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Campus Environmental Factors That Influence Black Doctoral Student Leadership Development

Calvin Lowery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Jesse Ford, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Tyler Bacote, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Kofi Boateng, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Cedrick Brown, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The political shifts in the United States have caused higher education leadership to constantly evolve (Smith, 2024). For Black doctoral students, leadership during doctoral study is critical for the development into future roles as scholars and professionals (Gardner & Mendoza, 2023). This paper explores the experiences of four Black doctoral students at a minority serving institution. This scholarship reveals that leadership development is a vital part of the doctoral experience for Black doctoral students. It expands existing literature as positions on campus environmental factors that foster and constrain leadership development.

Introduction

The landscape of leadership in higher education is constantly changing for students, staff, and faculty due to political shifts in the United States (Smith, 2024). Leadership, as a concept, has been defined differently throughout history (Rost, 1991) and is a socially constructed and contextually situated term. While definitions have evolved over time, in this paper we rely on House and team's (2004) definition of leadership as "the capacity to inspire, influence, and empower individuals to contribute to the goals of the organizations they belong to" (p. xxii). Building on this, Forsyth (2014) defines leadership as a "complex social process" that is "reciprocal, transactional, transformational, cooperative, and adaptive" (p. 281). In tandem, leadership refers to the process or capacity, while a leader refers to the individual engaged in the process. We frame this paper with this understanding as we seek to explore the leadership development experiences of Black doctoral students while simultaneously understanding how their positionality and identities impacts their development as leaders on college campuses.

The leadership development of Black doctoral students has a profound impact on their overall growth, as doctoral education often serves as a critical training ground for future scholars and professionals in multiple fields (Gardner & Mendoza, 2023). Doctoral education has been widely

recognized as an essential mechanism for preparing and supporting the next generation of leaders (Ballard & Cintrón, 2010; Gardner & Mendoza, 2023). While not explicitly linked to doctoral socialization (Weidman et al., 2001), graduate student leadership development experiences are interconnected to many doctoral student experiences. Scholars have argued that much of doctoral student socialization is deeply intertwined with their personal and professional development, both inside and outside of the classroom (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015) and for those who see leadership as defined by Forsyth (2014) and House and team (2004), professional development can be seen as a natural form of leadership development for doctoral students.

Professional development has been defined as the process to assist doctoral students as they identify, prepare and acquire the skills needed to perform in their post-graduation careers (Rudd & Nerad, 2014). More specifically, doctoral professional development includes teaching, mentoring, attending, presenting at conferences and other career focused opportunities (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Gardner & Mendoza, 2023). In this same context, it is important to note that the campus environment plays a pivotal role in shaping these experiences, either fostering leadership development through access to mentorship, resources, and inclusive spaces, or hindering it through systemic barriers, racialized experiences, and limited institutional support (Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Beatty & Lima, 2023; Guthrie et al., 2017).

This autoethnography explores the experiences of four Black doctoral students navigating a minority serving institution. The contributors were purposefully selected due to their participation in a research team and engagement in leadership roles on campus. Through their journaling, this paper seeks to unpack how their individual campus experiences have led to their own leadership development. Furthermore, leadership is not always seen as a central element of doctoral student socialization (Weidman et al., 2001), this paper seeks to add to the literature on how leadership experiences add to the holistic development of Black doctoral students. To frame this study, we borrow the framing of Perez-Felkner and team (2020) and Ford and team (2021) to anchor the positionality of the participants and to build the bridge between doctoral student socialization and leadership development.

Given and Providing Leadership Development Opportunities

Author Two – I come to this work as a faculty member, scholar, and leadership educator dedicated to supporting and expanding how we understand Black doctoral student experiences in higher education and more importantly, how we support Black doctoral students in their leadership development. I am a recent doctoral degree recipient and my experiences as a doctoral student are nested in the mentorship, professional development, academic preparation, professional socialization, and what I consider to be a critical component of my experiences, leadership development. As a first-year doctoral student, I did not associate my journey with leadership, however, shortly after starting my doctoral journey, I immediately took on a leadership role within the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA). Over the next few years, I held various roles within my doctoral degree program including chair of our higher education and student affairs association, and vice president of the BGSA. While I enjoyed these roles, I did not start to define

myself as a leader until I started teaching in a leadership program, as a higher education professional, interested in supporting and advancing the success of Black men.

Today, my role as a professor, educator, and administrator are centered on fostering experiences where Black men can not only develop leadership experiences but cultivate leadership identities. As such, I use this framing to help anchor the conversation on Black doctoral student experiences with leadership development. It is with this framing that we position this work as five scholars sharing our experiences and seeking to expand the understanding and connection between socialization literature and leadership experiences. The following narratives situate the experiences of four graduate students and how they answer the following research question. What campus experiences contribute to or hinder leadership development?

Liminality – What Helps Can Also Hinder Leadership Development

Author One - The campus environment simultaneously hinders and contributes to Black graduate student leadership development. I navigate this liminal space while serving as both a doctoral student and a full-time university employee. There are times where the roles I carry complement each other, there are times where those roles compete against each other, then there are times when those roles provide balance. As a dual role Black graduate student, I am navigating the leadership development process at the same time I attempt to contribute to (and not hinder) the leadership development of Black undergraduate students and even other Black graduate students.

First, the presence of meaningful mentorship has assisted in my development as a Black graduate student leader. Outside of the classroom my professional and academic mentors have helped guide me through an otherwise cryptic journey. Inside the classroom as a teacher, I have the ability to serve as a mentor. These encounters have left me with a higher self-efficacy and an increased sense of belonging at the institution. Alternatively, negative encounters have hindered my development as a Black graduate student leader. These racialized experiences that include blatant discrimination and more subtle microaggressions are regular enough to cause me to constantly be in defense mode, while exploring methods to lead, uplift and mentor others.

Another factor in my development as a Black graduate student leader can be attributed to the presence or absence of campus resources. For example, I serve as a Senator for the Graduate Student Association (GSA). This shared governance has led to increased meaningful campus engagement between students, faculty, staff and administrators, as well as an increased understanding of campus policies and procedures. This is a limited opportunity and only 10 percent self-identify as Black.

Lastly, inclusive spaces have played an integral role in my development as a Black doctoral student leader. The most notable inclusive space for me has been the Collaborative for Black Men Success. This group is composed of a Black faculty member and four Black doctoral students. The participants in this group have had the opportunity to develop a relationship that promotes a sense of community. Most Black graduate students will not have a similar opportunity. Each of these

experiences has led me to see myself as a leader on campus with my peers and with my campus partners.

Sacrificing Now to Pursue Future Goals

Author Three- As a doctoral student who has the goal of obtaining a professorship, I must do many proactive activities to contribute to those future endeavors. As a Black first-generation PhD student who recently quit his full-time job to go all into earning his doctorate full-time, I had to figure out how to set myself up to become an academic now and, in the future, while also being able to make a livelihood financially. When I decided to pursue my Ph.D. full-time, I found out about graduate assistantships that could provide me with all the academic experiences I needed, provide financial assistance, and release debt.

Because there is a lack of these opportunities for now, I have had to volunteer my time as a research associate on a team, co-instructor inside of a class, on top of a graduate assistantship, taking full-time classes, and being part of committees, each of these assisting me in developing leadership skills and my own leadership identity as a doctoral student. While volunteering my time is not ideal, it has allowed me to gain some of the experiences that are vital professional and leadership development.

It Is Not Done Alone We Must All Do Our Part

Author Four - Integrating into doctoral level studies can be a challenging experience for many marginalized, non-traditional and first-generation students. As a first-generation student navigating the terrain of a doctoral program at a minority serving institution, I was fortunate enough to be a part of a graduate program that recognized and valued the variety of professional, academic and cultural experiences of students. Opportunities for leadership development were abundant, and I was deeply appreciative of both my institution and program for providing the space and tools for students to develop into authentic, impactful leaders. In the earliest stages of my academic career, I have had the opportunities to design and teach an undergraduate course, speak on panels, publish papers, present at conferences, and serve as a leader in student organizations.

Teaching, research and scholarship remain the priority for institutions and programs preparing future academicians, but the role of the student in shaping, honing and supplementing their own leadership development experience is often understated. Leadership development within the context of graduate education is a collaborative effort between the student, faculty, and the institution. The institution is responsible for providing the resources and structure, and faculty are responsible for using their expertise to guide and lead the direction of graduate programs, as well as to act as a consultant to doctoral students. Ultimately, students have the responsibility of tailoring their own leadership development experience, based on their unique goals and aspirations.

equips the academy and campus leaders to serve Black doctoral students (and future leaders) in a more effective and meaningful way. The students in this reflective article expressed how co-curricular experiences or campus engagement, such as, mentorship, teaching, research, community engagement and leading a student organization contribute to their leadership development. These findings are aligned to Ford and Bertrand Jones (2023), Griffith and Ford (2023) and Bertrand Jones et al., (2015) prior work which emphasizes professional development, mentorship and academic preparation as central to the success of Black scholars. Conversely, students share how feeling displaced and having unmet needs hinder their professional development. We offer the following points of reflection as a bridge to connect leadership development and professional development for Black doctoral students.

Advancing Research and Leadership Development

The Black doctoral students in the study each participated in a collaborative research team. For these students, this meant leading research projects, conference proposals, and team meetings. It is essential for Black doctoral students interested in pursuing a professorate to have meaningful experiences that assist in their leadership and scholarly identity beyond the classroom (Ford & Bertrand Jones, 2023). Thus, belonging to a research team allows students to strengthen their research and writing, while simultaneously leading projects to advance our overall mission of advancing the academy. These experiences, while not framed in what has traditionally been classified as leadership opportunities, such as co-curricular or student leadership engagement, our collective participation in a research collective has provided leadership development opportunities. Ranging from developing strong communication, collaboration, organization, and leadership skills are connected to how each of the students in this study perceives and makes meaning of how their doctoral journey builds and strengthens their leadership development.

The research team also allows Black doctoral students to participate in critical decisions pertaining to how research should be conducted. Additionally, this allows Black doctoral students to present research and consider how their thoughts, opinions and perspectives are connected as peer leaders in the research process. The spaces serve as a shared leadership space where power is removed to advance the success of marginalized communities through academic writing. Ultimately, this campus activity that is provided beyond the classroom generates experiences that equip Black doctoral students with professional discernment, valuable insight, leadership development when they are allowed to guide research teams, secure funding, discuss and present findings.

Teaching as a Vessel for Leadership Development

In addition to their research opportunities, the participants served as instructors for undergraduate courses. Teaching is another campus activity that enhances the Black doctoral student's professional and leadership identity development. For Black doctoral students interested in pursuing a professorate, having opportunities to teach courses is highlighted as a critical aspect of the experience. As instructors of record these Black doctoral students were allowed to design lesson plans and structure coursework which supports their professional development. Teaching also

contributes to the leadership development of each student. Here, each Black doctoral student managed classrooms, facilitated discussions, and mentored undergraduates. Each factor contributed to the participants' increased confidence and their eventual recognition of seeing themselves as leaders within the classroom space.

This campus activity has placed students in a position to inspire and be inspired. Engaging in teaching has allowed these Black doctoral students to envision themselves in an academy that was not designed for them. The increased self-efficacy is critical to the leadership development of future members of the professorate. These Black doctoral students finish the semester not only knowing they are capable of being in the front of the classroom, but also knowing they belong at the front of the classroom.

Campus Engagement and Leadership Development

Similar to research experiences and teaching, institutional and community engagement also contributes to the professional and leadership development of Black doctoral students (Gardner & Mendoza, 2017). The participants also serve as leaders of the Black Graduate Student Organization (BGSO). The experience gained leading a student organization provides a campus activity that allows the participants to engage both on the campus and in the community. The collaboration with other student organizations, departments, administrators, and community leaders supports the professional development of each student.

Likewise, serving as a student organization leader contributes to the leadership development of each student. As leaders of the BGSO the experience of navigating campus policies and politics has contributed to each student's leadership development. Similarly, the participants' leadership development has been enhanced through the group's strategic vision planning and execution for the organization. This campus activity has provided each student with the opportunity to contribute to campus and community conversations. Having a valued voice in these spaces has empowered each student to envision themselves as contributing members on campus and in the community. In turn, this involvement has led to the Black doctoral students envisioning themselves as campus and community leaders.

Recommendations: What Can Institutions, Faculty, Staff, and Doctoral Programs Do?

The narratives of the **participants** in this study reveal both the **opportunities** and challenges that shape Black doctoral **students' leadership** development. From the findings, we offer the following recommendations for **institutions**, staff, faculty and doctoral programs.
- *Funding inclusive doctoral leadership organizations.* The participants described how their involvement in organizations, such as BGSO provide community, belonging, and leadership identity development. However, these experiences are not always accessible for Black doctoral students. Funding student organizations, like BGSO, should be a priority for institutions to develop students in and out of the classroom.

- *Formalizing inclusive structured mentorship programs.* Mentoring through the connection with the faculty member in the study emerged as a vital factor in shaping the participants' leadership identity development. As highlighted in this article, students face challenges with issues of racism and racial microaggressions, which were damaging to the perception of how the participants experienced doctoral education. To combat these entrenched barriers, institutions should consider faculty and student or peer mentoring programs which could lead to opportunities for leadership development.
- *Providing co-curricular leadership workshops.* The participants in this study described their experiences with teaching, organizational governance and research team leadership, but each of these often requires students to navigate systems without formal preparation. Staff, who could offer leadership workshops, focused on topics such as navigating institutional barriers, leading collaborative research, and professional development would build on what is currently known about doctoral socialization and better equip them, not only for the academy, but for leadership roles after degree completion.
- *C*ollaborative research opportunities. Each participant in this study emphasized the importance of *participating* in a research team, which allowed them to lead projects, present findings, and lead a team. Faculty should intentionally design *collaborative* research experiences that allow *doctoral* students not only to serve as *contributors*, but as co-leadership as they develop their leadership and *scholarly identities* as doctoral students

Each of these together emphasizes that leadership development for Black doctoral students should not be seen as an add-on to their experience, but as important steps to ensure this population is ready for the next phase of their careers. Institutions must create structures that affirm their experiences, provide access to opportunities, and cultivate relationships and spaces where leadership identities can thrive.

Conclusion

Leadership is central to Black doctoral student socialization and has a direct impact on their overall growth. Considering how Black doctoral student socialization takes place inside and outside the classroom, it is imperative to examine both environments in relation to Black doctoral student development. Moreover, acknowledging the interconnectedness of professional development and leadership development highlights the importance of determining what plays a significant role in the development of future Black professors.

This paper explored the experiences of Black doctoral students navigating leadership opportunities at a minority serving institution. The MSI context shaped their development as it offered culturally affirming spaces, leadership development opportunities while also showcasing that this was not the experience of every doctoral student in higher education. As seen in this manuscript, this institution can simultaneously contribute to and hinder the leadership development of Black doctoral students. The narratives shared by each doctoral student revealed how their involvement

in campus environmental factors has both contributed to and hindered their leadership development. More specifically, the accounts provided by the doctoral students indicated how teaching, research team membership and leading student organizations contributed to their growth as leaders. As recommended, funding inclusive doctoral student organizations, formalizing inclusive structured mentorship programs, providing co-curricular leadership workshops, collaborative research opportunities are vital, specifically for Black doctoral students leadership development. Remember, it is the responsibility of the institution to provide these opportunities and the responsibility of the students to engage in these activities. As our understanding of doctoral leadership development evolves, the task becomes how to strengthen and cultivate the structure, resources and guidance that support graduate student leadership development.

Table 1
Influential Factors

Contributing Factors	Hindering Factors
Funding inclusive doctoral leadership organizations	Racial Microaggressions
Formalizing inclusive structured mentorship programs.	
Providing co-curricular leadership workshops	Absence of Culturally Affirming Spaces
Collaborative Research Opportunities	Isolation
Student Organization Leadership	Inconsistent Support from Institution

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