Influence of Campus Activities on High Achieving Students' Leadership Identity Development

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This article explores the leadership identity development of high achieving undergraduate students through their engagement in campus activities. Drawing on a narrative inquiry study of high achieving undergraduate students at a large public research university in the southeastern United States, the research analyzed how students construct and reflect on their leadership identities amidst academic and social expectations. Using the leadership identity development (LID) model and the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) framework, the study uncovers five key themes: evolving definitions of leadership, peer influence, belonging, shifting engagement, and leadership as a relational process. Participants' experiences reveal a shift from positional leadership to values-based, authentic leadership practices shaped by context and identity. The findings emphasize the importance of reflective and supportive environments for fostering leadership growth. This work contributes to the ongoing conversation about the intersections of leader and follower, offering insights and recommendations for educators and practitioners supporting high achieving students in leadership development across campus environments.

Introduction

High achieving undergraduate students often seek engagement in a multitude of areas outside of the classroom. With a variety of student organizations, interest groups, and enrichment opportunities, the possibilities for engagement on campus can seem endless. In addition to excelling academically, this student population pursues excellence across their campuses. While high achieving students are often positioned as leaders by virtue of their accomplishments, the actual construction of leadership identity is deeply contextual and personal. As expectations for student involvement continue to rise, it becomes essential to explore what involvement high achieving students choose and what they perceive as necessary or required. This article explores the contributing factors to leadership identity development through involvement in campus activities. It highlights research that investigated any connection between heightened expectations for high achieving undergraduate students and their leadership identity development.

To further explore the context of campus activities, it is crucial to understand whether high achieving undergraduate students assume leadership roles due to their academic status rather than developing their own self-efficacy. Owen et al. (2017) have demonstrated that leadership self-efficacy is essential in the development of leadership identity. This self-efficacy can be actualized

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through students' involvement in academic enrichment opportunities, and student organization activities and programming. Furthermore, as we learn from leadership development theory, leadership identity can develop when individuals engage with learning opportunities in their specific environments (Komives et al., 2006).

This study of focus for this article centered on high achieving undergraduate students who were members of the Presidential Scholars program at a large public research university in the southeastern United States, and explored the distinct challenges, interpretations, and meaning-making processes that shaped their leadership identity development. It examined how participants define leadership, reflect on their roles, and make sense of the ways they engage in leadership experiences. Through these reflections, a broader conversation emerged about the expectations placed on high-achieving students and how those expectations influenced their involvement. Participants also considered whether their leadership identity was assumed by others or actively constructed through the interplay of expectations and performance. To further contextualize the participants' identities, each was a junior or senior member of the Presidential Scholars Program, the university's premier undergraduate merit scholarship, structured around four foundational pillars: leadership, wisdom, service, and character.

This article positions leadership identity development within the broader context of campus activities, responding to a call to explore the complexity of leadership, particularly through the lenses of leader, follower, and context. The aim is to integrate findings from a dissertation study with the broader scholarly and practitioner-focused conversation about leadership education in higher education. Central to this exploration are the questions: How does leadership identity evolve over time? What role do peers, environments, and expectations play? And how can educators create environments that support authentic leadership learning for high achieving students?

Leadership Identity and High Achieving Students

Leadership Identity

Leadership identity development is an evolving area of scholarship within higher education, particularly in the context of co-curricular learning and student engagement. When high achieving undergraduate students reflect on their leadership identity, it can create a broader discussion around the expectations they have as high achieving students and the reasoning for their engagement. The study of focus for this article, contributed to the knowledge surrounding high achieving undergraduate students' leadership identity development and specifically their understanding and reflective processes regarding the direct contribution to that identity. Komives et al. (2005) introduced the leadership identity development (LID) model, which outlines a progression from leadership as external and positional to an internalized, relational process. This framework emphasizes the importance of adult mentors, peer interaction, and meaningful engagement in shaping how students come to see themselves as leaders.

An important learning model for the study was Bertrand Jones et al.'s (2016) culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model, which incorporates identity, capacity, and efficacy into leadership development. Guthrie et al. (2013) define leadership identity as a student's understanding of themselves as leaders. It is noted that students' understanding of their various

identities can inform their learning about leadership. The CRLL model focuses on transforming and improving leadership programming, as well as its considerations for developing leaders, which supports high achieving students. This model assists in conceptualizing the framework, particularly regarding the Presidential Scholars Program's programming and purpose in leadership development. The CRLL model considers the role of campus and environmental climate as one of the model's dimensions. The five domains of the CRLL model are the historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion, compositional diversity, behavioral dimension, organizational and structural dimension, and psychological dimension (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021).

The CRLL model is significant for high achieving students' leadership identity development due to the interconnection between academic success and the capacity domain. The participants in the study were high achieving students whose environment in a top undergraduate merit scholarship program fosters considerable engagement both in and out of the classroom, leading to specific leadership opportunities. The CRLL model assisted the study's participants in reflecting on and understanding their leadership identity development process, as it created space for them to comprehend their leadership identity through the lens of their multiple identities, particularly their high achieving identity in this context.

High Achieving Students

The definition of high achieving undergraduate student that was used for the study guiding this article was Harper's (2008), which defined high achieving as those who not only maintain a high cumulative GPA but are also heavily involved in student programming, engage in educational enrichment opportunities like undergraduate research, display positive interpersonal relationships with students, faculty, and staff, and hold elected student leadership positions on campus. Astin (1993) notes that students with increased academic and social involvement tend to achieve better educational outcomes. This finding contrasts with Wu et al.'s (2019) study, but Astin's (1993) work has been further developed by scholars focusing on the holistic impact of co-curricular and extracurricular involvement. The intersection of high achievement and leadership expectations can create an identity tension, especially when students feel compelled to assume leadership roles rather than pursue them authentically. Astin's (1993) theory of student involvement provides a foundational link between participation in campus activities and student development. Kuh and Lund (1994) emphasize that these gains are not merely academic; they extend into identity construction and interpersonal competence.

Engagement in Campus Activities

Research indicates that when college students hold program leadership roles, engage in general student programming, participate in internships, and receive faculty mentoring, positive relationships with leadership identity development are established (Sessa et al., 2014). Recent work has also highlighted the importance of reflection and storytelling in leadership development. Logue and colleagues (2005) noted that students' understanding of their leadership identity is often shaped retrospectively, through the stories they tell about their experiences. Narrative inquiry, therefore, is a particularly effective method for understanding how leadership identity forms in high-achieving students over time and across contexts.

In addition to prior research focusing on leadership roles within campus activities, student groups and organizations, multiple studies examine engagement in student government, fraternities and sororities, academic organizations, and more (Kuh & Lund, 1994; Logue et al., 2005; Posner & Brodsky, 1994). Posner and Brodsky (1994) conducted a study assessing whether female and male student leaders differed in their leadership practices, using the Student Leadership Practices Inventory as a measurement tool. The participant pool included fraternity and sorority presidents, as well as executive committee members from multiple college campuses across the United States. The study found connections between five leadership behaviors: challenging, inspiring, enabling, modeling, and encouraging, concluding that successful student leaders exhibited these five characteristics (Posner & Brodsky, 1994). Important to note from this study is its significance for understanding how high achieving students comprehend their leadership identity development, confirming that engagement in student organizations designed to enhance student's skills and understanding can create an opportunity for the development of leadership.

Central to this conversation is the role of reflection and meaning making in shaping students' leadership identities. The high-achieving students in this study—participants in a prestigious merit-based scholarship program—navigate multiple, intersecting social identities, resulting in a complex and layered sense of self. Their academic status and perceived excellence can both inform and complicate their leadership development as they work to make sense of their roles and experiences. Applying the leadership identity development (LID) model alongside the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) framework offers a valuable lens for understanding how these students reflect on, construct, and express their leadership identities.

Research Design

The study indicated the gap in the literature regarding high achieving undergraduate students reflecting on their leadership identity development through programming and engagement. The two research questions that guided the study were: 1) How do high achieving undergraduate students at their institution construct, make sense of, and practice their leadership identity? and 2) How does involvement in student organizations, in addition to participation in the presidential scholars, contribute to the meaning-making of their leadership identity? To answer those questions, a narrative inquiry study was conducted, eliciting the stories of junior and senior presidential scholars, which is the top undergraduate merit scholarship program at their institution.

The site for this research was at a large public research university, a predominantly white public institution located in the southeast, on the oldest continuous site of higher education in Florida. Founded in 1851, the institution serves over 44,000 students from all 50 states and 130 countries, boasting representation from every county in Florida. The sample consisted of individuals from the junior and senior cohorts of presidential scholars. Each of the current junior and senior cohorts comprised 30 students, resulting in a participant pool of 60 students. While qualitative researchers typically work with small sample sizes, this approximate number necessitates more specific sampling to create a reduced pool. Miles et al. (2020) outlined two actions needed in qualitative research sampling: boundaries and framework. Given the narrative inquiry boundary and framework of researching high achieving presidential scholars, the study employed criterion

sampling. The primary criterion for this study is the specification of junior and senior cohorts of presidential scholars. Convenience sampling was utilized to facilitate participant recruitment.

Since the research purpose involved analyzing how Presidential Scholars reflect and make meaning of their leadership identity, the goal was for participant reflections to stem from both their engagement within the Presidential Scholars Program and their involvement in student organizations across campus. To support this, the sample focused specifically on juniors and seniors, as these students had accumulated multiple years of experiences, allowing for deeper reflection, more developed identity insights, and a clearer understanding of how their leadership evolved over time. The sample of students were invited through personal email invitation, which allowed each junior and senior member to decline or accept their involvement in the study.

The data collection involved a questionnaire and one-on-one in-depth interviews with eight participants. The questionnaire included questions specifically about scholar cohorts and student organization involvement, but most importantly, it began with questions about identities. These general questions helped identify areas to explore further regarding identity development in the one-on-one in-depth interviews. The questionnaire not only facilitated participant identification but also gathered data integral to the success of the interviews. The interviews were conducted in person, which allowed for diverse interpretations and narratives when the participants reflected on their engagement through programming in the Presidential Scholars Program and across campus. The advantages of in-person interviews gave the researcher the ability to collect additional information and personalize the interview experience (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). Each participant chose their location for their interview and had unique reflections and feelings surrounding their identity development. The interview setting enabled them to articulate these through individualized narratives. Each interview followed an interview guide approach, as described by Johnson and Christensen (2016), which allowed for the exploration of specific topics and the broad use of open-ended questions. The timing of the in-depth interviews occurred at the beginning of the fall semester, in the month of September. This timing allowed participants to reflect on their last three to four years without the added stressors of end-of-semester finals or activities. Additionally, the beginning of fall is generally a reflective time for students, especially those embarking on their final undergraduate year or starting their junior year with the potential for increased engagement and activities.

Findings

Analysis of participant narratives yielded five key themes: evolving definitions of leadership, peer influence and pressure, shifting engagement over time, the role of belonging, and leadership as process, not position. The themes that emerged in the study aligned with each participant's engagement through presidential scholars, educational enrichment opportunities, and student organizations. The focus of research question one was to understand how involvement in activities contributes to leadership identity development, and how the participants' narratives were intertwined with their various engagement experiences. The participants had engaged in a multitude of activities and opportunities on and off campus, discussing a combined total of 85 activities. The significance of this number is not to highlight volume but to establish a framework for understanding that these participants had spread their engagement widely and for various reasons.

Shifting Engagement Over Time

This section explores how participants' engagement evolved throughout their college experience, revealing shifts in focus, intentionality, and identity alignment over time. All participants discussed how their most meaningful engagements occurred in various organizations and opportunities across campus. The narratives surrounding these engagements contributed to the understanding of leadership identity and ongoing involvement because the participants reflected on how their interests and passions sparked their desire to lead in those spaces. Additionally, as participants began to branch out into different areas across campus, they entered new peer groups that opened doors for different opportunities. For most participants, timing also played a critical role in aligning opportunities with their academic pursuits. John noted that engagement in student organizations had to be purposeful regarding timing, stating:

> *There were a lot of things I was thinking about during freshman year about the trajectory. I knew when it came to student organizations like student government or stuff like that, you had to kind of start then and, you know, follow the track and figure out how it works with all the students and navigate everything.*

This reflection was significant because John recognized that if he wanted to hold leadership positions in student government, he needed to engage early. This realization prompted him to refocus his attention on organizations that aligned more specifically with his interests rather than following a predetermined timeline for leadership roles. Garrett talked about his experience with a student organization, emphasizing how the work he does aligns with his post-college aspirations. Garrett stated:

> *It always feels good to know that you are working towards something and to make a difference. I feel like a lot of the things I am doing I can speak to on an interview and to be able to say, I compiled pages on relevant policies, or I contributed to a literature review on doctoral student success. I am able to get skills from these and I have been able to develop a reputation.*

Garrett highlighted that his engagement not only provided quantifiable skills but also referenced mentorship and peer influences throughout his involvement. His engagement evolved after his freshman year due to changes in his academic major and general shifts in interests and initiatives.

Other participants, like Katy, reflected on their engagement with student organizations as valuable learning experiences and opportunities for growth. Katy noted that these engagements helped her learn not to take things personally, how to communicate effectively, and how to be more understanding and open to all individuals. She also mentioned that her involvement in a specific group was meaningful to her identity and provided a sense of community that she had been lacking in other spaces. Billy reflected on his experience in a student organization as a learning opportunity regarding the consequences of poor student leadership. He discussed the challenges of neglectful leadership and the need to change the environment to set future students up for success when his time in the organization concluded. Peers played a major role in students' engagement and leadership development—both positively and negatively. Many students were introduced to opportunities through peer recommendations, while others felt burdened by the unspoken expectation to constantly achieve.

Evolving Definitions of Leadership

Participants described significant shifts in how they defined leadership, moving from a focus on titles to a more personal and process-oriented understanding shaped by experience and reflection. Jefferson had the most direct reflections on his engagement with student organizations across campus. He initially struggled to get involved; however, once he got involved in his current student organization and took on a leadership role, he began to develop his leadership identity. Jefferson described how he accepted a role on the executive board of an organization that no one else wanted but noted how it would open doors for him if he remained committed, which it did. He has now been involved in the same student organization for three years and has grown as a leader in that space, leading to additional opportunities due to his commitment. Jefferson also discussed his involvement with other student organizations and the challenges of being in groups that require recruiting new members and rebranding the group if it is not growing. He provided a holistic reflection on the various spaces he was involved in and how each opportunity offered tangible takeaways that contributed to his leadership identity. Belonging emerged as a central component of leadership identity development. Students who felt a strong sense of belonging in their groups were more likely to step into leadership roles and experiment with their leadership voice.

Academic Focused Organizations and Activities

Other participants' engagement was specifically tied to their majors or groups and programs that would further their research and academic interests. Most of Noelle's engagement involved research internships and the creation of her own club on campus after being involved in other academic-specific clubs. Resilience was a significant theme in Billy's reflections. He acknowledged that his field and academic interests were challenging, and he would experience more failures than successes, which grounded him. It was evident from his reflections that without participating in his research engagements, he would not have gained the experience that led to this understanding. Participants described how their campus involvement evolved throughout their college experience. Early on, involvement was exploratory and often reactive. As students matured, their engagement became more intentional and aligned with their values.

What remained constant was that engagement interests and involvement became more specific and tailored to each participant's academic pursuits and, for some, their social needs and opportunities. It was intriguing to hear about all they had engaged in throughout their time on campus, but the key areas of involvement at the time of the interviews were particularly telling. As some participants approached graduation, they focused on career readiness engagement or research to build their academic portfolios. Others took steps back from engagement to allow themselves a break from previous years of over-involvement. Regardless of engagement opportunities, the participants consistently viewed themselves as leaders or taking on leadership roles within those opportunities. This observation and understanding of leadership roles or opportunities through their engagements will be further explored in this chapter's section on leadership identity.

Leadership as a Relational Process

Students' reflections revealed a shift from seeing leadership as an outcome to understanding it as a relational and evolving process, shaped by their communities, identities, and personal growth.

They identified moments of failure, uncertainty, and growth as essential parts of their leadership journey. To further illustrate this theme's complexity, some participants found empowerment through traditional leadership roles. While many embraced informal leadership opportunities, others saw roles with titles as a platform for action, not just recognition. These contrasting perspectives underscore the need to support multiple pathways of leadership expression. While many high achieving students move away from positional models, some still derive meaning from formal roles, especially when they can exercise agency and influence authentically.

Each participant discussed how they make meaning of their own leadership identity development through reflections on their years of engagement and experiences. Some participants noted experiences from high school, while most focused on their first years of college. A consistent theme was a resounding "*yes*" to the question: Can you make sense of and articulate your leadership identity development? Regardless of self-confidence or personal understanding of their leadership capacity, each participant was able to reflect on how they arrived at their current state and what experiences contributed to that identity development. Some themes that emerged from the meaning-making discussions included early involvement in college and its impact, the development of identity in current years, and the importance of reprioritizing involvement rather than chasing every opportunity, as well as perceived leadership identity.

A prominent theme across participant narratives was the pressure students felt from institutional messaging, family expectations, and societal standards associated with being "high achieving." Students internalized implicit norms about what success and leadership should look like, often leading to conflict between external validation and personal alignment. Across narratives, students expressed a shift from seeing leadership as a destination to embracing it as a process of learning and self-discovery. They identified moments of failure, uncertainty, and growth as essential parts of their leadership journey.

Practicing Leadership

When revisiting the first research question, how do high achieving undergraduate students at FSU construct, make sense of, and practice their leadership identity, it is evident from the engagement discussions that each participant's choice of groups to engage in reflects how they practice their leadership identity. Additionally, through reflections on their engagement in the Presidential Scholars Program during their first year and subsequent shifts in engagement interests, the participants made sense of these changes by highlighting what attracted them to other engagements. Each participant constructed their own leadership path by creating opportunities to engage in communities that aligned with their interests and capacities. The second research question specifically examined how involvement in student organizations, in addition to participation in the Presidential Scholars Program, contributes to the meaning making of leadership identity. It was during the transition of engagement outside of the Presidential Scholars Program that reflection and meaning making occurred. Participants were able to choose their engagements, understand why they chose them, and articulate how their identities developed in spaces where leadership was not emphasized. This understanding of the importance of engagement in participants' leadership identities was also impacted by their communities, groups, and peers, which is highlighted in the next section.

Influence of Peers

Notably, some specific student organization engagements were influenced by peers, which directly contributed to the development of their leadership identities. To understand a participant's leadership identity, connections to individuals, programs, and peer influences were crucial. All participants discussed their experiences with peers in the Presidential Scholars Program and how those peers influenced engagement or did not. There was also an emphasis on the competitiveness and challenges within group structures that created an environment of over-involvement and the need to lead.

The study found that most of the eight participants engaged in organizations and projects because they were influenced by a peer or member of a group they were already involved in at some point in their experience. When asked how they became involved in the organizations they engaged with, at least six participants noted that peers from the Presidential Scholars Program or peers from the groups they were intending to join recruited or encouraged them. These group influences played a significant role in key experiences for the participants. The study also found that participants' self-reflection and self-awareness were instrumental in meaning making regarding their leadership identities. It was through these developmental influences that participants discussed their engagement in opportunities more aligned with their values or career goals. For others, self-awareness revealed that they had become too engaged or overly focused on multiple opportunities instead of leading in spaces that were most meaningful to their development.

When the participants were asked which involvements and experiences contributed most to their leadership identity development, developmental influences and self-awareness dominated their understanding and guided their narratives. The study found that participants' engagement in programs and opportunities outside of the Presidential Scholars Program contributed most significantly. Five participants indicated that their experiences in educational enrichment opportunities, such as internships and research, provided them with reflective experiences that contributed most to their leadership identity development, as they were better able to focus on engagements that were meaningful to them as individuals and students.

The nature of each participant's engagement and the reasons behind it were consistent themes throughout the findings that led to the construction and understanding of each participant's leadership identity and its development. These eight participants were involved in an incredible amount of programs that contributed to the clear definition of a high achieving student for this study: a student who not only has a high cumulative GPA but is also heavily involved in student programming, engages in educational enrichment opportunities such as undergraduate research, fosters positive interpersonal relationship building with students, faculty, and staff, and is elected to student leadership positions on campus (Harper, 2008). These participants were exceptionally engaged in student programming across campus, and the majority spent most of their interviews discussing their involvement in educational enrichment opportunities. The study found that each participant's unique experiences and narratives regarding their engagement clearly illustrate how they were able to construct, make sense of, and practice their leadership identity. They actively sought engagement experiences that aligned with their overall identities.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study offer important insight into the complex and evolving nature of leadership identity development among high achieving students. Through the narrative accounts of students in the Presidential Scholars Program, several key intersections between leader, follower, and context emerged, shedding light on the broader ecosystem in which leadership learning occurs. Many participants described moving between leadership and followership roles depending on the context, sometimes taking initiative, and other times offering support or stepping aside. This fluidity affirms Komives et al.'s (2005) LID model, which suggests that leadership becomes more relational and internally grounded over time. It also reinforces the importance of creating spaces where leadership is not solely tied to positionality but includes relational influence and supportive collaboration.

These findings reflect important dimensions of the CRLL framework, particularly the organizational and structural dimensions. Participants' reflections highlighted how their social identities shaped both their comfort and legitimacy in leadership spaces. Additionally, program structures such as peer mentor matching often failed to account for students' developmental needs or evolving interests, illustrating the importance of revisiting organizational and structural design. More intentional alignment with CRLL dimensions can create affirming environments where high achieving students are empowered to develop leadership identities that are both authentic and identity-conscious.

While all participants were part of the same high achieving scholars' program, their social identities shaped their leadership experiences in meaningful ways. Students of color, first-generation students, and women described feeling out of place in some traditional leadership spaces, especially those dominated by unspoken norms about who is "supposed" to lead. For these students, campus context was not just developmental, it was also political and cultural.

One student shared that they often felt their leadership was questioned or diminished unless it aligned with dominant expectations: "Sometimes it felt like people needed me to be louder or more aggressive to count as a leader, but that's not who I am." This quote reflects how social identity can affect both leadership expression and recognition.

The findings underscore that context is not neutral. Campus activities and leadership programs must not only be available but also inclusive, affirming, and reflective of diverse pathways to leadership. When environments validated participants' multiple identities, they were more likely to lead authentically and confidently. As noted earlier, reflection, both self-directed and facilitated, played a central role in participants' leadership development, turning experience into identity. Whether prompted by a setback, a peer conversation, or the understanding of misalignment between values and involvement, participants used reflection to make sense of their evolving views. Narrative inquiry illuminated how meaning-making transforms engagement from activity into identity work. Students did not just recount what they did, they shared how those experiences reshaped how they saw themselves.

Many participants internalized the belief that leadership meant being constantly involved, highly visible, and always productive. Yet the most powerful growth occurred when the participants chose alignment over obligation and when they stepped away from roles that no longer fit for them and

pursued leadership that was values-driven rather than expectation-driven. Together, these findings emphasize that leadership identity development is not simply about acquiring skills or titles. It is about finding your place, building connections, and learning to lead with honesty in a changing campus environment.

Implications

The findings from this study offer rich implications for both scholars and practitioners committed to cultivating leadership development through campus activities. Grounded in participant narratives and aligned with the themes of leader, follower, and context, the following recommendations address how institutions can better support high achieving students in developing authentic leadership identities.

Acknowledge Various Ways Leadership is Practiced

First, leadership development should not be confined to position or roles in students' organizations and campus activities. Institutions can shift their program designs and recognition structures that better value supportive and collaborative contributions (Komives et al., 2005). Leadership certificates, awards, and training programs should elevate stories of peer mentoring, team contributions, and servant leadership. Practitioners should name and affirm leadership when they see it happening informally. High achieving undergraduate students often begin college with a broad and exploratory approach to involvement, but their growth comes through intentional narrowing and alignment with personal values. Advising structures should support this evolution by helping students understand when to step in, shift focus, or step back. Co-curricular engagement that could build in reflection prompts can reinforce this developmental arc (Komives et al., 2005; Dugan & Komives, 2007).

Highlight Peer Mentorship

The findings of the study demonstrate the importance of peer influences on engagement, community building, and leadership choices. Many narratives from the participants discussed how peers influenced their involvement in campus activities, encouraged them to pursue leadership positions, or even pushed them to engage in what was most meaningful to them. The connections and narratives about these peers were significant to their leadership identity development and informed their engagement decisions. Therefore, a recommendation for college campuses is to create and promote peer mentoring programs that foster students' leadership qualities through mutual learning, personal growth, and continuous development.

Participants discussed their relationships with their "big and littles"—assigned older cohort members (big) and younger cohort members (little)—who, for the majority, had little to no influence on their leadership identity development. It is recommended that faculty and staff who create and lead programs like presidential scholars develop programming around these peer mentorship relationships. With assignment comes expectation, and this study showed that participants did not receive peer support and influence from their big and little compared to a mentor-mentee relationship. Some narratives described the importance of social connections with peers in their group, but those connections, big or little, ultimately did not lead to engagement that contributed to their leadership identity, although they provided a space and person to connect with. Many participants noted being assigned a big or little based on their major or minor, which

often changed, leaving them with little in common with their peers. An additional recommendation for faculty and staff leading programs that promote a mentor-mentee structure is to solicit feedback from students on how they would like to be paired with peers and what they hope to gain from the relationship. Additionally, while participation in a peer mentor program or relationship should not be mandatory for students, if such relationships are emphasized, there is an opportunity to reevaluate how programs match peers. Specifically, there is an opportunity to assess how programs identify students' preferences and needs in both peer mentors and mentees—beyond just academic interests—to include overall engagement in extracurricular activities and other aspects of campus life.

Community Building Through Campus Activities

As the findings demonstrated, students' sense of belonging within campus communities significantly shaped their leadership identity. Leadership educators can build on this insight by ensuring students who feel a strong sense of belonging are more likely to lead, take initiative, and contribute meaningfully. Leadership educators should partner with student affairs professionals to ensure that involvement opportunities foster inclusive climates and affirm students' identities. Additionally, in tying in and focusing on leadership learning, participants repeatedly noted that their leadership growth was anchored in spaces where they felt seen and heard. Campus activities which can incorporate relationship-rich environments and culturally relevant programming, can foster an environment for identity exploration.

While this study centers on a cohort-based undergraduate merit program, the findings offer broader relevance for institutions without similar structures or programs. Leadership educators and student affairs professionals can apply these insights by creating developmentally aligned, identity-conscious programming that does not depend on formal cohorts. For example, reflective leadership development can be embedded into existing initiatives like orientation, living-learning communities, or career preparation workshops. Peer mentorship can also be reimagined as opt-in learning communities organized around shared values or interests. Importantly, institutions can expand recognition structures beyond positional leadership, highlighting informal contributions such as peer mentorship or community impact. These strategies can foster similar conditions for meaning making and identity development without requiring a centralized programmatic structure.

Conclusion

This article has explored the leadership identity development of high achieving undergraduate students, grounding its analysis in the lived experiences of participants and situating those experiences within current leadership development literature. Through narrative inquiry, we see that leadership learning is neither linear nor uniform. Instead, it is deeply personal, socially influenced, and continually shaped by the contexts in which students live and learn. The findings challenge traditional assumptions that leadership is confined to positions. These narratives affirmed leadership as a developmental process, reinforcing earlier themes of relationality, self-discovery, and alignment. These participants learned to lead not only through formal roles but also through informal acts of support and stepping back when needed. Their leadership identities were forged not just by achievement, but by reflection and recalibration in response to their environments.

This study also underscored the critical role of campus activities as developmental spaces. When environments were inclusive and affirming, students felt empowered to explore their identities. Yet when they were required or performative, students often felt constrained or disconnected. Thus, leadership development is as much about the context we build and the environments we create, as the curriculum we deliver. For educators, administrators, and leadership practitioners, this work is both a guide and a call to action. Supporting high achieving students requires moving beyond assumptions of readiness and toward more intentional, identity-conscious leadership learning environments.

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