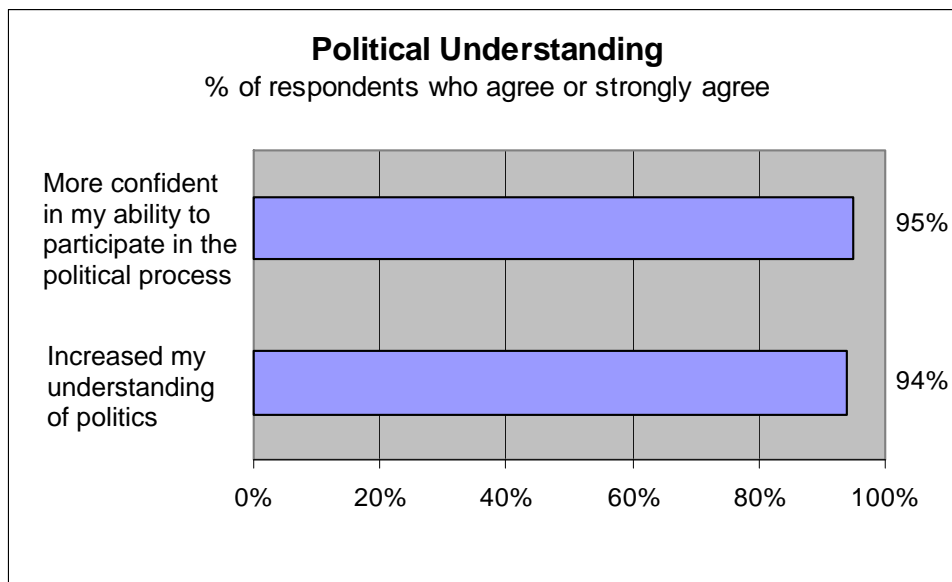
Since its inception in 1991, CAWP has adapted and refined NEW Leadership and expanded the program's availability through the NEW Leadership Development Network, a program created in 1999 in which CAWP partners with colleges and universities across the country to assist them in developing women's leadership programs in their state or region, based on the NEW Leadership model. To date there are fifteen NEW Leadership partner programs serving students in seventeen states and Washington, D.C.

In an effort to assess the long-term effects of the program, and evaluate which workshops and experiences have been most useful to NEW Leadership participants, CAWP conducted a survey among students who attended a CAWP sponsored NEW Leadership program. Our analysis of the survey results suggest that the vast majority of alumnae agree that the summer institute was successful in enhancing their leadership skills, developing future career goals and educating them about the political process and the importance of increasing the numbers of women in political office.

Political knowledge and participation

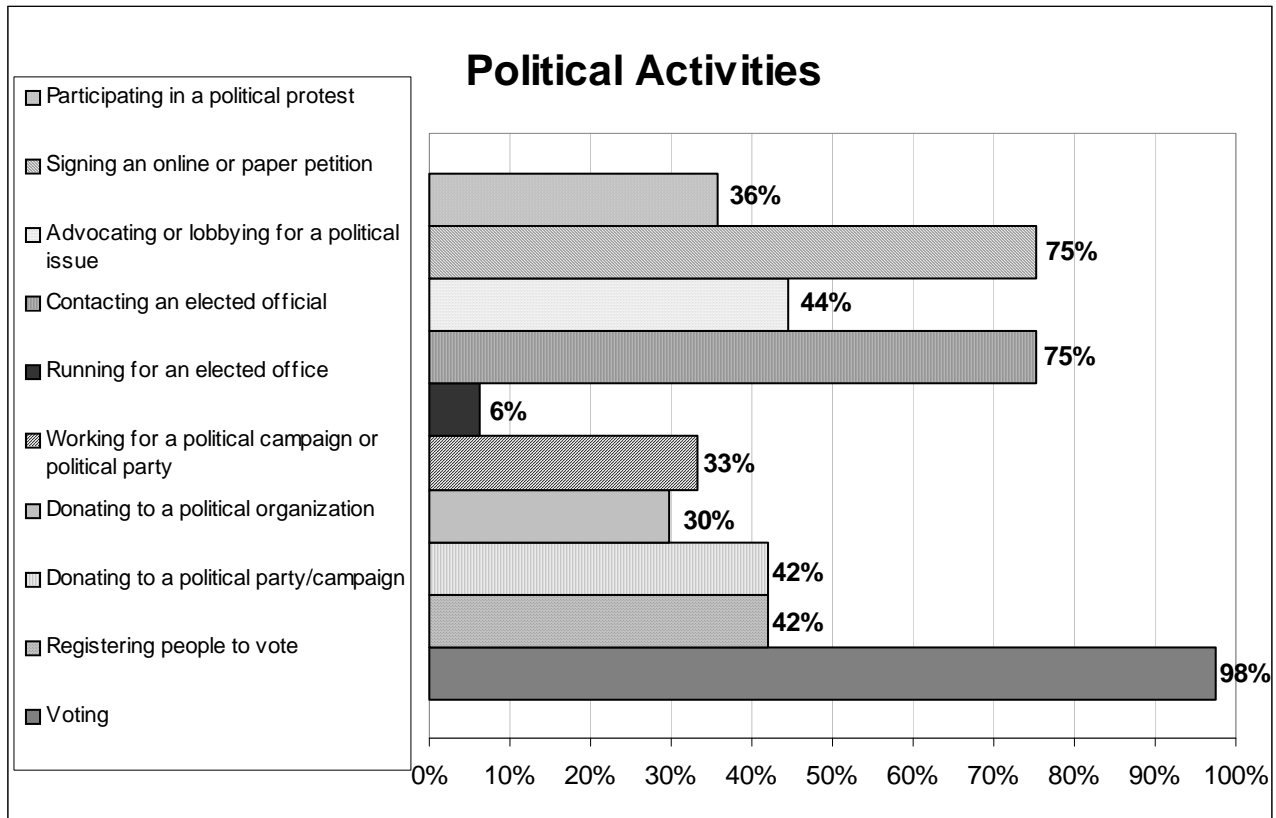
A significant majority of respondents indicated that participating in NEW Leadership increased their understanding of politics and confidence in their ability to participate in the political process.

In response to the statement “Participating in NEW Leadership increased my understanding of politics” 38 percent indicated that they agreed and 56 percent strongly agreed. Similarly high levels of agreement were reported in response to the statement “Participating in NEW Leadership made me more confident in my ability to participate in the political process” with 46 percent indicating they agree and 49 percent strongly agree.



In addition, NEW Leadership alumnae reported that participating in the program increased their interest in various types of political participation. A substantial proportion of respondents (82%) indicated that NEW Leadership motivated them to create social change. Almost three-quarters (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that participating in NEW Leadership made them more interested in voting. Given the nature of NEW Leadership program and the students who are drawn to it, it is likely that the 22 percent who responded “neither agree nor disagree” already felt that voting was an important mode of political participation.

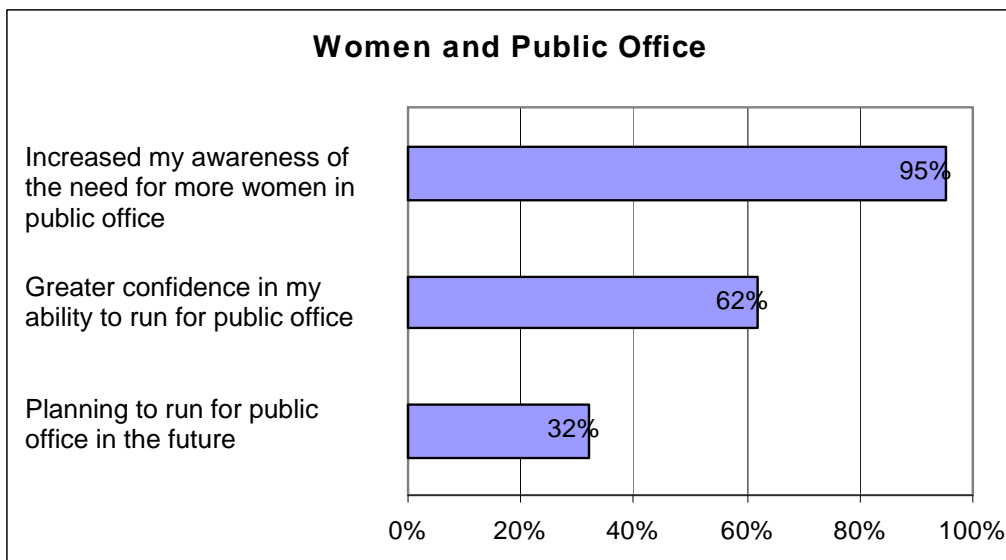
In an effort to assess the long term impact of NEW Leadership, we asked respondents to indicate the types of political activity that they had engaged in over the past two years. The results indicate very high levels of voting, online participation and contact with elected officials. Also, over 40 percent of respondents had advocated for a political issue, registered people to vote or donated to a political campaign. That 42 percent of respondents have donated to a political campaign is especially impressive given that this is a fairly young population and many have only recently graduated from college. Finally, over one-third of respondents indicated that they had worked for a political party or campaign over the previous two years.



Increasing the number of women in political office

Part of the mission of CAWP is to increase the impact of women in politics and the number of women holding political office in the U.S. The survey results suggest that NEW Leadership has been very successful in terms of increasing college women's interest in running for political office.

A striking 95 percent of respondents indicated that NEW Leadership increased their awareness of the need for more women in public office and 62 percent said NEW Leadership gave them greater confidence in their own ability to run for office. Over one-third of the alumnae said they were planning to run for public office in the future.



We also asked whether respondents had ever run for public office. Seven out of the 83 respondents indicated that they had run for office. Of those, three had been elected. While this may seem a rather small number, it is important to consider that NEW Leadership participants are college students, and even those who participated in their earliest years of the program have been out of college for less than 15 years. In fact, 43 percent of the respondents were under 25 years of age, 43 percent were between 26 and 35 and the remaining 14 percent are over 35.

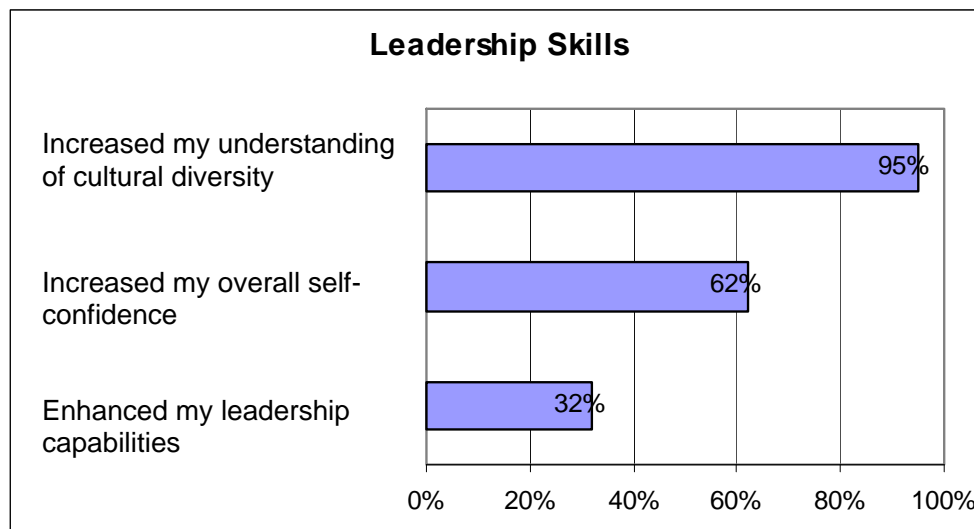
CAWP's research has shown that women officeholders are significantly older than their male counterparts, probably because they are less apt to run while they have young children. Given the demographics of this group, we are encouraged by the numbers of respondents who say they are planning a run for office in the future.

Enhancing leadership skills

A significant proportion of the respondents agreed that participating in NEW Leadership enhanced their leadership and professional skills and was a great help in building their self-confidence. A large majority (92%) agreed that “Participating in NEW Leadership enhanced my leadership capabilities.” A smaller, but still significant majority (83%) agreed with the statement “Participating in NEW Leadership increased my overall self-confidence.”

Two important leadership skills that are emphasized at NEW Leadership are networking and public speaking. Our survey results suggest students find these skills-building workshops very helpful. Respondents agreed that participating in the program increased their ability to network with people (83%) and gave them greater confidence in their ability to speak in public (81%)

Another critical finding was that a considerable number of alumni (76%) agreed that NEW Leadership increased their understanding of cultural diversity, and for many created the first opportunity to interact with people whose backgrounds were very different from their own. This was a significant result as CAWP emphasizes the importance of diversity throughout the NEW Leadership program.



In their own words

We also asked two open-ended questions to allow the alumnae to tell us in their own words how they felt that NEW Leadership had benefitted them. The first asked, “In what ways did participating in NEW Leadership help you to become a better leader?” In response, a number of women cited increased self-confidence and the opportunity to improve their leadership skills:

“I gained self-confidence through my experience in the NEWL program. The project associated with the program allowed me to put into practice what it takes to be a leader and to form an organization for awareness.”

“It gave me practical experience in politics and fostered great communication skills.”

“I am more confident. I believe in myself and my ability to affect change.”

Many respondents remarked that participating in NEW Leadership increased a sense of duty to participate in politics and greater awareness of and sensitivity to the importance of diversity.

“I understand that as citizens we must hold those that are in public service accountable. Most important, as citizens our involvement with our public representatives makes a difference.”

“The program just reinforced the notion that as women we need to speak up and let our voices be heard... the NEW program encourages women to use their skills, voice their opinions and make a difference.”

“Participating in this program broadened my horizons and exposed me to a number of ideas and people that I ordinarily would not come in contact with. I have felt the effects of this since participating in the class.”

“NEWL helped me to create a better understanding of cultural diversity which in turn has made me a more conscientious leader. I often take more time to consider all alternatives before making any decisions. I am more aware of the effect of my decisions on others.”

A significant number of respondents said that the most valuable aspect of the program was learning about and networking with accomplished women leaders:

“The main benefit was realizing that I was not alone. It was inspiring to be around so many accomplished women and young women looking to become accomplished and enact change.”

“I loved to see how many women strived for success and attained so much in their lives. The best thing I got from NEWL was listening to so many success stories from women of virtually all backgrounds.”

The second open ended question asked, “In what ways did participating in NEW Leadership change what you thought you could accomplish in politics and government?” Many reported that NEW Leadership taught them about the various ways to become involved in politics and encouraged them to consider a career in the political realm:

“Before NEWL I had never considered a career in the "public sector". I didn't know what that was. After NEWL I joined a nonprofit board, work for a city department on public process and started down the path that now has me leading a nonprofit that assists hundreds of non-profits in my community to be more effective with social change using technology.”

“It made me aware that being involved in politics meant far more than just being an elected official. Before I participated I didn't believe that I could accomplish anything in politics and government. After participating I now believe I honestly can run for office. I'm now seeking my masters in public administration.”

“NEWL made me see myself running for office or being directly involved with government in some other way... whereas before NEWL I had not considered these possibilities.”

Finally, many indicated that NEW Leadership opened up their eyes to the importance of having more women in elected office and involved in political decision making:

“It gave me access to women in politics and answered many of my questions in regards to how to operate successfully as a female in politics. That in turn allowed me to see that it's possible and important for women to actively contribute to the political process.”

“It taught me that: anything is possible; it is vital for women to be involved in the political process; women have specific skills that are well designed for politics; there are many women already making a difference in government.”

“It definitely got me more focused on electing women to public office and the challenges of doing so in terms of women running, etc. Even today electing more women to public office is my most important political goal.”

Conclusion

Studies have shown that young women rarely consider a future that includes political involvement, and that college women are significantly less likely to be interested in politics or to view political involvement as a priority than their male counterparts. Since 1991 NEW Leadership™ has been working to reverse that trend. Evidence obtained through this survey indicates that NEW Leadership is successful in achieving its goals.

Responses of program alumnae indicate that the NEW Leadership experience helps college women develop the skills and confidence necessary to join the next generation of public leaders. Through NEW Leadership™ college women come to see themselves as empowered leaders who can participate in the public sphere and make a difference in their communities.

Methodological note:

The population for this survey included all students who had participated in a CAWP sponsored NEW Leadership program between 1991 and 2006, which was a total of 519 students. Of those, we had current contact information for 311 individuals. In the spring and summer of 2006 we distributed surveys by mail to each of the alumnae for whom we had accurate contact information. We received a total of 83 completed surveys from participants in each year of the program since 1991. Although the total number of responses is not large, it represents a response rate of 26%, which is considered a very high response for a mail survey.