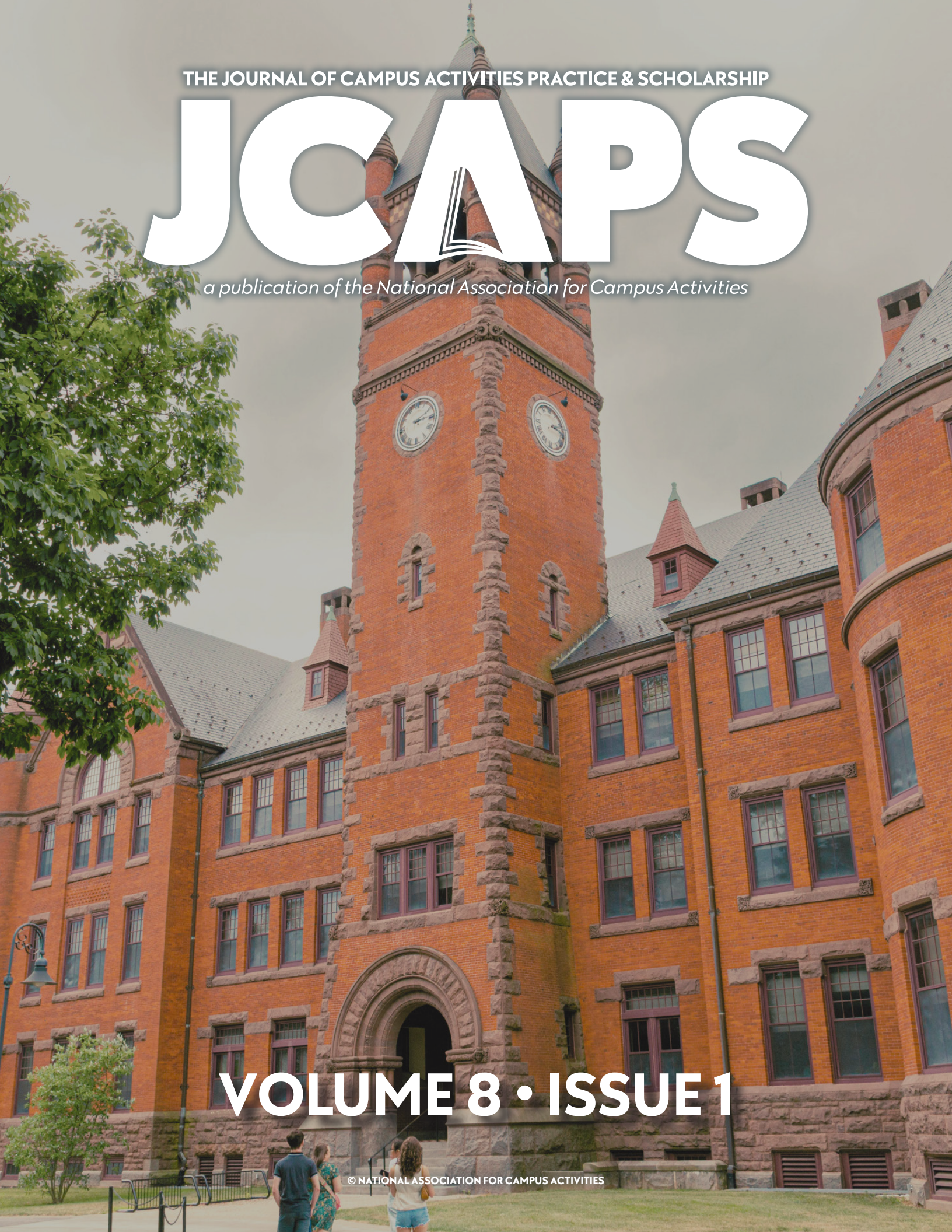

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Influence of Campus Activities on High Achieving Students' Leadership Identity Development

Amy Haggard, Florida State University
Kathy L. Guthrie, Florida State University

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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Navigating Silence: White Student Leaders' Silence and Fear When Addressing Race

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This general qualitative study examined how white undergraduate student leaders at three historically white institutions (HWIs) understood and navigated race, whiteness, and leadership. Using photo elicitation in semi-structured interviews and focus groups, data were collected from 18 participants (n = 18). Thematic analysis revealed a culture of racial silence, fear of missteps, and limited racial consciousness in leadership contexts. Participants described discomfort discussing race and often withdrew from cross-racial engagement. The findings suggest that whiteness operated invisibly, reinforcing ethnocentric norms and limiting students' readiness to lead across difference. The study recommends intentional leadership education that integrates critical reflection about race, raising racial awareness through dialogues, and empathy building through leadership opportunities in diverse teams.

Introduction

Colleges and universities are vital incubators for developing future leaders (Chunoo & Osteen, 2016), offering student leadership roles that are often formative and influential well beyond graduation (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998; DeSantis, 2007). These formal leadership positions—such as roles in student government, fraternities and sororities, campus organizations, and residence halls—offer students opportunities to develop interpersonal, organizational, and ethical competencies (Komives et al., 2011; Dugan, 2017). While it is common for leadership frameworks to emphasize the ethical responsibility of leaders to inspire positive social change (Komives, 2009), leadership development programs can be silent on the issue of race (Taylor, 2023).

On college campuses, student leaders are positioned to challenge or perpetuate racial inequalities that persist within higher education environments and the broader society. Specifically, research has demonstrated that white students play a pivotal role in sustaining systems of racial inequality and discrimination on college campuses (Cabrera, 2019; Cabrera & Hill-Zuganelli, 2021; McKinney, 2013), yet they often have limited awareness of their racial identity (McKinney, 2013). Foste (2019a, 2019b) suggested that some white student leaders demonstrated discomfort when talking about race or framed themselves as racially innocent, while Beatty et al. (2021) found that some white students exhibited resistance when engaging with race-related dialogues in leadership settings. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the racial attitudes, experiences, and leadership practices of white student leaders. This study seeks to address this gap

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by examining how white student leaders perceived their own racial identity and the racial identities of others, and whether (or how) these perceptions shaped their leadership practices and decision-making.

Positionality

In any study that addresses social identities, the identities of the author affect the analysis. I am a white male leadership educator at a large public land-grant university in the Mid-South. I came to study race and leadership through the experiences, stories, questions, frustrations, and joys of students. In my interactions with university student leaders, they have shared stories of explicit individualized racism and structural racism, as well as examples of individualized racial healing and opportunities for systemic racial equity. I approach this study with the belief that, while students can create and perpetuate racial inequities, they can also be catalysts and leaders for racial healing.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore how white student leaders at three historically white institutions (HWIs) understood race and its effects within the context of their leadership experiences (Taylor, 2023). Central to the study was the question: How do white undergraduate student leaders in formal institutional leadership positions make meaning of their race in their leadership roles and experiences (Taylor, 2023)?

Review of Literature

Although white students at HWIs frequently occupy many influential formal institutional leadership roles, such as student government association officers, fraternity and sorority executives, student council officers, and homecoming executives, relatively little research has explored how race and race consciousness influence their leadership experiences and development. Dugan and Henderson (2021) criticized this silence around race and racial injustices from student leadership development scholars and researchers, arguing that silence makes the field complicit in the injustices.

Much of the existing scholarship on race and student leadership centers the barriers encountered by Students of Color—challenges that stem not only from underrepresentation in high-impact positions (Arminio et al., 2000) but also from emotional and psychological strain (Beatty & Lima, 2022). These students tended to gravitate toward culturally specific organizations or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) related positions, where they could find safety and shared understanding. As Tatum (1994) argued, affiliation with racially similar peers provided relief from the constant demands of code-switching, while Beatty and Lima (2022) underscored the cumulative burden of racial battle fatigue that many Students of Color experience while navigating predominantly white leadership structures.

In contrast, the racial dynamics influencing white student leaders remain relatively understudied. This gap in the literature is notable. White students frequently hold influential leadership positions

that shape campus culture. One of the few studies on white student leaders examined co-curricular involvement and concluded that the white student leaders wanted to frame their leadership work through a lens of progressive, racially conscious innocence (Foste, 2019a). According to the study, the students saw racism or racial prejudice as something that happened among other bigoted students, but never within their own leadership work or the structures or programs in which they were leading. Foste (2019b) also found that white student leaders, either consciously or unconsciously, wanted to maintain the status quo, resulting in reproducing white-centered leadership cultures.

While some white student leaders undoubtedly articulated commitments to inclusion and justice, others relied on colorblind frameworks that attempted to minimize inequities (Cabrera, 2019; Modica, 2015; Taylor, 2023). Scholars have noted that white racial consciousness likely varies due to personal relationships with People of Color or lack thereof (Kunst et al., 2022; Tatum, 1994), political or religious ideologies, and the ability to engage in difficult conversations about race (Oluo, 2018). Additionally, fears around losing influence or disrupting familiar leadership hierarchies may have caused some to resist structural changes that would elevate Students of Color to more visible leadership roles (Foste, 2019b; Dugan & Komives, 2010). In a broader population than just student leaders, Norton and Sommers (2011) found that white people saw race as a zero-sum game. In this study, Norton and Sommers (2011) highlighted the perception from white participants that, if prejudice decreased toward Black people, it must increase toward white people. This concept of reverse racism is sometimes held within groups of white student leaders (Taylor, 2023) and hotly debated among race scholars (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2018; McGhee, 2021; Oluo, 2018).

While the broader fields of student development have explored racial identity development among white students (Cabrera, 2019; McKinney, 2013) and offered insights into inclusive leadership pedagogy (Beatty & Manning-Ouellette, 2018; Dugan, 2017; Kroll, 2023), specific attention to white student leaders remains scarce (Foste, 2019a, 2019b). This study seeks to address that gap. In an era where national debates around race and racial justice have become increasingly polarized and suppressed in many settings, understanding the beliefs, behaviors, and blind spots of white student leaders is critical. For leadership educators and institutions seeking to foster inclusive communities and train leaders for the reality of multicultural workplaces and communities, this inquiry offers a timely and necessary contribution.

Methodology

This study employed a general interpretivist qualitative design grounded in the constructionist paradigm (Patton, 2002) and implemented an arts-based research (ABR) approach. Rooted in the belief that knowledge is socially and individually constructed, the study sought to understand participants' personal interpretations of leadership and race within their campus environments. Eighteen (*n = 18)* students from three universities participated in the research, each engaging in an in-person focus group followed by a virtual one-on-one interview. In alignment with Covey's (1989) principle to "seek first to understand," the researcher approached the inquiry with openness to the participants' constructions of leadership and whiteness.

While the study did not begin with a guiding theoretical framework, the analysis process drew from the body of critical whiteness studies (CWS) to deepen the interpretation of patterns and absences in the data. CWS offered a lens to explore how participants articulated racial consciousness, inclusion, and power—or failed to do so—and highlighted how broader racial narratives and silences were woven into their leadership stories.

Participants

Eighteen white undergraduate student leaders from three large public universities participated in the research. The universities were public research HWIs located in the South, Mid-South, and Midwest. Each participant took part in two conversations—an in-person focus group and a follow-up one-on-one interview via Zoom, both lasting close to an hour and a half. The 18 white student leader participants were in high school or college during the 2020 COVID pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement for racial justice. To qualify for the study, participants were required to meet three inclusion criteria. First, each participant had to be an undergraduate student currently enrolled at one of the three selected university sites. Second, participants needed to currently hold or have previously held a formal, institutional student leadership position, such as serving as the president of a student organization, treasurer of their college's student council, student government association (SGA) vice president, fraternity or sorority recruitment chair, or a comparable role. Finally, all participants were required to self-identify as white (Taylor, 2023).

Arts-Based Research and Photo Elicitation

With the goal of eliciting salient, concrete examples of leadership praxis from the participants, the design incorporated participant-generated photo elicitation as the central method of data collection. The participants submitted between four and seven photographs in response to the prompt: "On your campus, what does leadership look like to you?" These images—ranging from peer-led initiatives to institutional symbols of leadership—acted as visual prompts for deeper storytelling, evoking personal memories, emotions, and reflections. In total, 94 photographs were collected from the 18 participants.

Each photo served as an entry point into the students' lived leadership experiences, often sparking narratives that moved beyond the leadership moment in the picture. The data collected demonstrate the core premise of arts-based research—that the arts offer a unique way of knowing, revealing dimensions of identity, belonging, and power dynamics that may remain hidden through traditional interviews alone (Latz, 2017; Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2020). The photographs facilitated what Yates (2010) describes as two windows of understanding: a view into the participant's world and a view into the participant themself. Integrating photo elicitation into the study design was not merely a stylistic choice—it was essential to cultivating the kind of vulnerability, specificity, and authenticity that gave the study its depth. As students described the context and significance of each image, their stories unearthed complex intersections of race, leadership, and meaning-making. The resulting data were not only rich and layered but also emotionally resonant, providing insight into how white student leaders made meaning of race in the context of their leadership praxis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I prioritized participants' own interpretations by adopting an emic lens, focusing on how students made meaning of their experiences. This approach of centering the members' meanings (Emerson et al., 2011) shaped my choice of coding methods. I began with *in vivo* coding to stay grounded in participants' language. I then layered descriptive coding to identify patterns, themes, and relationships across the data. To ensure trustworthiness, I triangulated across multiple data sources: 94 student-submitted photographs, 1,939 minutes of transcribed dialogue, and extensive field notes capturing context and tone. Furthermore, there was a high level of participant engagement in the study with the photo selection, interactions with their peers in focus groups, and the follow-up one-on-one interview.

Findings: Silence and Fear

The following sections detail experiences shared by the 18 participants. Table 1 identifies the participants and their primary formal leadership roles. The pictures shared in the following sections were submitted by the students prior to their focus group. Overall, students described a pervasive—sometimes imposed—silence surrounding race in their leadership roles, along with a fear of being "canceled" if they shared opinions about race in those roles.

Table 1

Participants and Their Leadership Roles

Student alias	Primary formal leadership role
Bella	First-year Leadership Team Officer
Billy	IFC Officer
Carol	Panhellenic Officer
Carson	Fraternity Chapter President
Chad	IFC Officer
Colin	SGA President
Derek	First-year Leadership Team Officer
Elaine	Student Programming Board Executive
Jake	Fraternity Chapter Officer
Johnny	New Member Educator, Pre-Law Fraternity
Katie	Student Programming Board President
Kayla	Women in STEM Sorority Officer
Liz	Pre-Health Club Officer
Luke	IFC Officer
Mason	Fraternity Chapter Officer
Olivia	Mental Health Club Officer
Rebecca	Student Philanthropy Executive Director
Theia	Tutoring Student Supervisor

Silence: Whiteness Unseen and Unspoken

One of the most consistent patterns that emerged from participant interviews was the tendency not to acknowledge or discuss their own whiteness. This finding is consistent with other white racial identity scholars (McDermott, 2020; McKinney, 2013). Nearly every student required prompting to consider the role of whiteness in their identity or leadership, even though each participant understood prior to the focus group that the study was about the intersection of their white racial identity and leadership experiences. Only two participants—Katie and Mason—brought up the topic of whiteness unprompted. Interestingly, these two students were the ideological extremes in this group of participants, with Katie identifying as a "hardcore conservative Bible-believing Christian Republican" and Mason describing himself as a "socialist" and "on the left." Despite their ideological differences, both admitted to avoiding race talk. Mason noted, "Essentially, we're not talking about it," referring to his fraternity. Katie also acknowledged a tight boundary around those conversations, stating she only discussed race with "family and a few close friends who agree" with her.

Other participants also acknowledged silence around race and whiteness in leadership discussions. Billy shared the picture below (see Figure 1) of a fraternity newsletter introducing the executive team of which he was a part. He identified all of the student leaders as white.

Figure 1

Fraternity Newsletter: "Just Elected and Eager to Make an Impact"

Billy shared this photograph because he was proud of the leadership impact he had on this executive team. When asked about how race affected his leadership decisions, he paused and, as if thinking about it for the first time, said, "Well, we were all white, so I guess it didn't." His statement acknowledged a belief that race is only significant for those who are not white, a sentiment echoed in other whiteness research (Helms, 1995; McDermott, 2020). Billy went on to explain that the group never talked about race and never considered race as a part of their leadership work. It is important to note that their leadership work specifically affected historically white fraternities with, as described by Billy, limited racial diversity.

Beyond interview discussions, the silence surrounding race and whiteness extended into the artifacts students shared. Of the 94 images submitted as part of the study, many similar to Figure 1 above, not a single one was chosen with race or whiteness in mind (the recruitment email specifically noted that the study was exploring whiteness and leadership). To reiterate, every participant selected multiple photos to share, and each participant was asked why they chose each photo. Not a single participant mentioned race as a part of their answer. It was only after specific prompting that participants mentioned race or whiteness concerning their photographs. This trend suggests not only a silence around whiteness but a deep-seated social conditioning in which whiteness was rendered invisible to these participants.

A Culture of Silence: Self-Censorship and Speech Bans

Participants often described navigating an environment in which conversations about race were avoided—not just by personal choice but as a perceived or explicit group norm. While some silences were voluntary, many described a broader cultural atmosphere where such conversations were discouraged or even banned. The picture below (see Figure 2) is of Chad's fraternity giving a gift to their house mom. Chad shared that one of his leadership values was showing gratitude, and this picture was an example of that value. When I asked how race affected his leadership experiences in his fraternity he noticed the lack of racial diversity. Of the 16 people pictured, he confirmed that all were white. He went on to describe a leadership culture in which differences, especially race, were not talked about in his fraternity. He explained that they would have a diversity talk in chapter presentations during Black History Month, but there "wasn't a need to talk about it otherwise."

Figure 2

Fraternity Executives: "Expressing Gratitude" at Christmas

For some participants, silence around race and whiteness was less about choice and more about enforcement. Carson, a leader in one of the most influential fraternities on his campus, stated bluntly: "We've outlawed talking about most things like that." He explained that race conversations were "polarizing," so the group decided to avoid them altogether. A message was sent in a group message to the entire fraternity that discussions around race or other possibly polarizing topics were "banned." Others described this silencing as "damage control." Billy, reflecting on a previous racial scandal in his fraternity, admitted, "I'm scared. I don't trust fraternity members to not be stupid." Chad added, "I'm scared that the racists are going to get caught, and I'm not going to have a fraternity any longer." These reflections revealed that students perceived silence as a safer path than engaging in potentially polarizing discussions—especially when reputations or group status were on the line.

Jake articulated the subtle consequences of that avoidance: "I think it builds a culture of distance. It feels like you can't talk about some in-depth things. You can't cross this line or this line." Theia echoed this when she noted, "…College kids, they're not going to talk about race unless they're in a class about race theory or something." This reticence was not just passive avoidance—it reflected an internalized fear of saying the wrong thing or being perceived as offensive. Derek, who stated that he opposed most DEI initiatives, admitted that he avoided conversations about race or whiteness unless he was confident the person agreed with his views, sharing, "I don't want other people to think of me in a bad light because I don't really agree [with DEI]." Overall, a prominent theme emerged—the white student leaders interviewed were not talking about race or whiteness in their leadership contexts, and sometimes this silence was imposed through organizational demands.

Silence Around Race in Leadership Development Trainings

In addition to self-and group-imposed silence, participants described a clear gap in formal leadership training around racial identity and awareness. When asked directly whether before the study they had ever considered how race affected their leadership actions, 10 of the 18 participants expressed sentiments similar to Johnny's: "I have never thought about how race affects leadership." The data highlighted a clear gap in leadership training; these white student leaders had not received leadership training discussing racial dynamics or racial consciousness in leadership. The general absence of race-conscious content in leadership programming meant that students were left unprepared for the complexities of leading in increasingly diverse environments. Another participant, Rebecca, shared about a leadership experience during the BLM movement. As a first-year leader, her sorority tasked her with writing a public post for the sorority in response to George Floyd's murder, but she recalled having "no training" and being unprepared for the criticisms of "white performative posts" that she received. Before this moment, she was unaware of the whiteness of her historically white sorority and reported she felt "set up to fail" by the lack of training.

Figure 3

Sorority Executive Team: "I Love Being with My Girls"

Similarly, Carol shared a picture of her sorority's executive team (see Figure 3). She identified only one member of the team who did not identify as white. I asked Carol what leadership training she received regarding race or DEI to navigate the challenges of leading a sorority. She talked about having a DEI chair for the sorority as a formal leadership role (this was the one Person of Color on the executive team), but when I asked again what training she received, she stated, "I guess I didn't get any training. We didn't talk about it. The DEI chair covers that for the house." Carol expressed the common theme throughout the data that these student leaders were not receiving specific training regarding race consciousness, dialogues about race, or how to create diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities; rather, there was silence around race in leadership trainings.

Several participants described DEI presentations as a part of the communities they led. While many fraternities and sororities now include DEI presentations, their impact appears limited and often polarizing. Katie, for example, described DEI efforts as attempts "to indoctrinate me," and Derek shared that he often felt that "no one is allowed to ask questions." Even among those who valued the intent, the delivery was questioned. Luke observed, "They often consist of somebody standing up and telling everyone to not be racist." In response to whether these topics surfaced in leadership team meetings, answers were unanimous: "No." Elaine reflected, "We just don't think about it. We have work to get done." Carson's blunt assessment stood out: "We've outlawed talking about most things like that." This points to a broader issue in leadership education: not only are

conversations about race absent, but they are also perceived as unrelated—or even detrimental—to the practical work of leadership.

A Desire for Dialogue

One of the fascinating tensions of the study was the dichotomy between the silence regarding race and whiteness and a thirst for honest and vulnerable leadership conversations about race. In the follow-up interview, Rebecca mentioned that her entire focus group stayed in the parking lot talking about race and being a white leader for over an hour. Jake echoed this sentiment naming his focus group as one of the "best and hardest" conversations he had in college. Carson, who was also in Jake's focus group, remarked that he loved hearing from his peers who had different ideas than him.

The overall takeaway from the participants was that they craved more candid conversations about race and whiteness with peer leaders. The silence around race and whiteness, as described by many participants, appeared to stem from an underlying fear—fear of misspeaking, of being judged, or of being labeled as racist. This fear often translated into avoidance, reinforcing a cycle where silence replaced dialogue. Jake, reflecting on the consequences of this dynamic, noted how avoidance not only maintains the status quo but actively reinforces narrow perspectives: "I feel like it almost brings more closed-mindedness instead of open-mindedness." He argued that the reluctance to engage does not foster neutrality; it breeds insulation. By staying in comfortable circles where conversations remain restricted or in echo chambers, he claimed: "the potential for real understanding shrinks."

Juxtaposed Stories of Racial Awareness

One of the more memorable stories from the data started with Jake sharing a picture of his fraternity's executive team (see Figure 4). Jake talked about his love for his fraternity. While he did not mention race proactively, when asked about how race affects his leadership experiences in his fraternity, he mentioned that almost his entire fraternity is white, and all of the members of the executive team were white. At first, he said that race did not affect his leadership experiences at all; however, later in the interview, he recounted a story about his fraternity and the BLM movement.

Figure 4

Fraternity Executive Team: "Just Me and the Guys"

Jake remembered a BLM march that went on the street directly in front of his fraternity house. His fraternity was a large, influential, historically white fraternity. The house was situated on a hill above the street. The fraternity members gathered on the lawn, looking down on the march. Jake recalled that his friends in the fraternity "just stood around watching and talking" and sometimes "laughing." Overall, he felt that the experience was innocuous. Then, a few days later his fraternity was "called out" by some of the Black students in the BLM march. The Black students said that they felt intimidated or threatened by a group of white men looking down on them. In the interview Jake said that he had not even thought about the optics of an all-white group of young men with folded arms, a group who largely disagreed with the movement, looking down on the group of Black protestors. After further prompting, he also noted that he had not considered the fact that his fraternity was standing in front of a multi-million-dollar fraternity house in a prime campus location, whereas the historically Black fraternities did not have an official fraternity house. In the interview, Jake mentioned that he and "the entire fraternity" were "unaware" of the ramifications of his fraternity's actions.

Juxtapose Jake's story with a story from Colin. The picture in Figure 5 was significant to Colin because his grandma impressed upon him the importance of voting, reminding him not to take voting for granted because there was a time when women were not allowed to vote. Consistently in the interviews, Colin mentioned inclusive leadership practices, was thoughtful about his position as a white leader, and talked about some of his considerations for historically marginalized students in his leadership decisions. Colin also identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. It is possible that Colin's connection to similar societal experiences of marginalization or oppression and his relationships with others who taught him to see people from these groups informed his inclusive leadership actions and raised his racial awareness.

Figure 5

Grandma and Me: My First Time Voting

Fear of Being Canceled

For many students, the threat of being "canceled" shaped how they engaged—or chose not to engage—with discussions about race. For example, Derek shared an experience in which a guest speaker came to a group of which he is an officer. The speaker was from the university's financial aid office. Derek felt like it was discriminatory that he could not apply for some scholarships because he was white. He stated that he was genuinely curious to learn why there were scholarships based on racial identity, and he wanted to ask the speaker about it; however, he expressed that he did not feel like he could ask his question because of the fear of ridicule from his peers.

Derek went on to describe a pervasive anxiety about sharing his viewpoints, noting: "There are certain things you don't wanna say because people will not agree with it, and then those people will cancel you." His approach to leadership included a calculated silence, saying, "If I can help it, I will never talk about [race]." He viewed race-related topics as too risky to navigate, particularly during high-tension moments such as the BLM movement. The fear of losing friends or being labeled a racist consumed him. "If you said anything… really anything about a Black person in my opinion, you could be labeled as a racist," he said. This apprehension led him to keep quiet around peers whose views he suspected differed from his own, reserving candid conversations for those he trusted to agree. His silence was not rooted in indifference but in a desire to avoid misinterpretation and the reputational harm that might follow.

Politically Strategic Silence

It is imperative to understand the socio-emotional experiences behind Derek and others' words. The participants explicitly mentioned their fear of saying the "wrong thing and being canceled." Bella, who was in the same focus group as Derek, spoke after he shared the story above. She was supporting his claims but also differentiating her perspective (she later acknowledged in her follow-up interview that she found his views "problematic"). She gave a reasoned response that she appreciated people "thinking about what they're saying" and holding others "accountable for purposely saying hurtful things," but lamented that the fear of being canceled may have led to a "lack of willingness to learn." Bella perfectly captured this tension, explaining the current context for student leaders:

> It's this tension of wanting to say the right things and wanting to be the right kind of leader, but also being terrified of even stepping into the arena because you don't wanna hurt someone. You don't want to say the wrong thing, so it just kind of stops...it stops you from even starting to learn about the issues for yourself. It's just easier to be quiet, avoid the topics, and just share your opinions when you know you are with people who already agree with you, that way you don't have to learn new things or consider another opinion or change what you're doing (Taylor, 2023).

Bella's statements above illustrated the collective hesitancy among participants to engage with race-related topics. Her reflection underscored the powerful role of social risk in shaping student leadership behavior. Students shared that, rather than being driven solely by apathy or lack of awareness, they withdrew from conversations about race because they feared the consequences of getting it wrong—being misinterpreted, judged harshly, or pushed to the margins of their social circles. Bella's reflection highlighted how this fear did not just silence individuals; it created environments where vulnerability, curiosity, and growth were stifled. Bella and Derek both reflected that the high social cost of missteps—whether real or perceived—discouraged them from stepping into complex dialogues around race, and in Bella's reflection, one could see how that ultimately reinforced patterns of disengagement and self-censorship within leadership spaces.

Navigating Belonging Through Silence

One perceived consequence of addressing race and whiteness in a leadership role is the potential loss of social belonging within one's peer group. Katie, a highly politically motivated student, expressed a belief that conservative students like herself were particularly vulnerable to being silenced. Katie shared a picture of a leadership team of which she is the president (see Figure 6). She selected the picture because of her influence on the leadership team and the campus-wide significance of the team. When asked how race affected her leadership choices, she said that it did not; race was "just a box I check." She said that talking about race only divides groups, so leaders "shouldn't talk about it." She shared her frustration with her sorority and the university for "caving into the woke agenda and DEI nonsense." In multiple instances, she expressed a belief that her viewpoints were "silenced," "canceled," and "unwanted." She accused the media and universities of suppressing right-leaning voices. This perception led her to retreat into spaces she called "safe places"—groups of like-minded peers where she could share her opinions without fear of backlash.

Like others, Katie avoided public confrontation, not out of neutrality, but because she did not want to be "canceled" or subjected to ridicule.

Figure 6

Campus-wide Events Planning Team: "The Best Who Applied"

While Katie's views were the most dogmatic of the participants, her views were not isolated. Participants consistently expressed a fear of being canceled, so in response, to ensure a sense of belonging, they remained silent, avoided conversations about race and whiteness, and retreated to groups of people who they perceived shared their pre-existing viewpoints.

Discussion

By pursuing members' meaning (Emerson et al., 2011) in data analysis, the data from the 18 participants indicated that white student leaders experienced a persistent silence around race and whiteness within their leadership contexts. Additionally, their narratives revealed a fear of being canceled, which contributed to a gradual withdrawal into groups they perceived as ideologically or culturally homogeneous. The following sections explore the reasons behind students' choice of silence and examine the phenomenon of ethnocentric monoculturalism as a way of understanding the participants' responses.

Why Silence?

The participants reported a deafening silence around the topic of race in student leadership. Dugan and Henderson (2021) confirm this finding regarding leadership development programs and scholars. The silence begs the question, why?

I specifically asked many of the participants that question, "Why do you believe there is a silence surrounding race and whiteness among white student leaders?" The following is a verbatim response from one participant. It is formatted as a poetic transcription. Poetic transcriptions are

verbatim accounts; however, the words have been reformatted into poetic verse, highlighting repetition, contrasts, and themes to allow readers to see the uncommon insights in the common, making the invisible visible (Ellingson, 2011; Glesne, 1997).

It Threatens Them

So, when you ask
the question of
why…
why there's such a
silence
from student leaders
who are white?

Well,
if somebody were to say,
that you got all this,
you're so successful
because
you're
white.

Well,
        it threatens them.

I think the reason
why there's such
a discrepancy
between people that are
allies
or…
not allies
is because
        it
          threatens
                who
                    they
                            are.

At the very root
of their person,
        it threatens them.

This was just one participant's perspective from the study, and yet it reveals something hidden deep within the silence around race: fear. Heifetz et al. (2009) argued that people do not fear change but the loss that may come from the change. It is possible that the participant above was expressing

this fear of loss that could come from acknowledging the nuanced and complex influence that race has played in their experiences. Taylor and Manning-Ouellette (2022) adapted Vygotsky's zones of proximal development into a leadership learning model discussing the socio-emotional challenges that students face in leadership learning, specifically regarding socially just leadership development. The intersection of Heifetz et al. (2009) and Taylor and Manning-Ouellette (2022) is the realization that students from dominant narratives, specifically in this study white student leaders, will have an emotional obstacle to discussing race and leadership because the outcomes of the conversation could be perceived as a threat to their own self-worth or identity, a threat of loss.

For leadership educators, this emotional obstacle does not dictate silence but intentionality. Participants from this study consistently remarked that they wanted more spaces to have these conversations. Of the 18 participants, 12 stated that they wished they could talk about race and/or whiteness more. Silence is not a helpful response; rather, thoughtful, intentional dialogues are needed, and in those dialogues, discussion about the real emotions that accompany growing one's racial awareness is a necessity.

Ethnocentric Monoculturalism

Throughout the data, participants expressed that race was insignificant to them. Similar to McKinney's (2013) finding in which a white student stated, "I could tell my life story without mentioning my race" (p. 1), 16 of the 18 participants in this study mentioned that they did not regularly think about their race. Katie and Theia stated that they felt like being white was just a box they checked. Theia said, "It's just like a descriptor. It is what it is. It's just a box. It just hasn't impacted me positively or negatively…. It's just a box." This statement is an expression of the phenomenon known as ethnocentric monoculturalism. Sue (2004) defines ethnocentric monoculturalism as a system of belief or action that assumes that the dominant culture's norms are shared by all. In this study, ethnocentric monoculturalism presented itself as a white student leader not having to think about their race or the effects their race may have on their actions because they assumed that all people shared their experiences.

As an example of ethnocentric monoculturalism, Liz shared the picture in Figure 7. She loved her experience volunteering at a local food bank as a part of a leadership team. I asked about how race affected her experience, and she remarked, "It didn't. Like [there was] no racism. I didn't see anything that had to do with race."

Figure 7

Volunteering at the Food Bank

Interestingly, she equated race being significant with racism. Later in the focus group, Liz interrupted another student and said, "Wait a minute! My entire group volunteering was white, and the staff was mostly white too. And I think most of the people receiving the food were Black." It is important to acknowledge the challenges with Liz's account that conflates socioeconomic status with race. While poverty is unequally distributed, it is a faulty assumption that racially minoritized people are always impoverished. Yet, in Liz's reflection, she started to see how race may have influenced her experience. She concluded with the following reflection: "I'd never thought about [race] until now."

Her proclamation of never thinking about race was an epiphanic moment of recognizing ethnocentric monoculturalism—the unconscious assumption that her race was normative, that her experiences were shared by all instead of a culturally informed perspective. Thus, a primary challenge in leadership education is to get students who often express race as insignificant in their lives to recognize the significance it has for others. While Liz previously never thought about race as a leader, race was likely significant to some of the people that she led. The educational challenge lies in guiding a white student who views race as merely a checkbox to understand the deep and pervasive impact of race. Consequently, there is a need for further exploration concerning how to enhance student learning about ethnocentric monoculturalism and how to move beyond this often unconscious posture in leadership.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

The findings and discussion detailed in this article suggest a need for leadership educators, university professors and administrators, and student services practitioners to engage in meaningful programming and organic conversations with students in multiple contexts. The following sections will discuss the implications for future practice to create opportunities that intentionally navigate the socio-emotional barriers and ethnocentric monoculturalism skillfully. Furthermore, future research is needed to explore wise practices and changing contexts.

A Need for Empathetic Dialogues

Recalling the juxtaposed stories of Jake (see Figure 4) and Colin (see Figure 5), those vignettes inform future practice by highlighting the importance of empathy. Empathy is a teachable skill. Curricula, both inside and outside the classroom, can foster perspective-taking and create space for critical reflection, helping students recognize how systems of oppression have harmed people in their lives—even those they know and love. Thus, scholars and practitioners should explore how to navigate the challenges of today's polarized context through empathy development.

From this study, the data suggest that empathy was a primary entry point to critical reflections about the intersection of race and leadership. Jake, when confronted with how his fraternity's actions made some of the student marchers feel, engaged in perspective-taking, but only after discussions forced him to reflect. He put himself in the shoes of the marchers and saw the situation differently. He said in the interview, "I just didn't realize what we were doing. We didn't mean anything by it, but we screwed up." In the moment, he was not able to see how his actions were problematic because he was unaware of the racial dynamics of the group for which he was the leader. Then, through a moment of critical reflection, empathy created a pathway for him to see the situation from another's perspective. He concluded that portion of the interview by wishing he could go back and lead differently. Therefore, student services professionals, leadership educators, faculty, and administrators should consider spending more time and resources creating structures that facilitate critical reflection and empathy development. Students are having the experiences necessary to learn; however, do universities have structures in place to help students critically reflect on their experiences to create meaningful learning moments? Moreover, intentional dialogues can become one of those reflective constructs to help students make meaning of their experiences.

A Need for Further Research

While this study explored the experiences of these 18 participants at three different universities, the study also revealed a need for further research regarding the experience, attitudes, and beliefs of white student leaders in various university contexts. There is a need for studies in private schools, religious universities, community colleges, and other large public research institutions. Furthermore, the culture is ever-evolving, thus there is a need for future studies to explore the changes in how white student leaders experience the intersection of race and leadership. As laws and policies change at universities concerning race, the student experience changes too. Therefore, future research should explore how the changing contexts affect the worldviews and leadership postures of white student leaders.

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Finally, there is a need for future research that identifies wise practices for how to engage students in empathetic dialogues and navigate the socio-emotional barriers that many white student leaders face when entering discussions surrounding race. Research that prioritizes pragmatic skills for practitioners to engage in race-conscious leadership training will prove invaluable in developing student leaders prepared to lead in a global society.

Conclusion

This study offers important insights into how white student leaders navigate race, whiteness, and leadership within higher education. Participants' narratives revealed a persistent silence around race, shaped by racial unawareness and fear of being canceled; however, findings also revealed a desire for informed dialogues. These findings underscore the need for leadership development programs that more intentionally address racial identity and awareness. The research indicates that white student leaders are not aware of their race, a sign of ethnocentric monoculturalism, but through intentional conversations, empathy building through perspective-taking can prove an entry point to more inclusive leadership practices.

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Emotionally Intelligent Leadership: A Framework for Applied Learning in Campus Activities

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Campus activities offer students valuable applied learning experiences that enhance their engagement and sense of belonging on campus and act as catalysts for leadership development. The Emotionally Intelligent Leadership (EIL) model offers a structured framework for fostering leadership development in campus activities by emphasizing self-awareness, social awareness, and environmental awareness. With three broad facets and 19 tangible capacities, EIL equips students with skills such as emotional self-control, teamwork, conflict management, and adaptability, which are essential for engaging in leadership in campus activities contexts. Campus activities professionals play an important role in shaping these experiences, providing intentional support, training, and reflection opportunities to maximize student learning. By embedding EIL principles into their work with students, campus activities professionals can cultivate leadership development, strengthen student organizations, and prepare students for future leadership experiences. The author provides strategies for leveraging EIL in campus activities to enhance student leadership growth and development.

Introduction

Researchers have long recognized that learning opportunities in college exist beyond the classroom. There are ample opportunities for students to gain experiences outside the classroom, such as joining a student organization, having a mentor, engaging in community service, holding an on-campus job, or attending campus events. Together these experiences, along with many others, contribute to what is recognized on college campuses as *campus activities.* Campus activities provide opportunities to build a sense of community that fosters student engagement and cultivates a sense of connection and belonging (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2023; Huston, 2022; National Association for Campus Activities [NACA], 2025). Further, campus activities create opportunities for learning and growth across various domains including leadership development.

Leadership development involves expanding an individual's capacity to participate in leadership roles and processes across different contexts (Day et al., 2009; Komives et al., 2005; Owen, 2020). Emphasizing aspects such as identity, motivation, readiness to lead, values, and needs, leadership development addresses both intrapersonal and human dimensions of learning (Guthrie & Jenkins,

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In this manuscript I first discuss campus activities as applied learning experiences and identify key opportunities for student learning through engaging in campus activities. I next introduce the Emotionally Intelligent Leadership (EIL) model as an applied leadership model that can help support students' learning through engaging in campus activities. I conclude by providing specific applications and strategies for using EIL as a framework to support students' growth and development and to support the health and strength of student organizations and teams.

Campus Activities as Applied Learning

As educators increasingly emphasize student learning in higher education, they must consider how co-curricular experiences contribute to students' growth and development. Student affairs educators are uniquely situated to shape environments and opportunities that support this process. Applied learning, which has received increasing attention, involves the process through which students develop an understanding and mindset that enable them to connect and apply new knowledge across different contexts and situations within and beyond college (Association of American Colleges & Universities [AAC&U], 2018). Applied learning is not only a critical outcome of higher education, but also a cornerstone of career readiness, as it enables students to develop practical skills, gain real-world experience, and build relationships and networks that will benefit students during college and in their post-college lives and careers.

Higher education provides ample opportunities for applied learning in and out of the formal classroom. The wide range of applied learning opportunities falls into three main categories: (a) curricular applied learning, (b) cocurricular applied learning, and (c) career applied learning (Jach & Trolian, 2019). Cocurricular applied learning includes "service or community-based learning, cocurricular involvement, leadership experiences, and peer learning" (Jach & Trolian, 2019, p. 8). Depending on the nature of one's involvement, there are opportunities for each form of applied learning through campus activities.

The metaphor of a "practice field" is often used to describe the co-curricular context of colleges and universities. Higher education institutions provide a space to "practice" leadership by offering many opportunities to get involved and engage in groups and communities. Through engaging in campus activities, students try out new strategies, skills, or roles – and, just as an athlete does, enhance their effectiveness and hone their skills (Haber-Curran, 2019). Cocurricular opportunities allow students to engage with others and acquire new knowledge in an environment that typically involves fewer risks and consequences than in the "real world" (Mainella, 2017). These applied, hands-on experiences allow students to gain new experiences, insights, and learning that prepare them for future challenges and experiences.

Continuing with the metaphor of a practice field, just like the role of a coach for athletes, student affairs educators play a critical role in supporting students in their development as they make meaning of their experiences. Student affairs educators can provide the scaffolding, structure, and environments for students to reflect, set goals, and synthesize their learning (Haber-Curran, 2019). They play a crucial role in helping students learn from their experiences about (a) themselves as

intentional leadership development of college students involved on campus and engaged in campus activities (e.g., Social Change Model of Leadership Development, Relational Leadership Model, Servant Leadership). Among those models, Emotionally Intelligent Leadership is a framework that explicitly centers the realms of self, others, and the larger context inherent in campus activities experiences (Shankman et al., 2015a).

Emotionally Intelligent Leadership

First introduced in 2008, Emotionally Intelligent Leadership (EIL) is a model that emphasizes the interplay between self-awareness, social awareness, and environmental awareness in leadership (Shankman et al., 2015a). Informed by Boyer's (1990) scholarship of integration, EIL pulls together concepts of contemporary, process-oriented leadership with key tenets of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence encompasses an awareness dimension (self-awareness and social-awareness) and a behavioral dimension (managing self and managing relationships with others; Goleman, 2000).

Shankman et al. (2015a) argue "emotional intelligence is a core function for effective leadership" (p. 9). The EIL model emphasizes the "importance of emotional intelligence in human interaction, leadership processes, and the dynamic and interdependent relationship between the individual, group, and context in a leadership process" (Haber-Curran & Williamson, 2024, p. 26). Designed to be accessible to college students, the model provides a practical and applied framework for leadership development.

At the core of EIL are three interconnected facets:

> *Consciousness of self*: Demonstrating emotionally intelligent leadership involves awareness of one's abilities, emotions, and perceptions. [It] is about prioritizing the inner work of reflection and introspection and appreciating that self-awareness is a continual process.
>
> *Consciousness of others*: Demonstrating emotionally intelligent leadership involves awareness of the abilities, emotions, and perceptions of others. [It] is about intentionally working with and influencing individuals and groups to bring about positive change.
>
> *Consciousness of context*: Demonstrating emotionally intelligent leadership involves awareness of the setting and situation. [It] is about paying attention to how environmental factors and internal group dynamics affect the process of leadership. (Shankman et al., 2015a, p. 10)

An individual's leadership effectiveness depends on their awareness of the three facets. When one or more facets are underdeveloped, one's ability to effectively lead may be weakened. Conversely, with awareness across all three facets, individuals can more intentionally and thoughtfully engage in leadership (Shankman et al., 2015a).

The model includes 19 tangible and actionable capacities that operationalize EIL and reflect the three facets in practice. The three facets and 19 capacities "equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and attitudes" to engage in EIL (Shankman et al., 2015a, p. 9). Although EI is foundational to the model and facets, the capacities in which EI is most evident are *emotional self-*

EIL is particularly relevant in campus activities settings where there are opportunities to develop leadership capacities, work collaboratively with others, and navigate group dynamics and the larger systems in which one is leading. By developing EIL capacities, students can enhance their ability to lead in various settings, from student government and student organizations to intramural sports and service projects – and to leadership opportunities outside of the college environment. Table 1 includes the 19 capacities and a brief description of each capacity.

Table 1: 19 Capacities EIL Capacities

Consciousness of Self Capacities
Emotional self-perception: Identifying emotions and their impact on behavior
Emotional self-control: Consciously moderating emotions
Authenticity: Being transparent and trustworthy
Healthy self-esteem: Having a balanced sense of self
Flexibility: Being open and adaptive to change
Optimism: Having a positive outlook
Initiative: Taking action
Achievement: Striving for excellence
Consciousness of Others Capacities
Displaying empathy: Being emotionally in tune with others
Inspiring others: Energizing individuals and groups
Coaching others: Enhancing the skills and abilities of others
Capitalizing on difference: Benefiting from multiple perspectives
Developing relationships: Building a network of trusting relationships
Building teams: Working with others to accomplish a shared purpose
Demonstrating citizenship: Fulfilling responsibilities to the group
Managing conflict: Identifying and resolving conflict
Facilitating change: Working toward new directions
Consciousness of Context Capacities
Analyzing the group: Interpreting group dynamics
Assessing the environment: Interpreting external forces and trends

Source: Adapted from Shankman et al., 2015a

The 3 facets and 19 capacities provide a structured yet flexible approach to leadership. Although each capacity brings value to various contexts, it is neither necessary nor realistic for individuals to excel in all 19 capacities. Instead, Shankman et al. (2015a) promote developing a well-rounded and adaptable skill set and a greater awareness of when and how to demonstrate different capacities based on the situation. Challenges can arise when capacities are underutilized, misapplied, or even overutilized. This reflects the complexity of leadership and groups and

A key premise of EIL is leadership is not confined to a leadership role but rather is a process that occurs through interactions among individuals, groups, and the larger environment. Further, EIL can be learned and developed with time, practice, and effort, and the college environment provides ample and rich opportunities and spaces to do this.

Strategies and Applications for Campus Activities Professionals

Although campus activities offerings provide valuable opportunities for students to engage, practice, and learn, meaningful growth and applied learning do not happen automatically for students. Campus activities professionals play a critical role in shaping students' experiences by providing the structure, intentionality, and guidance necessary to help students translate their involvement into deeper learning. Simply participating in campus activities does not guarantee transformative leadership development outcomes—educators must deliberately design environments that foster reflection, skill development, and application. This requires an intentional approach that involves "reflectively and deliberately employing a set of strategies to produce desired outcomes" and maximizing student learning (Harper, 2011, p. 288).

Campus activities professionals are uniquely situated to educate students outside the classroom through various co-curricular experiences. They are in a role in which they can shape environments, create experiences, provide support and guidance, and build ongoing relationships with students. This section includes strategies for campus activities professionals to intentionally approach their roles to center student learning and development, specifically through the framework of EIL. I provide examples of how EIL capacities can be demonstrated in campus activities experiences. I then discuss how EIL can provide a framework for advising and coaching, training and development, supporting the health of student organizations, and supporting and developing teams.

EIL in a Campus Activities Context

Designed to be applicable for college students engaging in leadership on a college campus, the 19 EIL capacities can each be directly tied to campus activities experiences. Table 2 provides examples of EIL capacities that can be demonstrated and/or developed across various campus activities experiences.

Table 2: EIL Capacities and Examples Relevant to Campus Activities

Capacity	Example
Emotional self-perception	• Recognizing stress before a big event and seeking support. • Reflecting on your feelings after not being selected for a leadership position in the group and discussing these feelings with a trusted friend or advisor.

Emotional self-control	● Staying calm during a heated debate in a student government meeting. ● Remaining composed when facing technical issues while setting up an event.
Authenticity	● Being honest about personal challenges when mentoring a new student. ● Asking for help when you realize that you cannot do something on your own.
Healthy self-esteem	● Sharing your strengths and advocating for yourself when applying for a leadership role. ● Accepting constructive feedback after an event and using the feedback to improve.
Flexibility	● Adapting plans when an event is disrupted by bad weather. ● Stepping in to take on a group member's role when they are absent.
Optimism	● Encouraging a team after a fundraising event falls short of its goal. ● Highlighting the positive outcomes of an event that was poorly attended in order to boost group morale.
Initiative	● Partnering with the counseling center to implement a new destress event during finals week. ● Proposing a new mentoring program for incoming members of the organization.
Achievement	● Setting and reaching a goal of increasing membership of the organization by 20%. ● Completing the required capstone project to earn a leadership certificate.
Displaying empathy	● Listening to a peer's concerns about their ability to manage multiple responsibilities. ● Checking in on a group member when you notice that they are more reserved and quite than usual.
Inspiring others	● Motivating a team to work hard on a campus-wide sustainability project. ● Recognizing and celebrating the group's efforts and hard work before kicking off a big event.
Coaching others	● Guiding new club members on how to plan and implement successful events. ● Helping new resident assistants get ready to welcome to their new residents by providing guidance and advice for a smooth process.

Advising and Coaching

EIL is a helpful framework for advising and coaching students involved in campus activities, whether they hold leadership positions, serve on committees, or participate in student organizations. Educators can apply the model explicitly to guide goal setting, reflection, and feedback, or implicitly by integrating its principles into ongoing mentorship and advising.

When using EIL explicitly, educators can introduce the model to students as a developmental tool, helping them assess their leadership strengths and areas for growth. Students can use the model as a framework for individual reflection or journaling, discussion with advisors or peers, or goal setting. The *Emotionally Intelligent Leadership for Students: Inventory* is a self-assessment instrument that can help students and educators identify strengths and opportunities for growth (Shankman et al., 2015b).

Students' self-assessment can help them gain greater awareness and guide their ongoing leadership development. Coaching conversations can be structured around the three broader EIL facets (self, others, and context), allowing students to explore their leadership identity and impact. The individual EIL capacities can also help students hone more specific skills, such as initiative, emotional self-control, or conflict management. By identifying specific EIL capacities for growth, educators help students establish intentional goals and engage in a continuous cycle of reflection, deliberate practice, observation, and feedback.

Training and Development

Campus activities educators can use EIL as a foundation and guiding framework for training and development, offering structured learning experiences that support students' leadership development. The model's flexibility allows for various training formats such as:

- Workshops and In-services: Monthly or quarterly sessions can focus on introducing and practicing EIL capacities, such as building relationships, inspiring others, or adaptability.
- Retreats and Leadership Conferences: EIL can serve as a guiding curriculum for intensive, immersive experiences, allowing students to engage deeply with the model and apply it to situations they are experiencing through their campus involvement.
- Ongoing Leadership Development Programs: Multi-session programs can progressively introduce EIL facets and capacities, encouraging students to apply their learning over time. For example, a series of programs could begin with a unit on *self,* then units on *others* and *context.* Alternatively, mini-EIL tidbits or opportunities for reflection could be incorporated into weekly meetings.

Using EIL as a framework, educators can create intentional learning opportunities that help students connect their campus involvement experiences to broader leadership development goals.

Supporting the Health of Student Organizations

Student organizations frequently undergo transitions, whether due to leadership turnover, shifts in priorities, or external challenges. EIL provides a structured approach to navigate change for student leaders and their advisors. At the outset of a change process, educators can help student

leaders leverage capacities such as initiative, achievement, and building teams to foster engagement and buy-in from their peers. During times of uncertainty or resistance, guiding students to develop optimism, conflict management, and skills to diagnose group dynamics can be valuable to the individual students and the group. Helping students focus on the three facets of EIL and relevant capacities can, in turn, help student organizations better manage transitions and sustain momentum.

Supporting and Developing Teams

Campus activities offerings often encompass student teams, from event planning committees to executive boards of student organizations. EIL offers a valuable framework for enhancing team dynamics and performance. Educators can facilitate team development by using EIL to:

- Guide visioning discussions about shared leadership values and team priorities.
- Support goal setting and action planning based on EIL capacities.
- Encourage ongoing reflection and evaluation to reinforce learning and improve team performance.
- Have students assess their EIL strengths and areas of growth and/or administer the *Emotionally Intelligent Leadership for Students: Inventory* (Shankman et al., 2015b) to help team members assess their collective strengths and areas for growth.

By grounding team development in EIL, campus activities educators can empower students to take ownership of the team, work collaboratively, engage thoughtfully in the leadership process, and build more effective and cohesive student-led initiatives.

Conclusion

By integrating the EIL model into campus activities programs, educators can create meaningful opportunities for students to develop self-awareness, foster relationships, and navigate the complexities of group dynamics. EIL provides a structured yet flexible framework to support students as they navigate their collegiate experience and prepare for future leadership roles and experiences. Embedding EIL principles into the applied learning experience of campus activities enables students' experiences to extend beyond participation to become meaningful opportunities for leadership, personal development, career readiness, and lifelong learning. Further, EIL provides a valuable framework to strengthen student programs, organizations, and teams. By intentionally focusing their work and centering student learning through applied experiences, campus activities professionals enrich students' co-curricular experiences and fulfill the broader mission of higher education—cultivating lifelong learners who can apply their knowledge and skills to make a meaningful impact in their communities and beyond.

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JCAPS

Campus Environmental Factors That Influence Black Doctoral Student Leadership Development

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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

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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 Microagressions
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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The RISE Model: A New Model Shaping College Student Leadership Learning

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Effective student leadership development in higher education requires a strong theoretical foundation to cultivate competent, empathetic, and adaptive leaders. The newly developed RISE model—relationships, identity, skills, and efficacy—offers a structured, theory-based approach to leadership growth. The authors provide examples of the student-centered approach to developing the RISE model and how the leadership learning domains interact to create dynamic leadership growth. By prioritizing relationships, the model addresses gaps in empathy, inclusivity, and the ability to lead diverse teams. The authors argue that, by implementing the RISE model as a roadmap, student leadership development becomes a clearer, more impactful process, shifting leadership from an abstract concept to a structured, meaningful journey.

Introduction

One day, a student leading one of the largest student organizations on campus sat down with one of the authors to talk about her experience leading this influential group. She shared joys and frustrations. She had successfully led a large group of student leaders to execute dozens of community and campus events. To those on the outside, it seemed like a huge success, and she was proud of her work. Yet, she still struggled with a central issue, saying, "Am I really a better leader after this experience? I know I did a lot, but I am not sure what I learned." As authors, we fear that this is a common refrain among student leaders in higher education. They have led organizations, meetings, tasks, events, philanthropies, fraternities, sororities, and more. However, are they better leaders, or are they just maintaining the status quo? What have they learned about leadership from their college experience?

In 2021, the authors' university launched a leadership institute to support the development of student leaders. Early in its implementation, it became clear that while students were eager to become "better leaders," the term itself lacked definition. The desire for growth was strong, but without a shared understanding of what "better" and "leader" meant, there was no clear target to guide their development. Therefore, the institute's staff began a long process of defining that target

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so that students had a clear picture of how to develop as leaders. The result was the RISE model, a new theory-based student leadership development model.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to share the developmental process undertaken by a university leadership institute in designing a comprehensive model for leadership development, and second, to introduce the RISE model as a dynamic and practical tool that supports student leaders in deepening their leadership practice. The RISE model creates a process that translates leadership development from an abstract concept to a structured, meaningful journey. By outlining both the origins and applications of the model, this article aims to contribute to the broader conversation on effective strategies for cultivating contextually and theoretically grounded leadership learning in higher education settings.

A Theory-Based Design Process

The context for the development of the RISE model was a large public land-grant university in the Mid-South. The university recently founded a centralized leadership development institute with the mission of creating access to leadership education for all students and furthering the field of leadership studies.

When developing leadership learning content, Taylor et al. (2025) emphasized a student-centered approach. Based in this framework, content creation was an iterative process informed by feedback from hundreds of student leadership learners and the institute staff. One of the institute staff's early experiences with students, similar to the experience shared in the introduction, helped clarify a need among leadership learners. While teaching a leadership class of about 125 first-year students, one of the authors asked the seemingly innocuous question, "How can we become better leaders?" There were a variety of answers, and class continued. At the conclusion of the class, a group of six students approached the instructor and asked for the right answer to the question. A discussion ensued, and the students expressed that they were uncertain how to become better leaders. They wanted to learn, but they did not know how to orient their growth. One shared, "I know all these new leadership theories from this class, but I don't know how to put it all together. I just feel overwhelmed and paralyzed by how complicated leadership is."

The class taught the social change model (Komives & Wagner, 1994) and Northouse's (2021) leadership anthology to familiarize students with a range of leadership theories, and other programs focused on adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) to help student leaders tackle adaptive challenges. However, students still felt overwhelmed by the complexity of leadership without specific direction, prompting an iterative process of content development that highlighted the need for a clear model to structure their growth. Similarly, the authors spoke with hundreds of students who were leading campus activities such as homecoming, student government, fraternities and sororities, student activities boards, and more, and the students echoed a similar refrain. *How do we actually become better leaders?*

Developing a New Leadership Learning Model

When the institute first launched, staff taught various leadership theories and frameworks. Over time, it became clear that students responded most to concepts of identity and personal growth. As Komives et al. (1998) noted, college students are at a critical stage for identity development. Therefore, staff started primarily teaching the leadership competencies of identity, capacity, and efficacy (Guthrie et al., 2021). While teaching this framework, the staff considered how it could extend and contextualize prior leadership work for the students they were serving, allowing content to be shaped by both the learner and the environment.

For example, during a campus activities retreat designed to build community for first-year undergraduate students, one returning student serving as a peer mentor reflected that they quickly judged a quieter first-year student as "uninterested." However, after a one-on-one conversation, the mentor learned that the student was navigating extreme anxiety with the transition to college while knowing they would also need to work a significant number of hours per week to support their family back home. The peer mentor later shared that this moment shifted their perspective: "I realized I had been equating leadership with being in front and visible. But leadership can also look like quiet resilience." This experience reminded both students—and the staff facilitating the retreat—that leadership development must be grounded in empathy and relational awareness. Building authentic relationships, what some models may frame as interpersonal skills (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Komives et al., 1998) and others as relational competencies (Komives et al., 1998; Seemiller, 2013), is central to supporting leadership growth.

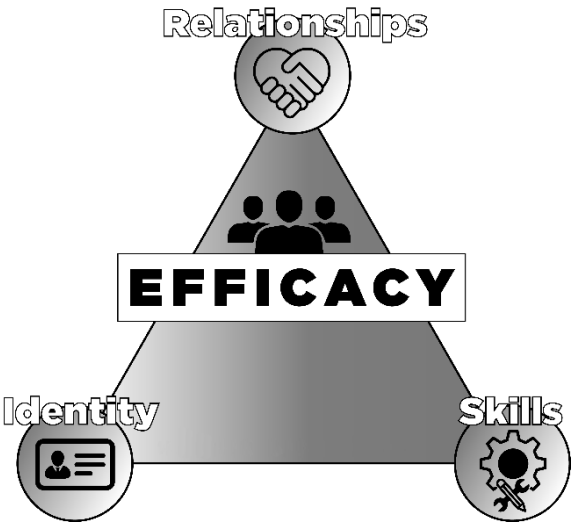
This one experience served as a microcosm of the greater challenge: leadership learners must understand how to build and sustain healthy relationships to lead effectively. Therefore, the RISE model insists that leadership growth starts with the skill of building healthy relationships. Scholars and practitioners alike emphasize the importance of relationships in leadership (Drath et al., 2008; Keyton et al., 2002; Komives et al., 1998). Furthermore, the ILA (2021) *General Principles for Leadership Programs* and the LCD framework (Taylor et al., 2025) highlight the importance of knowing the leadership learner and the context when developing leadership content. Thus, through ongoing analysis and reflection of this and similar experiences, the leadership staff developed the RISE model to complement and extend existing approaches to guide leadership learners. Recognizing that no singular leadership theory, framework, or model can meet every leadership learner's needs in every context, the RISE model offers a path to leadership development that helps students visualize leadership growth and answer the question of how they can become better leaders in their context.

The RISE Model

Figure 1 illustrates the RISE model, which integrates four critical areas for leadership development: relationships, identity, skills, and efficacy. These four domains are integral to the leadership process and to personal leader development. The following sections will detail the four leadership learning domains and depict how they organically interact with each other.

Figure 1

The Rise Model



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The RISE model has gone through several iterations throughout the years. One day, during a capstone leadership course, an instructor was explaining the model when a student raised their hand and asked, "Why do you keep calling it the *IRS* model?" At the time, identity sat at the top of the triangle, and efficacy was a lesser part. The instructor admitted that "IRS" was not the most inspiring name for a leadership model.

Without missing a beat, the student suggested, "Why don't you call it the RISE model? Just put relationships at the top. You always tell us that relationships are the most important part of leadership, so it should be on top anyway." And with that simple yet insightful suggestion, the RISE model was born.

The authors designed the RISE model by drawing on both empirical work and practitioner experience to identify the concepts most essential for leadership development in a collegiate context. Relationships were included as a foundational element due to extensive scholarship highlighting the significance of relational processes for effective leadership (Drath et al., 2008; Keyton et al., 2002; Komives et al., 1998). Building and sustaining authentic relationships enables leaders to foster trust, navigate group dynamics, and create collaborative environments. Identity was incorporated to reflect decades of research indicating the significance of a leader's identity and leadership identity development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Komives et al., 2006; Owen 2023). Skills were selected as the actionable, observable capacities that allow students to translate their identity and relational understanding into practice, encompassing a range of interpersonal and strategic abilities that contribute to leadership. These are the leadership skills often discussed in specific contexts like business leadership, community leadership, and situational leadership theory. Finally, efficacy is what drives leadership development (Guthrie et al., 2021). It was incorporated into the model because of its foundational role in whether a person takes initiative to lead and in their posture toward leadership.

Relationships

The leadership learning domain of relationships asserts that effective leadership is inherently relational. As detailed earlier through multiple vignettes, student experiences and reflections consistently led to the inclusion and emphasis of relationships as a leadership learning domain. Drath et al. (2008) and Seemiller (2013) emphasized the importance of relationships in leadership, highlighting that successful leaders must navigate diverse social dynamics, demonstrate empathy, and engage inclusively with others. Komives et al. (1998) developed the relational leadership model (RLM), which included inclusivity, empowerment, purposefulness, ethical practice, and process orientation as keys to building and maintaining successful leadership relationships. Leadership books often geared toward the business world have long emphasized the importance of relationships (Brown, 2018; Carnegie, 1936; Cialdini, 2021; Covey, 1989; Sinek, 2014).

Relationships are at the heart of effective leadership. Trent (2016) calls for leadership that is heart-led, fueled by empathy and relationships. Arguing from a critical theory perspective, Trent (2016) asserted that it is only through this framing of leadership that leaders will act ethically and make decisions that uplift all, especially the historically marginalized and overlooked. Guthrie et al. (2021) call for leadership learners to improve emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills as a part of capacity building. However, leadership learners still widely struggle with relational aspects of leadership, including empathy, inclusive practices, and cross-cultural awareness. These gaps hinder and sometimes curtail one's ability to lead effectively, especially in diverse, global communities.

Therefore, the RISE model places a strong emphasis on relationships, particularly in the context of building trust and empathy and fostering inclusive leadership practices. The relationships domain also includes networking, but rather than emphasizing what the leader can extract from their network for personal gain, the focus is on cultivating healthy relationships that value people. The model also emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant relationship-building, ensuring that students develop the skills and insights necessary to lead in increasingly global and diverse environments.

The Sub-domains of Relational Leadership and Application to Campus Activities

As Table 1 outlines, there are three sub-domains for developing healthy and strong leadership relationships: building influence, demonstrating empathy, and developing emotional intelligence.

Table 1

Relational Leadership Learning Sub-domains

Relationships	
Influence	Influence affords one the opportunities to lead without a title or position. Influence is invaluable to leaders; it is the relational power to make a difference and affect change. Teaching students how to

	gain and maintain influence is a key component of leadership learning.
Empathy	Empathy is the key to ethical leadership that involves making decisions with compassion and understanding. Empathy development—often through developing perspective taking—is a critical pathway to developing influence and leading diverse groups of people.
Emotional Intelligence	Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) is essential to relational leadership, as it enables leaders to understand, manage, and connect with the emotions of themselves and others. By fostering self-awareness and emotional regulation, emotionally intelligent leaders can build collaborative relationships that inspire trust, collaboration, and positive change in diverse environments.

For leadership learners involved in campus activities, understanding that one of their first steps to successful leadership is building positive relationships with university staff, their leadership teams, and the people they are leading is an invaluable reframing. If students can gain relational influence, they can develop the trust necessary to achieve their organizational goals or lead a successful student program. Moreover, guiding student leaders to recognize that their leadership growth depends on building healthy relationships helps focus their campus activities on cultivating these connections. Altogether, by building influence, demonstrating empathy, and developing emotional intelligence, leadership learners will develop the competency of relational leadership, a fundamental aspect of highly effective leadership.

Identity

Identity serves as another fundamental leadership learning domain. According to Guthrie et al. (2021), leadership is rooted in self-awareness, which requires understanding the intersections of one's social identities and how they shape values, biases, lived experiences, and worldviews. In a student leadership course, all the Black students—just 3% of the class—requested the opportunity to present for Black History Month. Their powerful presentation highlighted the history of Black leaders and the distinct leadership approaches often found within the Black community. However, during the question-and-answer time of the presentation, one student asked, "Why are we even talking about this? This isn't a history class." This moment highlighted the need for students to learn about the role of identity in leadership. The student asking the question likely had not considered how their identity, or the identity of their classmates, shaped their leadership experiences and development.

Developing a strong sense of self involves navigating the delicate balance between personal identity and societal influences. Fuselier and Beatty (2023) argue that for meaningful leadership identity development to occur, leadership educators must give learners the freedom to deconstruct and reconstruct their social identities. This process is especially crucial in light of historical leadership norms that have excluded marginalized identities. Expanding identity-centered leadership frameworks to encompass race, gender, sexual orientation, neurodivergence, ability status, and

other historically marginalized identities fosters a more inclusive and equitable leadership landscape. The interconnectedness of these identities is particularly significant for marginalized leaders as they navigate compounded experiences of oppression (Dugan, 2017).

Leadership identity is an individual's superpower, their unique voice in the world. In some contexts, student leadership learners have been forced to hide, mask, or guard their full identities; however, studies show that the most effective leaders and the healthiest leadership cultures create space for all to lean into their full identities (Fuselier & Beatty, 2023). For leadership learners, embracing their full identity, including cultural background, is essential to leading authentically. Nevertheless, the authors recognize that, tragically, there are spaces in the world in which this ideal is not a reality. In these spaces, it is crucial for leadership educators and those with influence to assume the risks and responsibility of creating brave spaces and safe environments where individuals can fully embrace and lean into their identities.

The Sub-domains of Identity in Leadership and Application to Campus Activities

The RISE model highlights the centrality of identity in leadership development, emphasizing that leaders must engage in critical reflection (Volpe White et al., 2019) and identity exploration to cultivate authenticity and build trust. Table 2 details the three sub-domains that comprise identity in the RISE model.

Table 2

Identity Leadership Learning Sub-domains

Identity	
Personality	An individual's personality is deeply intertwined with their social identities and lived experiences, shaping how they engage with the world and approach leadership. Through self-reflection and an awareness of how identity and personality shape leadership, individuals can develop a more authentic and effective leadership approach.
Social Identity	Social identities—such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background—interact with one's personality to influence communication styles, decision-making processes, and emotional expression. These intersections emphasize that leadership is not a one-size-fits-all formula but a dynamic, evolving journey. By exploring one's social identities, the learner develops a clearer understanding of values, purpose, and motivations, positioning one to lead with integrity and establish meaningful relationships across diverse communities.
Self-Awareness	Self-awareness is a strategic goal of leadership development, serving as the foundation that connects personality, social identities, and leadership efficacy. Without self-awareness, leaders may struggle to make informed decisions, inspire others, and create inclusive spaces. While these traits, experiences, and perspectives influence one's leadership approach—an

	understanding of self empowers learners to foster inclusive spaces where they and the ones they lead can thrive.

Students involved in campus activities have a valuable chance to explore how identity shapes leadership. Many student organizations include an identity-based bond—like the Native American Student Association or LGBTQ+ and Allies. These groups and more offer incredible opportunities for leadership development, but students often do not realize how their own identities influence how they lead. For example, a group frustrated by low engagement from the broader campus community may, with staff support, reflect on how their leadership team shares the same social identities and networks. Using the RISE model, campus activities professionals can help students develop self-awareness, recognize the impact of identity, and make more inclusive leadership decisions. When students acknowledge and integrate their unique lived experiences into their leadership practice, they create inclusive environments that value diverse perspectives and foster belonging. This self-awareness directly influences how leaders engage with others and navigate complex environments. Overall, the intersection of personality, social identities, and self-awareness forms the core of authentic leadership; therefore, it is critical for leadership learners to lean into their identities and learn to create space for other identities as well.

Skills

The third leadership learning domain of the RISE model focuses on skills, which are context-specific and vary depending on the leadership challenges at hand. From listening to hundreds of student leadership stories a semester, the staff noted the range of skills needed, from public speaking and conflict resolution to behind-the-scenes tasks such as organization and coalition building. To best prepare students, the RISE model emphasizes learning agility—the ability to learn from experiences—which enables individuals to adapt to diverse leadership situations. While it is impossible to teach every leadership skill to every student, focusing on learning agility allows for context-driven, individualized leadership development.

Rather than prescribing a static list of competencies, the RISE model invites students to engage in adaptive skill-building—where the emphasis shifts from mastering discrete tasks to understanding how, when, and why to apply particular skills in complex and evolving situations. One student, for example, entered their leadership program with strong public speaking skills and a commanding presence, often taking the lead in group projects. However, when placed in a role that required behind-the-scenes coordination and team collaboration, they initially struggled. Through intentional reflection and guided mentorship, the student began developing new skills in logistical planning, active listening, and group facilitation—areas previously outside their comfort zone. In their end-of-year reflection, they shared, "I used to think being a leader meant being the loudest voice. Now I understand that leading also means stepping back, organizing the details, and helping others shine." This shift exemplifies the RISE model's emphasis on learning agility—developing the capacity to assess the needs of a given moment and apply the right blend of interpersonal and technical skills accordingly. In this way, the skills domain becomes less about accumulation and more about integration—equipping students to lead with intentionality, humility, and adaptability across diverse leadership contexts.

Application to Campus Activities

For leadership learners involved in campus activities, the skills section of the RISE model gives invaluable language to students, helping them translate their campus activity experience to interviews, future careers, or future campus activities. A student leader utilizing the RISE model can articulate that one leadership experience helped them develop the skill of goal setting, which they can use in their next leadership opportunity. Thus, by creating a context-based structure to the skills domain, students can meaningfully connect what they have done with what they have learned, making their leadership growth both visible and transferable. The RISE model, then, becomes a bridge between experience and articulation, deepening both reflection and readiness.

Efficacy

The final leadership learning domain focuses on efficacy. Leadership self-efficacy is the belief or confidence in one's ability to lead successfully. Guthrie et al. (2021) suggest that leadership efficacy is developed through experience, reflection, and engagement in leadership activities that reinforce a sense of competence. The RISE model emphasizes that leadership efficacy grows when students actively engage in leadership learning in the domains of relationships, identity, and context-specific leadership skills. As students refine their leadership skills and engage in real-world leadership experiences, their self-efficacy increases, creating the confidence to face challenges and adapt to changing environments with resilience and adaptability. For leadership educators, the RISE model stresses the significance of focusing on developing leadership self-efficacy, empowering students to lead with confidence, which will enhance leadership learning outcomes.

Application to Campus Activities

Despite the importance of developing leadership self-efficacy, many student leaders—particularly those from historically marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds—grapple with impostor syndrome, which can significantly hinder their perceived ability to lead. Impostor syndrome refers to the internalized belief that one's accomplishments are the result of luck or deception rather than competence or capability (Clance & Imes, 1978; Owen et. al., 2023). Even when students possess the skills and experiences that qualify them as leaders, they may struggle to internalize their success, often feeling as though they do not belong in leadership spaces.

Owen et al. (2023) emphasize that traditional leadership spaces often reflect dominant cultural norms, which can make students—particularly women and those with intersecting marginalized identities—feel invisible or undervalued. When students do not see themselves reflected in leadership narratives, or when their ways of leading are not affirmed, impostor feelings can become more deeply rooted. One student, for example, shared during a reflection activity: "I look around the room and think, how did I even get here? Everyone else seems so sure of themselves. I keep waiting for someone to realize I don't actually belong." Though this student had been selected for multiple formal leadership roles, their internal narrative undermined their confidence and willingness to engage fully. This psychological barrier can limit participation, reduce risk-taking,

and stifle growth in leadership roles. For leadership educators, recognizing and addressing impostor syndrome is crucial; cultivating affirming environments, promoting mentorship, and creating opportunities for students to reflect on their strengths can help mitigate these feelings and reinforce a healthier, more accurate sense of self-efficacy.

In contrast to impostor syndrome, some students may experience the Dunning-Kruger effect, a cognitive bias in which individuals with limited knowledge or skill overestimate their competence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Within leadership development, this can manifest as students confidently taking on leadership roles without a full understanding of the relational or contextual complexities involved. While confidence is a key component of leadership efficacy, overconfidence without corresponding competence can hinder growth and collaboration. Leadership educators must therefore balance efforts to build self-efficacy with strategies that promote self-awareness and accurate self-assessment, encouraging both humility and a commitment to ongoing learning.

The Organic Nature of RISE

Efficacy serves as the driving force behind growth in relationships, identity, and contextual skills within the RISE model, creating a cycle of leadership development fueled by confidence and action. When students believe in their ability to lead (efficacy), they take initiative, seek opportunities, and engage more deeply in leadership experiences. This engagement strengthens their relational leadership abilities by allowing them to work with new people, build empathy and trust, and develop influence. It deepens their identity by expanding their self-awareness, exposing them to new ways of understanding themselves, and connecting them with people with similar and diverse identities. Additionally, it enhances their contextual skills by fostering adaptability, sharpening strategic thinking, and increasing their learning agility through exposure to new experiences. Therefore, as a leadership learner's relational ability, identity, and contextual leadership skills grow, so does their efficacy, creating a dynamic interaction where confidence fuels competence, and competence, in turn, reinforces confidence.

RISE in Action

The RISE model is not a linear process but an interconnected and repetitive system that shapes one's leadership development. As learners engage with the model, they undergo transformational and lasting growth—not only deepening their understanding of leadership theory but also translating that knowledge into practice that builds confidence, sharpens effectiveness, and amplifies their impact in real-world contexts.

One student entered a leadership scholarship program unsure if she truly belonged in a space full of confident, high-achieving peers. She often hesitated to speak up, feeling that her leadership story did not "measure up" to those with long resumes and polished speaking skills. However, through the RISE model, especially the identity and relationships learning domains, she began to recognize that her strength came from lived experience—growing up as the eldest in a multigenerational household, advocating for herself as a first-generation college student, and navigating cultural intersections every day. With support from her student mentor and consistent reflection in small

group settings, her sense of efficacy flourished. By the end of the year, she was mentoring others—confidently owning her voice and showing peers that leadership was not about fitting a mold but showing up authentically and making others feel seen.

Another student, initially celebrated for his extroverted energy and bold leadership style, came into the leadership cohort eager to "run the room." He could command attention with ease, but early feedback revealed gaps in listening, collaboration, and inclusion. The RISE model challenged him to shift his focus from output to outcome—from *doing* leadership to *being* a leader. Through deepened relationships with his small group and reflection on his own values and impact, he began to realize that leadership required just as much vulnerability as it did confidence. By leaning into the skills and relationships learning domains, he grew into a leader who not only led initiatives but built spaces where others could thrive. In the final class discussion of the year, students were asked to share words of encouragement with peers in their small groups. One of his fellow small group peers wrote, "He helped me believe I had something valuable to offer." That's the power of leadership rooted in empathy, reflection, and growth—hallmarks of the RISE model in action.

In one final example of the RISE model in action, one of the authors frequently works with diverse students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and has observed a common struggle among Black and Brown female students who find it difficult to see themselves as leaders in a male-dominated field. This challenge became especially evident while mentoring two young women who, after facing harsh criticism from their male peers in an engineering course, began to question their place in the program. Discouraged, they even considered leaving STEM altogether.

By drawing from the efficacy and identity domains, instead of letting doubt dictate their path, the institute staff guided them back to their passions, helping them rediscover why they chose engineering in the first place. As their perspective shifted, so did their language—from seeking a way out, to searching for a support system. The staff member connected them with student organizations like the Society of Women Engineers (SWE) and the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), where they found a community of peers who shared similar experiences, emboldening their sense of identity and increasing their leadership self-efficacy. This transformation highlights the profound impact of a leadership learning model that integrates identity and self-efficacy development.

The RISE model components function as an organic system, building upon and reinforcing one another. Identity development shapes relational aptitudes, relational leadership competence influences skill development and efficacy, and skill application enhances leadership efficacy and relational aptitude. As leadership learners develop, they refine each component through responses to new experiences and evolving challenges. By recognizing this interconnectedness, learners not only gain technical skills but experience leadership development as a lifelong process of becoming leaders who are relational, self-aware, adaptable, and humbly confident.

RISE Implications

Just as leadership learners are growing, so is the RISE model. There is a need for broader adoption of the model so that RISE can grow and adapt with the contexts and needs of new leadership learners. By integrating this approach into leadership programs, student organizations, and co-curricular initiatives, institutions can create more structured opportunities for students to develop key competencies. Additionally, partnerships with faculty, student affairs professionals, and external stakeholders can provide further resources and mentorship, strengthening the effectiveness of the practice. One of the strengths of the model is that it is flexible enough to be adopted by a wide variety of university stakeholders; thus, a leadership office could partner with an academic department to implement the RISE model and create shared language that enhances student learning. The RISE model can be implemented as a model for student leaders in residential life, athletics, new student orientation, fraternities and sororities, or career development. Additionally, incorporating these practices into first-year experience courses or student government trainings could help cultivate early engagement and long-term participation.

Future research should explore how these strategies can be adapted across diverse institutional contexts to maximize student growth and program sustainability. Additional studies could detail wise practices for implementation of the RISE model and dissect the sub-domains to illuminate the most effective practices for developing these competencies in leadership learners.

Universities should also consider embedding this approach into campus-wide initiatives that emphasize experiential learning and service. For example, integrating RISE into community engagement programs, alternative break experiences, or campus traditions can provide meaningful hands-on leadership development. Establishing cross-departmental collaborations between student affairs, academic affairs, and career services can ensure students gain leadership learning opportunities that are cohesive, maximizing learning and implementation into leadership practice. Lastly, assessing the impact of this practice through surveys, focus groups, and longitudinal tracking can provide valuable data to refine and expand its effectiveness across institutions.

Conclusion

The RISE model offers a comprehensive, theory-based approach to leadership development, addressing key areas of growth specifically designed for college students. The RISE model provides leadership educators with a framework to design student-centered programs that enhance leadership learning outcomes. Furthermore, the model offers a roadmap for student leadership growth in an increasingly complex and diverse world. The RISE model, by integrating relational and identity-based aspects of leadership with contextual skills and efficacy, ultimately seeks to enhance leadership outcomes in diverse settings and challenge students to grow as holistic leaders who can navigate complexity with confidence.

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Understanding, Discussing, and Embodying Leadership Through Graduate Student Government

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The Congress of Graduate Students at Florida State University is an example of how the facilitation of graduate student government opportunities allow for the development of leadership and followership within graduate students. While scholarship has focused on how leadership learning can be facilitated through student government for undergraduate students, graduate student development should not be overlooked. This scholarship-to-practice brief will provide an overview of the Congress of Graduate Students under the Office of Student Governance and Advocacy, how theories on advising and leadership facilitate graduate student understandings of leadership and followership, and give recommendations on how other programs can work to encourage the development of leadership within graduate students through student government participation.

Introduction

Student government has been a way for students to connect with leadership and become empowered to be a part of shared governance within U.S. higher education since the 1700s (May, 2010). While student government has generally been focused on undergraduate students, graduate student government provides opportunities for graduate students to engage with shared governance and develop leadership identity, capacity and efficacy within their experiences. This scholarship-to-practice brief will share how the Congress of Graduate Students (COGS) at Florida State University works to empower graduate students to engage with the wider campus community and develop their own abilities and self-efficacy when it comes to viewing themselves as both a leader and follower. In recent years, the Congress, with the support of the Office of Student Government and Advocacy, has been working to raise the voices of graduate students and collaborate with campus offices to improve visibility and advocacy across campus. This has required many representatives within the Congress to both step up as leaders at times and to be responsible followers to make sure that those in leadership positions are taking responsible actions for the good of graduate students on campus.

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Overview of Student Governance and Advocacy

The Office of Student Governance and Advocacy fosters opportunities for students' personal and professional growth by encouraging leadership, amplifying their voices, guiding the management of funds and resources, and supporting their active engagement in the community. This office operates under the Department of Student Engagement, whose vision is to be a national and international exemplar in programming that develops students and staff into critical thinkers and responsible global citizens who make a positive impact on the world. Aligned with this vision, the Department of Student Engagement's mission is to educate, inspire, and empower the student body by fostering change, raising awareness, and building confidence. Through innovative, interdisciplinary, and co-curricular experiences, the department provides leadership development and community involvement opportunities. By empowering students and student organizations to lead their own initiatives, advisors strengthen their connection to campus and enhance their sense of belonging. Additionally, through collaboration, advisors promote student leadership and support the growth of organizations at Florida State University. To fulfill this mission, advisors are guided by core values, including:

- Nurturing Meaningful Connections
- Inclusiveness and Diversity of Thought
- Leadership and Innovation
- Holistic Learning Opportunities
- Continuous Assessment and Evaluation
- Exceptional Student Experiences and Engagement

The Department of Student Engagement is home to three offices, one of which is Student Governance and Advocacy (SG&A). SG&A focuses on supporting the leadership of Student Government Association (SGA) groups, including the Congress of Graduate Students (COGS). The SG&A office provides administrative and advisory support to graduate student leaders, ensuring they have the tools and resources to succeed. Our advising philosophy is grounded in evidence-based models that prioritize creating spaces where students feel a sense of belonging, purpose, and support. Research by Schlossberg et al. (1989) underscores the importance of students feeling like they matter, which is at the core of our approach. To achieve this, advisors integrate the following advising models:

1. **The Relational Advising Model**: This model emphasizes building trust-based, supportive relationships with students. By actively listening, providing personalized guidance, and fostering open communication, advisors help students navigate challenges and identify their goals (Lowenstein, 2005).
2. **Appreciative Advising Framework**: Rooted in positivity and collaboration, this model involves six key phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. Advisors use this framework to empower graduate student leaders to explore their strengths, envision possibilities, and develop actionable plans for success (Bloom, et al., 2008).
3. **Developmental Advising**: Advisors encourage graduate students to take ownership of their personal and professional development. This involves helping students reflect on their

experiences in COGS, identify areas for growth, and set leadership goals that align with their aspirations (Crookston, 1972).

By combining these models, advisors ensure that our graduate student leaders in COGS feel supported holistically. This approach not only strengthens their confidence and competence but also equips them to make meaningful contributions to student life at Florida State University. Involvement in student government is among the most impactful experiences for developing practical competence, as noted by Kuh & Lund (1994). Through participation in COGS, graduate students gain valuable skills and experiences that prepare them to lead both within and beyond the university setting.

Advisors within the Office of Student Governance and Advocacy also put into practice the Situational Leadership Model found under the leadership Contingency Theory. In the late 1960s, Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard developed the Situational Leadership Model, which illustrates the interdependence between leaders and followers within group settings. The model stresses that the role leaders should play in order to be most effective depends on the amount of direction leaders deliver, the amount of socio-emotional support they give to followers, and the maturity or readiness of followers to complete specific tasks (Hersey et al., 1996). To support the leadership development of representatives and the executive team within COGS, advisors within the Office of Student Governance and Advocacy use the following aspects of the model:

1. **Follower Readiness**: In Situational Leadership, follower readiness refers to a follower's ability and willingness to accomplish a particular task. By building rapport and understanding the skill level of our leaders advisors better position them to approach tasks. (Hughes, et al., 1998).
2. **Leader Behaviors:** Situational leadership theory maintains that leaders who correctly base their behaviors on follower maturity will be more effective, whereas the contingency model suggests that leader effectiveness is primarily determined by selecting the right kind of leader for a certain situation or changing the situation to fit the particular leader's style. As advisors guide students to work with different departments around campus, it is important for us to be able to recognize which situations better work for the leaders and their comfort level when initiating meetings etc. (Hersey et al.,1996)
3. **Situational Favorability:** The other critical variable in the contingency model is situational favorability, which is the amount of control the leader has over the followers. Presumably, the more guidance a leader has over followers, the more favorable the situation is, at least from the leader's perspective. Leader-member relations is the most powerful of the three subelements in determining overall situation favorability. It involves the extent to which relationships between the leader and followers are generally cooperative and friendly or antagonistic and difficult. When helping our leaders create their executive boards or delegate tasks it is important that they know how to build a good cohesive environment (Hersey et al., 1996).

Overview of the Congress of Graduate Students

The Congress of Graduate Students has been in existence for about 30 years at Florida State University and was created in order to give graduate students a greater voice and representation on campus. As stated on the official website:

> As the body representing graduate students, COGS represents graduate student interests to the university and community, and is empowered to issue resolutions expressing the views of graduate students and calling attention to important issues. The Congress provides graduate students with grants for conference travel, and funds programs and activities across campus that are targeted at graduate students (Congress of Graduate Students, n.d.).

COGS is governed by a Code that can be adjusted and updated as needed through bills and resolutions so that the Congress stays relevant to student needs and continues benefiting graduate students on campus. The Congress is led by an executive board that currently includes a Speaker, Deputy Speaker of Finance, Deputy Speaker of Communications, Deputy Speaker of Judicial Affairs, and Deputy Speaker of Advocacy. The representatives within the Congress are made up of representatives from the 15 colleges and schools at Florida State University as well as representatives holding identity-based seats such as the International student advocate, LGBTQ+ student advocate, Minority student advocate, Veterans advocate, and other advocacy seats.

The Congress has several standing committees dedicated to serving different target areas. These Committees include the Student Advocacy Committee that works to support students concerning various issues across campus, the Student Outreach Committee which works to organize events and collaborations with different offices across campus, and the Internal Affairs committee which revises and updates COGS Code and deals with more legislative issues before they are presented to the larger congress. There are also two seasonal committees with targeted purposes: the Budget Committee puts together the annual budget for the next academic year and the Strategic Planning Committee sets up a strategic plan for COGS to follow for the next few years which helps keep consistency among changing leadership each year. Over the past several decades, COGS has had waves of success and failures concerning its operations and practices. Some years have allowed COGS to be agents of change when it comes to graduate student support and in other years, COGS has faced issues of unclear leadership and poor communication. There are several factors contributing to these fluctuations including a lack of leadership from executive members, failed followership by student representatives, fluctuations in administrative and staff support, and no adherence to the COGS Code.

Participation and Growth of COGS since COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic created the most recent fluctuations within the operations of COGS. With everything suddenly moving to an online format, student organizations having to cut back on events, and professional conferences either being canceled or being held digitally, COGS faced challenges on how to adjust to the new normal for the next year or two. This re-adjustment led to several issues stemming from both unclear leadership and poor followership by representatives either leaving the Congress or failing to practice due diligence concerning bills and resolutions.

Advising staff turnover during this time meant another system of checks and balances was not in place to provide additional oversight and guidance.

As COVID-19 eventually settled into a new normal and campus opened back up, the newly elected executive board of COGS was faced with issues of a bad campus reputation, a large number of open representative seats, several budget discrepancies, and other issues that put COGS in a difficult position. The issues within COGS led to some concerns from administrators, staff, and members of student government on if COGS should be supported and provided with the current level of funding. However, the new leadership of COGS had a vision to make the Congress a place to provide resources to graduate students and let their voices be heard. The executive board worked closely together with the Office of Student Governance and Advocacy to first handle the financial issues that were mismanaged the previous year along with working to recruit new representatives to fill the empty seats. The Office of Student Governance and Advocacy hired new advisors to support student government organizations, including the Congress, to develop leadership skills and social responsibility. Executive board leaders worked to connect to various offices on campus to improve communication and fix the reputation of COGS that had been damaged over the pandemic. An emphasis was also placed on representatives understanding the COGS Code and Financial Manual with the expectation set that representatives should challenge any bills or decisions made that did not match the requirements of both documents. Training sessions were held at the start of each new semester to make sure that representatives understood all regulating documents and felt empowered to challenge bills or resolutions they did not support. This fostering of both responsible leadership and followership empowered those within the Congress to work to create a supportive environment for graduate students.

When looking at the Congress of Graduate Students today, a majority of the seats have been filled with representatives, the reputation of the Congress has improved among departments due to increased outreach such as presenting at over 24 departmental orientations, and there is a clear understanding of both structural and funding guidelines by all representatives. There are clear goals the Congress is working toward concerning graduate student advocacy and being a true representation of the graduate student body. Part of these improvements has also been due to support from advisors within the Student Governance & Advocacy Office who have helped to facilitate leadership learning within the Congress of Graduate Students.

Facilitating Graduate Student Leadership Efficacy and Sense of Belonging

Through the work of rebuilding the Congress of Graduate Students, both the executive board and the representatives were able to grow their own leadership efficacy. Leadership efficacy is the belief a person has in their own ability to complete a task or to practice leadership (Bandura, 1997). This is different from leadership capacity which is viewed as the skills someone has to complete a task (Dugan, 2017). For example, within COGS, representatives have been empowered to take actions against injustices shown toward graduate students on campus. One of these injustices was wording within the student handbook which stated a full time graduate student would be enrolled in 12 hours when the reality is that most programs consider full time to be 9 hours. The GI Bill requires veteran students to be enrolled full time in order to get their full funding and this wording error was causing veteran graduate students to not be given their full benefits. Working together as a

leadership can be facilitated in a way that benefits not only graduate students, but the overall campus environment.

Institutions

The Congress of Graduate Students at Florida State University has provided opportunities for graduate students to be more engaged with student programming and to be engaged with student government on campus. The authors encourage other institutions to have more inclusion of graduate student programing within student government even if you do not have a graduate student government association like COGS. For institutions that do not offer graduate student government associations, the authors encourage you to consider creating these organizations to help amplify graduate student voices on your campus. Graduate students are often overlooked within student affairs and tasks such as putting together activities are often pushed to the Graduate School which does not always have the staffing, support, or knowledge to put together those types of activities. COGS and similar programs intentionally provide safe spaces for graduate students to connect with peers in a place that is outside of their departments and classmates.

Institutions should work to facilitate programming such as leadership workshops specifically for graduate students in order to create opportunities for graduate students to meet each other. Many leadership workshops on campus are aimed at undergraduate students which can leave graduate students feeling excluded from this type of programming. These events allow graduate students to connect with others who might be going through their same struggles in other departments and provide an opportunity for cross-departmental collaboration. Putting together leadership workshops for graduate students also allows them to build their leadership and followership abilities in a space where they do not feel like an intruder within an undergraduate space. Graduate students are often siloed within their own departments without much opportunity or encouragement to explore the wider campus community. By encouraging the development and engagement of graduate student programming and associations such as graduate student government, this provides spaces for graduate students to break out of their silos and connect with their campuses.

Advisors

Advisors who work with graduate student governments play a unique role—not only as guides and institutional liaisons but also as advocates, mentors, and consistent supporters. Graduate students navigate leadership in the midst of academic, professional, and often personal transitions. Effective advising requires both strategic support and deep relational care. The authors have several core recommendations for advisors looking to strengthen their impact. First, advisors should support autonomy through trust. Graduate students benefit most when given the space to lead, create, and govern in ways that reflect their needs and values. Advisors should resist the urge to over-manage and instead offer students the freedom to structure their own processes, build their own teams, and lead their own initiatives. In our experience, offering that autonomy fosters reciprocal trust—students feel respected and, in turn, are more likely to seek collaboration and guidance when needed. The advisor's role becomes that of a steady support: someone who steps in to provide

institutional knowledge, connect with upper administration, or offer perspective, but never overshadows student leadership.

Second, advisors should advocate for graduate student visibility. Advisors must be vocal advocates for the presence and inclusion of graduate students within the larger institution. This means consistently raising graduate student perspectives in meetings where they are not present, especially when planning events or initiatives that typically center undergraduate populations. It includes being mindful of language—ensuring materials, emails, and public-facing messaging acknowledge graduate students as a vital part of the community. Advisors should also work to dismantle silos that isolate graduate students from broader campus resources or opportunities. Advocacy in these moments helps ensure that graduate students feel seen and valued.

Third, advisors need to build relationships through individualized support. One-on-one meetings with graduate student leaders are a cornerstone of effective advising. The authors recommend that advisors schedule regular (weekly or biweekly) check-ins with executive board members. These sessions provide space to discuss student well-being, leadership challenges, and updates on the Congress or governing body. They also allow students to reflect on their own growth and process the complexities of their roles. Treat these meetings as a time to see the student holistically—not just as a leader, but as a person navigating graduate school.

Fourth, advisors need to show up and be present with graduate student organizations. While attending events or participating in student-led initiatives is not a formal requirement of advising, it can significantly impact the strength of your relationship with students. Presence matters. When advisors show up, students feel supported beyond the office space—they feel seen in their work and efforts. Listening to their stories, engaging with their research, and being present in their environments reinforces that they matter as individuals and as contributors to the university's mission. Graduate students often express feeling undervalued on campus, despite playing critical roles as researchers, instructors, and thought leaders. Advisors can counteract this by affirming their value in daily interactions and supporting their leadership publicly and privately.

Finally, it is important for advisors to empower graduate students for leadership beyond the university. At the heart of this work is the goal of helping graduate students leave the university equipped to lead wherever they go next. Advising should be rooted in empowerment—ensuring that students feel confident, competent, and supported in their leadership. When advisors center trust, advocacy, presence, and individualized support, they help students shape not just their current experience, but their future leadership trajectories. Graduate student government becomes more than a service; it becomes a training ground for impact, legacy, and transformation.

Graduate Students

For graduate students, if you do not have a graduate student government association on your campus, the authors encourage you to push to have one established in order to have your voices heard. If you do have a graduate student government on your campus, the authors encourage you to run for office and take part in the shared governance that is occurring on your campus. Take advantage of these opportunities to work to build up your own leadership and followership. You

do not have to be an officer within student government to practice different aspects of situational leadership. The authors encourage you to practice responsible follower readiness within not just graduate student government, but also within any student organizations you join. Take an active role within the organization and if you see something that goes against the code or bylaws, speak out instead of letting it happen. It is important for graduate student leaders to work closely with all members of the organization to make sure that the organization provides a space for members to share their thoughts and ideas in a collaborative space.

The authors also encourage graduate students to take part in team building within their organizations to help with collaboration since a solid team requires trust within the members. Taking part in collaborative and team building exercises can help to build that trust within the organization. Practicing peer mentorship with one another when it comes to building leadership is another activity that you should encourage in your organizations. If you see someone in the organization who is interested in taking on a leadership role that you might hold, talk with that person and see if you can help to mentor them so that they understand your leadership role and are ready to step into the role when you leave the position. Peer mentorship can also build bonds within an organization and can allow for an easier transition of power if the person stepping into the leadership role already has an understanding of what those leadership responsibilities entail.

Conclusion

In closing, the authors hope that you take away the importance of graduate student government when it comes to leadership building, centering leadership and followership in student government, and building a sense of belonging for graduate students. The Congress of Graduate Students is an example of how with a team of leaders who have passion to create change, followers who are willing to support and enact that change, and advisors who provide guidance backed by scholarship, graduate students are able to make their voices heard by the larger student population and can create real change and impact on college campuses. It is important for all of those involved within the leadership process to remember that graduate students are a part of the heart of higher education and should be not only remembered, but should be encouraged to pursue campus leadership and involvement.

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JCAPS

Media Review: *Moving Towards Action: Anti-Racism in Leadership Learning*

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Leadership education is essential for preparing higher education professionals to take initiative, support students, guide colleagues and supervisees, implement initiatives, and shape direction in their work. While leadership skills are often highlighted by faculty and professionals as vital for success in the field, students in higher education programs may not be taught the importance of anti-racism in leadership practice. Additionally, faculty and staff may lack the knowledge or willingness to engage in these critical discussions. To address this gap, Cameron C. Beatty and Amber Manning-Ouellette's co-edited volume issues a call to action for leadership educators and higher education professionals—particularly those working in student activities and engagement—to embrace and practice anti-racist leadership in fostering inclusive communities where all students feel a sense of belonging.

In their preface and opening chapter, Beatty and Manning-Ouellette (2024) draw from their own positionalities and highlight the pervasive influence of white supremacy in post-secondary education. They call on leadership educators to acknowledge how their understandings of leadership are often rooted in and centered on whiteness. The authors emphasize the role white educators play in advancing anti-racism, urging them to leverage their positionality to create meaningful, positive change (p. 6). Furthermore, they provide an initial framework for what anti-racist praxis looks like in the classroom and the impact it can have on Students of Color. Additionally, they explore the effects of whiteness on both Students of Color and White students, a theme authors in the co-edited text elaborate on. Authors also recognize the unique power that White leadership educators hold in addressing racism, advocating that they utilize this power for anti-racist transformation.

The book is organized into three parts, with thirteen chapters. The first section, covering chapters 2 through 4, underscores the theoretical and conceptual foundations of anti-racist approaches in leadership education. The contributing authors provide essential context for understanding anti-racism in this field. Chapter 2 defines key terminology to ensure a shared understanding among readers as they progress through the book. Chapter 3 presents strategies for navigating race-related

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conversations, underscoring how participants avoid these critical discussions, while also offering pathways for engaging in racial dialogues centered on growth and progress. To close this section, Chapter 4 explores leadership education research by introducing an anti-racist research framework. This approach is built around five key components: praxis, ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, providing a comprehensive lens to examine anti-racism within leadership education.

In Chapter 2, Beatty and Vaughn (2024) provide leadership educators with essential definitions of racism and leadership education, as well as historical context on the development of leadership theories and their connection to whiteness. The authors introduce the racial literacy development model, which "aims to cultivate critical consciousness and understanding of race and racism, particularly within educational settings" (Beatty & Vaughn, 2024, p. 20). By applying racial literacy to leadership education, educators can promote anti-racist practices more effectively. Integrating these practices into leadership education demonstrates an organization's commitment to fostering inclusive environments and preparing future leaders. In today's evolving political landscape, this chapter emphasizes how vital it is for organizations to prioritize such initiatives.

In Chapter 3, Chandrashekar (2024) navigates the complexities of engaging in challenging conversations about anti-racist practices within leadership education. He outlines several barriers to discussing racism, including white fragility, emotional development, and critical consciousness. Chandrashekar also explores the concept of developmental readiness in anti-racist leadership education, offering insights into how educators can enhance their motivation, abilities, and growth in this area. He addresses resistance and lack of prioritization while offering practical questions and a framework for tempered radicalism to help practitioners drive meaningful change.

The final chapter in this section, authored by Roland and Johnson (2024), calls for a reexamination of leadership education research to address racism at multiple levels. They argue that adopting an anti-racist research paradigm allows researchers to center the experiences of historically marginalized racial groups by critically examining the epistemology, ontology, methodology, axiology, and praxis of their work. This approach deconstructs white supremacy in research and has the potential to positively impact multiple marginalized racial and social identities. Roland and Johnson also note that while anti-racist language is increasingly common in leadership education, its integration into research and practice remains limited.

The second section of the book (Chapters 5-8) shifts focus to the praxis of leadership learning through an anti-racist lens. Across these chapters, the authors consistently argue that anti-racism requires intentional self-reflection paired with concrete action. For example, in Chapter 5, GuramatunhuCooper highlights the role of anti-racist pedagogical practice in leadership education, utilizing Fink's framework of significant learning to emphasize how educators can use an anti-racist approach when shaping course design. She challenges educators to reflect on whose voices have been excluded from leadership discourses, emphasizing the importance of engaging students in dialogues that blend subjectivity and objectivity. GuramatunhuCooper also encourages educators to critically self-reflect on their positionality, posing essential questions for leadership educators to consider.

In Chapter 6, Pierre and Nkrumah delve deeper into integrating mindfulness and self-reflection into teaching practice while developing emotional literacy among students. Recognizing the centrality of emotion in dialogues about racism, they provide two frameworks to promote anti-racist pedagogical practices. The first offers specific strategies for improving teaching practice, while the second encourages critical self-reflection with questions on content, climate, and assessment. The authors' discussion of "meeting students where they are" highlights the importance of positionality, and they offer valuable insights into how educators can work through classroom conflict, though personal examples would have enriched this discussion.

Chapter 7, written by Harmon, Gonzalez, and Crockrell, explores the challenges and responsibilities of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) in engaging in anti-racist practices. The authors discuss how SSAOs, despite internal and external constraints, are perceived as moral compasses and therefore should champion anti-racism. The chapter addresses how SSAOs navigate the impact of race on students and how they can create lasting change, especially by advocating for BIPOC colleagues and students to enter SSAO roles. A critical question they pose, "are our roles inherently set up to betray our own commitment to anti-racism, inclusion, and equity?" (p. 100), invites readers to grapple with the complexities and tensions inherent in their roles.

Wilborg and Ford conclude this section by examining how discourses in educational leadership courses center whiteness, arguing that leadership values and standards are often steeped in whiteness. They critique "white talk" in classrooms, revealing how it fosters competition and division among racial groups while reinforcing the superiority of white individuals. The authors stress the need for educators to improve their racial literacy and challenge the dominance of whiteness in their teaching practices.

The third section of the book outlines practical steps for creating actionable change. Chapter 9, written by Taylor, lays the foundation for anti-racist work, urging leadership educators to create brave spaces where students feel safe sharing their perspectives. Taylor emphasizes the need to challenge existing systems from within and highlights the importance of forming alliances across campus to drive systemic change. His suggestions for fostering anti-racist spaces are both practical and attainable, provided educators are willing to listen and challenge entrenched systems.

In Chapter 10, Williams emphasizes "Centering Community" as a critical means of driving meaningful change. They argue that before focusing on community, individuals must engage in self-reflection to critically examine personal privileges and biases. Williams introduces Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a tool for analyzing systems and structures, encouraging readers to step outside their comfort zones to foster stronger, more impactful outcomes. In Chapter 11, Maldonado Frazen and Youngblood discuss organizational frameworks that can promote change, with a focus on disrupting assumptions. They recommend using tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to assess and enhance intercultural competence, and they emphasize the importance of open communication and personal narratives to drive growth. Their

recommendations - "Be Vulnerable," "Be Bold," and "Be Available" (p. 169) - provide a roadmap for organizations to collectively commit to anti-racist practices.

Chapter 12, written by Manning-Ouellette and Mutambuki, focuses on anti-racist pedagogy in leadership education, exploring key concepts such as Inclusive Pedagogy and Liberatory Pedagogy. They challenge educators to examine their course materials, teaching philosophies, and classroom practices to foster more inclusive learning environments. By centering student experiences and encouraging critical reflection, the authors demonstrate how educators can promote anti-racist learning while humanizing the classroom experience.

In the conclusion, Beatty and Manning-Ouellette outline essential steps for creating meaningful change. They stress the importance of recognizing privilege and influence, urging educators to challenge systems and advocate for their students and colleagues. The authors remind readers that while this work can be challenging, immediate action is essential to drive transformation. By embracing discomfort, continuously learning, and committing to anti-racist practices, leadership educators can contribute to building more equitable and inclusive environments for all.

The authors of this edited text offer meaningful and practical strategies, philosophies, and insights on anti-racist work in higher education. This chapter and the overall work are particularly relevant to those in higher education seeking to create change in leadership education, and as a result institutions broadly. The authors emphasize the importance of leveraging one's influence and power to drive meaningful progress. In the face of ongoing challenges and attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, this text serves as a crucial resource, providing actionable steps for leaders and equity-minded individuals committed to fostering change. A common theme throughout these strategies for systemic change is the willingness to learn and grow as an individual. This approach is highly effective when individuals are open to self-reflection and eager to learn.

While the book offers valuable insights and practical suggestions, there are some areas where the authors could have delved deeper. One critique is that the text assumes professionals in higher education are inherently open to growth and change, which overlooks the reality that some individuals resist adopting equitable and inclusive practices. A more nuanced discussion around how engagement with individuals who lack a commitment to inclusivity affects both learning and practice would have been beneficial. Higher education professionals do not always enter the field with a mindset geared towards personal and professional development in equity, and the text could have addressed strategies for navigating these challenges more directly.

Moreover, the authors could have explored the fine line between recognizing students' needs and knowledge while unintentionally re-centering whiteness in predominantly white spaces. In contexts where many classrooms are still predominantly white, the book could have provided more critical reflections on how educators can avoid perpetuating this re-centering while striving to meet students where they are.

Given that Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) are still predominantly white, it would have been useful for the authors to include discussions on how white SSAOs can better acknowledge their positionality and take actionable steps toward anti-racist leadership. Although there is minimal scholarship specifically on SSAOs of color, the authors could have drawn on broader research about faculty and staff of color to provide concrete examples of the challenges faced in advancing anti-racist work within higher education. Including case studies or examples of institutions actively engaging in anti-racist initiatives within student affairs would have further strengthened the book's message, offering tangible models for implementing equity-minded and anti-racist practices. Additionally, it would have been compelling for the authors to present alternative approaches to the examples they provide, specifically focusing on how instructors could have interrupted "white talk." Offering potential scenarios for challenging whiteness and its discourses would have provided readers with practical tools for addressing these dynamics in real-time, further aligning with the book's call for transformative, anti-racist practices.

The authors explore the importance of personal reflection, growth, and collaboration in driving systemic change, emphasizing the need for Student Affairs, graduate programs, and professional development organizations to work together in better serving students from diverse backgrounds. As continued resistance to DEI and anti-racist practices mounts, it is imperative for educators and higher education administrators to grapple with these challenges and engage with texts like this, which provide guidance and hope during times of strife and complexity. This book provides a valuable foundation for leadership educators, especially those involved in student activities and programming, to encourage critical reflection and offer practical strategies for driving institutional change and fostering a culture of belonging. By integrating theoretical foundations, practical strategies, and personal narratives, the text equips professionals with the tools to challenge white supremacy and foster anti-racist leadership in higher education, pushing the conversation forward toward greater equity and inclusion.

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Emerging Scholars: Empowering the Ensemble: Followership Practices in Collegiate Student-Led A Cappella

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This scholarship-to-practice paper examines a popular campus activity: collegiate student-led a cappella. As musical groups that sing without instrumental accompaniment, collegiate a cappella groups are often student-run without the direction of faculty or staff. While a formative opportunity for students to develop skills of self-authorship and community building, a cappella groups can face challenges in leadership. Guided by the premise that understanding the importance of leader and follower interaction, this paper explores a workshop designed to empower the development of followers within a cappella groups.

Introduction

Contemporary a cappella is a common practice in higher education. Student-led groups work together to sing songs in popular genres without any instrumental accompaniment (Duchan, 2012). As student-led groups, they rely on their undergraduate members to make both musical decisions, such as song selection, and leadership decisions, such as managing conflict. With typically only one music director and an executive board for managerial tasks, groups can execute democratic strategies for formal decisions (Berglin, 2015). That said, the lack of association with a formal leadership development program may leave room and opportunity for groups to develop skills to engage in effective leader and follower practices.

Contemporary leadership theories consider the interaction between leaders and followers within the context of their work (Foley, 2015; Hughes et al., 2022; Kellerman, 2016). Scholars, such as Kelley (1988), paved the way to understand the role and significance of followers in leadership models. Focusing on Chaleff's (1995) model of followership styles and grounded in prominent student leadership development competencies described by Seemiller (2013), this paper describes the workshop: *Ensemble Leadership: Leveraging Strengths Beyond the Sheet Music,* an a cappella workshop that provides student-led a cappella groups the opportunity to understand their own leadership perspectives, learn about followership, and practice empowering behaviors within the context of a rehearsal simulation.

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Collegiate Student-Led A Cappella

A cappella or "in the chapel style", synonymously understood as singing unaccompanied by instruments, is a centuries-old musical artform which predates even its own name (Clark, 1969). While the Italian-originating name, *a cappella*, rose in the 18th century to differentiate the musical style, Renaissance polyphony, from other practices at that time (Holmes, 2001), the practice of singing without other instruments dates back even earlier, with records of religious practice of a cappella performances in 70 A.D. or secular practices in 150 A.D. (Kegerreis, 1970). A cappella showed some emergence in United States higher education institutions in the 19th century where collegiate glee clubs arose from Harvard, Yale, and others (Duchan, 2007).

The formation of collegiate groups spiked in the 1990s with 313 new groups beginning in colleges across the United States. At the time, male groups were the most popular with over 700 male groups in existence by 2005 compared to under 300 female groups and even less mixed gender groups (Duchan, 2007). These proportions have likely since changed with a cappella groups now being an expressive outlet for students to find their gender and sexuality and breaking its binarized, exclusive roots (Mantie & Talbot, 2020).

It is common practice for collegiate a cappella groups to be student-led, where faculty advisors are typically a nominal role required by the university (Mantie & Talbot, 2020). While students do not need to formally study music, possessing musical independence or the "ability to evaluate, select, refine, and perform" music without help allows student-led a cappella groups to function without faculty assistance (Berglin, 2015, p. 53). Informal pedagogy (Cain, 2012) or nonformal learning (Haning, 2019) arises as musical practice is led by students who do not yet hold musical or teaching degrees, if these students even major in said degree programs. Regardless, a cappella groups can exhibit democratic functionality where members collaborate or vote on repertoire, solo designations, and other decisions (Berglin, 2015; Haning, 2019).

While collegiate student-led organizations can offer students opportunities of self-expression (Mantie, 2013) and practical experiences running organizations (Komives et al., 2009), these groups can also face several challenges. While it is typical that the person in charge of leading musical rehearsal, the music director, is musically independent, they are likely new or inexperienced in teaching. While this can be an opportunity for students to develop, their time to do so is limited. As university-bound student organizations, collegiate a cappella group members typically do not stay beyond graduation. This means there is always a rotation of students joining and leaving the group assuming students attend four-year undergraduate institutions. High turnover in any type of organization can make long-term growth and sustained success a great challenge (Huang et al., 2021). For a cappella groups, they must balance both musical and technical considerations, such as balanced voice parts, as well as extramusical strategies, such as leadership structure and group dynamics (Sharon et al., 2015).

As student-led organizations, collegiate a cappella groups can mirror student organization executive board structures: president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary, with the addition of the music director. As a cappella groups have unique needs, they may have different leadership titles or roles, including business or performance manager (Sharon et al., 2015). While there is

diversity in administration roles, it is typically the sole responsibility of music director to lead rehearsals. With the remaining members presumably functioning as followers within the context of the rehearsal, this leaves opportunity for groups to leverage followership practices to enhance the overall sense of engagement, empowerment, and execution of their mission.

Recognizing Styles of Followership

Origins of Followership

The exploration of leadership studies has changed over the years with 19th and 20th century scholars narrating "great man theories", which fixate on traits individual leaders hold (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). While controversial at the time, later 20th century research began investigating factors that impact leadership effectiveness beyond the traits a single individual holds. Scholars, such as Fielder (1967), began to recognize the prominent role followers and the context in which leaders and followers interact play in the practice of leadership in his contingency theory. Further, Hollander (1978) contextualizes these ideas in his transactional approach to leadership, arguing the importance of the dynamics between leaders and followers. This contributes to more contemporary leadership models, such as Hughes et al.'s (2022) interactional framework for analyzing leadership. This interactional framework not only highlights the impact of the individual parameters: leader, followers, and the situation, but it also explores how the parameters interact with one another to make leadership either more or less effective. They argue the complexity of interactions and factors which contribute to leadership necessitate observation through various parameters.

Kelley (1988) reframed followers as a necessity for the success of organizations and understanding the practice of leadership. Several theorists also generated models of followership to understand how follower behaviors, motivations, and goals vary between individuals and contexts. Kelley (2008) later authored dimensions for understanding followership styles, such as how independent followers are in their critical thinking and how active followers are in their engagement in the organization. Observing followers through different lenses provides pathways to understand followers within one's own organizations, teams, and groups.

Chaleff's Five Dimensions

Another prominent followership scholar is Chaleff (1995) who continued the work of understanding the role of followers within the contexts of various systems in relation to leaders. Chaleff (2008) poses that followers do not serve a leader but instead work with leaders to serve a common purpose. With the aim to shift how society understands followers from a pejorative term to an empowering role to contribute to change and reaching goals, Chaleff poses five dimensions necessary to encapsulate *the courageous follower*:

> 1. The courage to support the leader and do everything possible to contribute to the leader's success. 2. The courage to assume responsibility for the common purpose and act whether or not receiving direct orders from the leader. 3. The courage to constructively challenge the leader or group's behaviors or policies if these threaten the common purpose. 4. The courage to participate in any transformation needed to

> improve the leader-follower relationship and the organization's performance. (Chaleff, 2008, p. 72)

Two of these dimensions, the courage to challenge and the courage to support, lead to Chaleff's styles of followers which acts as the foundational theory for the a cappella followership development activity explored in this paper. The next section explores these styles in depth and how members of a cappella groups can leverage them in rehearsal settings.

Significance of Followership

Students can develop as followers within the classroom in educational settings (Johnson, 2009). Various scholars created pathways for students to explore the interconnected nature between leaders and followers and understanding the prominent role followers play in the dynamic of organizations (Raffo, 2013). Followership education is not limited to leadership classrooms. Music educators explore student participation in ensemble settings where directors engage many student musicians in bands, orchestras, and choirs. Orzolek (2020) described high levels of engaged and effective followership in various parts of ensemble settings, such as modeling warm-ups and sectionals, sharing constructive criticism, supporting goals inside and outside of rehearsals, and reflecting on individual effort in relation to the ensemble.

Beyond the classroom, students can develop as more effective leaders and followers in student organizations. Rosch and Collins (2017) described the significance of participating in student organizations to develop their leadership abilities, such as exploring self-authorship, increasing self-awareness, and developing effective interpersonal behaviors through navigating various responsibilities, receiving peer feedback, and collaborating with peers to develop strategic decisions.

Practicing Followership in A Cappella

Workshop Context

A Cappella Education is a non-profit that provides musicians opportunities and resources to perform music, develop skillsets, and share their knowledge and passion for a cappella (A Cappella Education, 2025). One of the A Cappella Education's initiatives is holding three-day event which comprise of group performances, masterclasses, and workshops titled The National A Cappella Convention (NACC). With over 20 high school and collegiate a cappella groups engaged in each festival, NACC is an ideal environment for student-led a cappella groups to enhance their followership understanding and skillset through a workshop. For the 2025 NACC, this paper's author developed and facilitated a workshop titled *Ensemble Leadership: Leveraging Strengths Beyond the Sheet Music.*

Workshop Framework

The design of this workshop was grounded in followership development theory (Chaleff, 2008) and co-curricular learning frameworks (Seemiller, 2013). Seemiller identifies competencies, such as self-awareness, communication, and collaboration, as essential to holistic leadership

development. To achieve this, the workshop utilized Chaleff's (1995) styles of followership as a framework in a rehearsal simulation. By identifying different follower styles a cappella members hold when contributing to rehearsals, students could explore how members can deepen their connection to the rehearsal process and adopt inclusive behaviors to increase engagement.

Chaleff's (2008) styles of followership are products of two courageous follower dimensions: the courage to challenge and the courage to support. This results in four different styles of follower. A follower with a low level of challenge and support for their leader is known as a resource. Resources only contribute minimum engagement to retain their membership in an organization. A follower who does not support yet will challenge their leader is known as an individualist. Individualists may speak up when other followers do not, yet they will not productively support leaders in seeking solutions and making change. Completely opposite of an individualist, a follower who supports but does not challenge their leader, is known as an implementor. Implementors will execute leader requests, yet will not warn them to avoid mistakes if it requires disagreement or conflict. Finally, a partner both highly supports and challenges their leader to serve the common purpose of the group. To introduce these follower styles and explore how leaders can empower followers to develop supportive and constructive behaviors to become partners, Chaleff (2008) recommended hypothetical scenarios, role-playing activities, and coaching applications.

Workshop Procedure

Aligned with leadership development models applicable to co-curricular education, the workshop was designed to exercise students' self-awareness, communication, and collaboration (Seemiller, 2013). By implementing Chaleff's (2008) strategies, Seemiller's competencies were woven through the workshop's four phases: (1) Understanding Leadership Perspectives, (2) Identifying Styles of Followership, (3) Simulating Follower Empowerment, and (4) Analyzing Applications Beyond NACC.

Phase 1: Understanding Leadership Perspectives

The first phase aimed to stimulate participant self-awareness and communication by prompting students to ideate and verbally articulate their preconceived notions about leadership. The first of two brainstorm questions asked students, "In one word, what do you believe leadership to be?" After a silent minute of reflecting and generating their response in writing, students verbally shared their responses to the entire workshop group. After briefly drawing connections between responses, students were posed with a second question: "What is a follower?" After another silent minute, students were instead asked to raise their hand if the word had a negative connotation. This transitioned into the second phase with the aim to destigmatize the word follower and instead elevate its prominence in the leadership framework.

Phase 2: Identifying Styles of Followership

The second phase further engaged participant self-awareness by challenging students to consider their leader and follower biases while posed with frameworks and models likely foreign to them. Exploring the Hughes et al. (2022) Interactional Framework of Analyzing Leadership allowed

students to visualize the need for both leaders and followers to achieve shared goals within the context of a given situation. Any change to the leader, follower, or their situation can impact how the three parameters interact with one another. This created a pivoting opportunity to discuss Chaleff's four styles of followership. Engaging in hypothetical pedagogical strategies, each style was introduced through a story about a hypothetical a cappella singer who embodied the style to provide levity and allow for students to assimilate their own experiences with the example shared. Understanding there were likely a mix of students who held leader positions looking to strengthen their skills and followers looking to make greater contributions to their group, the next phase aimed to demonstrate how (1) leaders can guide all followers to the partner style through empowering behaviors and (2) followers can challenge and support leaders to serve the shared goals of their group.

Phase 3: Simulating Follower Empowerment

Rooted in collaboration and communication, the third phase was the rehearsal simulation, inviting students to collectively learn music, navigate challenges in real time, and generate solutions together. The author of this paper functioned as the facilitator of the rehearsal, providing all students with sheet music they have never seen before. The facilitator emulated an a cappella music director by teaching students music. After splitting the students into four voice part sections: soprano, tenor, alto, and bass, and distributing sheet music, the facilitator distributed note cards to a random selection of students. Each note card had two messages. The message on the outside of the folded card provided directions for the student to act out behaviors emulating one of the four follower styles. Once a student began acting out their notecard role, the facilitator would address the behavior using an inclusive behavior which would recognize the follower style and encourage both support and challenge. Once demonstrated, the student would read the inside of the card which was a first-person statement describing the perspective of the follower and why they might have demonstrated their assigned behavior during rehearsal. This note aimed to humanize the various behaviors and perspectives of different followers to leaders and other followers who behave differently. Table 1 outlines an example of each note card follower role and its correlating behavior prompt, leader response, and behavior motivator.

Phase 4: Analyzing Applications Beyond NACC

Finally, phase four provided a reflective opportunity for all students. In this section, students were prompted to reflect on which type of follower they typically embody, which type of follower with which they struggle interacting, and realizations they have not considered before the activity. The facilitator finished the workshop by opening the space to all questions, whether they were questions about specific leadership challenges faced in a student's group or broad questions about growing as a leader or follower. By framing the applicational reflection through a broader context of student leader and follower development, the activity solidified Seemiller's (2013) student leadership competencies of self-awareness, communication, and collaboration.

Table 1. *Note Card Roles, Behavior Prompts, Leader Response, and Behavior Motivator.*

Note Card Role	Behavior Prompt	Leader Response	Behavior Motivator
Implementor	Your music has missing lyrics, likely a printing error. Try to sing the lyrics that make sense to you, but do not ask the director for help.	Recognizing this challenge only after the Partner (next card), thank the Partner, apologize to the Implementor, and ask for the two to share this rehearsal. It is important to acknowledge the director's mistake and remind the group they are encouraged to point out mistakes like this.	I cannot read my music, but I am too nervous to interrupt the director. I do not want to distract from the group's work. I will try my best with what I have in front of me.
Partner	Your neighbor's partner has missing lyrics, likely a printing error. Raise your hand to let the director know and offer to share music.	Same response as above (a paired card role).	It seems like my neighbor is facing a challenge. I want to let my director know so they can make a correction. I am willing to share my music in the meantime.
Resource	Your part has a lot of rests, and you are not being asked to sing. Pull out your phone and look distracted.	Instead of calling out the resource, call them into the decision-making process as they do not have a singing role. Have them stand on a chair to add levity and energize both the singer and the rest of the group. Task them to offer insights from what they hear from a new vantage point in the next run-through and offer suggestions.	My parts are usually easy, and I don't sing often. It makes rehearsal boring. I feel like I am not valued, and my role is not as important as everyone else.

Individualist	You realize that the music is being sung with little musicality. With frustration, complain to the music director about this. Only after prompted, share the idea to enhance dynamics through shaping.	Instead of shutting down the singer for their comment, empower the singer to also support the group by making a recommendation on how to enhance the section after the next sing through. This allows time for the singer to generate a supportive suggestion.	I feel like I have a lot of ideas to offer, but no one believes in me. I am frustrated that we do not sound better.

Recommendations

Beginning the workshop with an opportunity for students to articulate their understanding of both leadership and followers not only helps them think critically about these terms but also provides the facilitator with a gauge on the room's general understanding. The leadership question generated responses commonly focused on an individual person instead of a group or process. Most students raised their hands when asked if their follower answer held a negative connotation. These provide the collective group a starting point in their leadership perspective and important transition into both the interactional framework and styles of followership. Beginning with the interactional framework offered students a model which showcases how leaders, followers, and situation/context interact with one another. It is important to offer examples of each follower style so that students can imagine group members or themselves who may potentially demonstrate similar behaviors. Offering hypotheticals with levity not only humanizes each style but also makes the flaws of each non-partner style acceptable for students with which to identify.

Role-play simulations can help students identify styles of followership and how to address them (Chaleff, 2008). It is vital to simulate follower styles within rehearsal simulations as this is where students would realize these behaviors and understand how they can shift their interactions in constructive ways. By incorporating the behavior motivator on the inside of the card, students could get an insight look as to why a follower may demonstrate a particular behavior. Not all followers behave the same way because they think differently and are motivated differently (Hughes et al., 2022). It is recommended to take time to pause and have students reflect on how the motivator connects to the behavior demonstrated.

Finally, taking time to open the floor for questions can allow students an opportunity to consider how they can apply lessons learned from the workshop to their own groups. It is recommended that the facilitator prepares questions in case students need guidance reflecting on takeaways of the activities. Reframing questions to not only be applicable to multiple groups but also as an opportunity as opposed to a complaint can also showcase to students that as leaders, they will need to uplift challenging followers to guide a positive change in behavior.

Conclusion

Developing leadership and followership practices can be challenging in student-led organizations as groups function without the guidance of individuals beyond their own group members. Placing students in an environment where they can actively engage leadership scholarship with their organizations provides a practical and direct path of student leadership development. Furthermore, offering simulation workshops where students engage in analyzing their leadership biases and practice behaviors while considering diverse follower styles can help groups enhance how they interact with each other. With the desire to continue improving workshops like this, the author aims to continue bringing opportunities to student-led a cappella groups. These campus activities can provide students an opportunity to not only develop as an a cappella group but also cultivate transferable skillsets of collaboration, problem-solving, and innovation beneficial beyond the sheet music.

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Emerging Scholars: Empowered to Engage: Black College Men's Leadership Experience in Campus Activities

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Black college men's participation in campus leadership is often restricted by systemic barriers, deficit-based narratives, and limited access to culturally affirming leadership development opportunities. However, when Black men are given space to explore leadership learning opportunities by connecting with campus activities, they unlock critical possibilities that support their leadership learning journey and promote community engagement. This article outlines the intersections of leader, follower, and context in shaping Black college men's higher education experiences, highlighting the importance of culturally relevant and affirming campus environments, and identifying examples of pathways to increasing Black college men's engagement with campus activities from a leadership perspective. Ultimately, we argue that Black men's leadership engagement must be reimagined through relational, identity-affirming, and context-specific approaches that cultivate not just participation but empower Black men to engage in leadership learning and campus activities.

Introduction

Higher education institutions have served as environments for shaping student experiences, particularly enhancing students' personal development, problem-solving skills, critical consciousness and awareness, and leadership learning experiences. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) highlights the changing trend of undergraduate students enrolling in higher education from Fall 2010 to Fall 2021, which faced a 15% decline; however, enrollment in higher education from Fall 2021 to Fall 2031 is expected to encounter a 9% increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Black undergraduate students in higher education from Fall 2010 to Fall 2021 experienced a 27% decline in enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023); as researchers have outlined, attending to Black men's structural and personal needs is imperative to their enrollment, persistence, retention, graduation, success and engagement in higher education (Druery & Brooms, 2019; Palmer et al., 2014). To reach the projected enrollment increase of undergraduate students in higher education institutions by 2031, there must be intentional efforts to support students, especially minoritized students, in this case, Black college men. One pathway that has been identified as a supportive path for supporting students during their undergraduate experience is engagement in leadership learning opportunities, particularly engagement with and participation in campus activities. In higher

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education environments, college students are afforded opportunities to participate in campus activities to increase their engagement on campus, promote a sense of belonging, and offer developmental leadership opportunities; these outcomes are a few benefits to engaging in campus activities beyond the traditional classroom experience in higher education. Although research has provided insight into how college students who participate in campus activities increase their leadership skills and sense of belonging, it is important to note that not all students navigate higher education environments through a one size fits all approach and or experience, especially students who do not make up the dominant identity of their respective institution. This article highlights the importance of culturally relevant and affirming campus environments, explores Black men's leadership through various context outlying the intersections of leader, follower, and context in shaping Black college men's leadership learning experiences, and identifying examples of pathways to increasing Black college men's engagement with campus activities from a leadership perspective.

Culturally Relevant and Affirming Campus Environments

It is not an unrelated concept that much of leadership development comes from planning and participating in major university-sponsored events, often with a leadership learning focus. The lack of involvement in co-curricular activities from Black men can often lead people to view Black men in a deficit lens, assuming that they do not care about gaining leadership developmental experiences. However, you could argue that having a deficit perspective does a disservice to young Black men on college campuses. Palmer and colleagues (2014) stated, "Black male students experience a chilly campus climate at HWIs and perceive the campus as hostile and unwelcoming." (p.63). We should lean into possibility thinking to create spaces where Black men can feel welcomed and a sense of belonging, while engaging in leadership development opportunities that come with participating in campus activities. To create those spaces, it must be an environment that is culturally relevant and affirming of Black men's identities, cultural backgrounds, and ability to thrive, contribute, and grow in collegiate settings.

The central question becomes what are the characteristics of a culturally relevant and affirming environment for Black college men to increase their engagement with campus activities and leadership learning experiences? Brooms (2018) states, "At predominately white institutions (PWIs), Black Students often face hostile campus climates, a lack of critical mass, a small number of faculty of color, and few opportunities to engage meaningfully with faculty and the majority student population." (p.107) This lack of community and mentorship possibilities further exacerbate Black men's negative campus experiences, particularly their struggle to find a sense of belonging on a campus. Developing an environment where Black men feel seen and supported begins with creating a culturally affirming and engaging campus community that better serves their needs throughout their leadership and campus activity journey.

Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE model)

Understanding the leadership development of Black men in higher education requires a deeper examination of the environments that shape their engagement. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model provides a helpful theoretical framework for identifying the institutional conditions that support the success of racially and ethnically diverse students. When

applied to campus activities and student organizations, four of the model's indicators offer insight into how institutions can cultivate spaces that affirm identity, foster belonging, and promote authentic leadership development (Strange & Banning, 2015). These indicators include meaningful cross-cultural engagement, cultural validation, collectivist cultural orientations, and humanized educational environments (Strange & Banning, 2015).

For many Black men, participation in student organizations comes with the pressure to conform to dominant (white) cultural norms. This often leads to environments where their contributions are undervalued or misunderstood. Cultural validation challenges this dynamic by affirming the identities, knowledge systems, and lived experiences that Black men bring into these spaces (Yosso, 2005). When organizations create room for cultural expression and acknowledgment, leadership becomes an act of authenticity rather than assimilation. Black men are more likely to lead with confidence when they do not feel the need to disassociate with parts of themselves to belong.

Leadership is also shaped by cultural values that emphasize collective responsibility. Many Black men approach leadership with a sense of duty to uplift others rather than focusing solely on personal advancement. This aligns with the CECE indicator of collectivist cultural orientations, which highlights the importance of shared goals and mutual success (Strange & Banning, 2015). Organizations that center collaboration, mentorship, and community care provide structures that resonate with how Black men often experience and enact leadership. These environments support a leadership identity that is deeply relational and grounded in community.

In addition to cultural validation and collectivist values, meaningful cross-cultural engagement plays a key role in expanding leadership opportunities. When Black men are invited into conversations and collaborations that are rooted in shared problem-solving and mutual respect, they gain access to broader networks and are positioned to influence change. These experiences are most impactful when they move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and instead create opportunities for honest dialogue, coalition building, and collective action.

Finally, humanized educational environments serve as a foundation for leadership development. Black men benefit from relationships with faculty, staff, and advisors who demonstrate genuine care and investment in their success. Involvement in student organizations that are supported by engaged and culturally aware professionals allow Black men to build trust and feel seen in their full humanity. These relationships are not transactional. They are essential to helping students feel grounded, encouraged, and capable of stepping into positional leadership roles with purpose and clarity.

Together, these four indicators reflect the kinds of environments where Black men are most likely to engage, lead, and thrive. The CECE indicators remind us that leadership is not only about developing individual skills. It is also about creating conditions where identity is affirmed, relationships are nurtured, and collective growth is possible. For institutions committed to the success of Black men, the CECE Model provides not only a framework but also a call to action.

Black Men's Leadership Through Various Contexts

To understand the leadership experiences of Black college men, this article applies a relational leadership lens grounded in the interplay of leader, follower, and context. Leadership is not a solitary act but a dynamic, relational process that relies on the interplay of leader, follower, and context (Guthrie & Devies, 2024). While leadership is often framed as an individual endeavor, followership is just as essential. As Guthrie et al. (2021) explain, followership is an intentional practice that enhances the relationship between leader and follower. Riggio (2020) further argues that followers are often more important than leaders, as leadership cannot exist without them.

This relational dynamic takes on even greater significance when considering the context of Black men in higher education, whose leadership is forged not in isolation but through collective navigation of systemic and historical oppression. Within institutions built on exclusion and racialized barriers, Black men have long been required to create their own support systems and communal pathways to success. In such contexts, leadership is not solely about individual initiative. As Guthrie and Devies (2024) describe, it becomes a collective process shaped by the interplay of leader, follower, and context. It is an intentional and communal act of resisting oppression, transforming systems, and celebrating Black identity and achievement. Followership is not secondary but central, as leadership often shifts fluidly between individuals who uplift and rely on one another. Unlike traditional models that celebrate personal achievement, Black male leadership is deeply rooted in collective uplift, where success is measured not by individual advancement alone but by the empowerment and well-being of the broader Black community.

Understanding leadership as a context-driven and collective process has important implications for student affairs professionals and leadership educators. Campus activities, for example, are more than just opportunities for leadership development. They function as support systems that counteract isolation and marginalization, providing Black men with the tools to build networks of solidarity, mentorship, and resilience. Whether through leadership courses, mentorship programs, student government, or Black student organizations (e.g., Black student union, historically Black fraternities, National Society of Black Engineers, etc.), Black men should cultivate a leadership identity that prioritizes the collective over the individual. This is especially crucial within predominantly white institutions, where they often find themselves in environments that overlook or undervalue their contributions. Campus activities, therefore, become more than sites of engagement. They serve as intergenerational networks of empowerment, resistance, and communal uplift that sustain Black student communities in the face of systemic barriers.

For example, Black men engaging in historically Black fraternities and student government will vary, as there are specific points to consider such as racialized, gendered, and environmental factors when supporting them, as each context is guided by a vision or goal specific to the context in which the leadership experience occurs. We provide the following bulleted list for leadership educators and practitioners to consider when supporting Black men through leadership learning:

- Balance support and empowerment: Both student affairs professionals (leadership educators) and student leaders contribute to student organization conditions, however, students drive cultural norms for their organization.

- Identity-affirming practices: Engage with Black men within their specific organizations to holistically understand their racial experiences on campus and their lived experiences, as these intentional affirming practices contribute to their sense of belonging and community.
- Coalition building: Establish networks and opportunities for Black men in identity-based organizations to collaborate with broader community partners to increase their network and perspectives
- Mentorship and leadership development: Provide training focused on leadership identity, capacity, and efficacy where this training increases leadership education and development opportunities. In addition to fostering leadership trainings, create and establish mentoring relationships with Black men and connect them with other Black men to grow and develop.

In addition to campus activities, leadership development programs also must move beyond individualistic models and intentionally create spaces where Black men can engage in both leadership and followership in ways that reflect their cultural traditions and lived experiences. Campus leadership programs that recognize and support collective, community-driven leadership approaches will not only better serve Black college men but also help create institutions that are truly inclusive of diverse leadership perspectives. When Black men are provided with spaces to lead in ways that reflect their values, experiences, and cultural traditions, they are not just developing as leaders for today. They are ensuring the longevity and strength of Black leadership for generations to come. The outlined bulleted list can be relevant across student organizations, but in this case particularly identity-based organizations that uplift Black men's experiences.

Building Affirming Campus Activity Engagement Opportunities for Black Men

Research and practice focused on the experiences of Black college men often highlight their engagement in college, in addition to the value of their relationships and participation in campus activities. Brooms (2018) research study describes the importance of Black male initiatives in relation to Black men's engagement on college campuses, included in the findings section are key insights for researchers, practitioners, and Black men navigating college based upon the following four key themes a) sense of belonging, b) access to resources, c) academic motivation, and d) collective identity development. Building upon the findings in Brooms (2018), we want to offer examples and recommendations for developing and creating affirming leadership pathways that increase Black men's engagement with campus activities. We center our examples and suggestions on culturally affirming and asset-based approaches that follow the themes of identity, context, and follower that can be adopted for practitioners and leadership educators, who work with and support Black college men. Particularly highlighting examples through campus activities like Black student union (identity), student government (context), and historically Black fraternities (follower).

Identity- Black Men Leadership Courses and Initiatives

Black men's leadership courses and initiatives are spaces where Black men can increase their cultural, racial, and gender identity development centered in a communal and uplifting space as a

necessary component to their development and growth in college (Robinson et al., 2023). Engaging in identity-specific environments in a curricular and co-curricular sense assists Black men in building and developing their leadership identity, which prepares them adequately for engagement with campus activities. Within these Black men-specific spaces, Black college men are positioned to learn more about themselves and other Black men as an opportunity to increase identity development and challenge socially constructed deficit perceptions of Black men. Engaging in Black men's leadership courses and initiatives offers them opportunities to be mentored in formal and informal contexts, which can contribute to how they begin navigating campus activities on the college campus (Robinson et al., 2023; Spencer Jr et al., 2024).

Context- Developing Affirming (Cultural) Environments for Black Men Leaders

Developing culturally affirming environments is essential for cultivating Black men's leadership capacities in ways that honor their lived experiences and sociocultural knowledge and values. Whether through campus centers and departments, identity-based leadership programs, and relationships with Black faculty, staff, and peers, culturally affirming environments offer intentional spaces for belonging and creativity, which are often missing in historically white institutions (Harper, 2015). Leadership development for Black men requires institutions to intentionally challenge dominant narratives and create and sustain culturally affirming environments that validate Black men to discover their leadership identity through engagement with campus activities. Establishing affirming contexts gives Black men the necessary resources to center care and increase their leadership capacity and efficacy (Guthrie & Devies, 2024). For example, a culturally affirming environment prioritizes relationality and community-building over individualistic leadership paradigms and models, allowing Black men to develop as leaders in ways that promote collective leadership frameworks, institutions that invest in culturally affirming environments, acknowledge the importance of place and space for Black men's leadership journeys in campus activity engagement.

Follower- Generativity of Black Men Leaders

Black men's leadership engagement in campus activities can foster generative norms and support for the next generation of Black men's leaders on campus. Black men's leadership engagement is not only transformational for the individual Black men involved but also generative in nature, rooted in collectivist leadership ideals. When Black men are supported and empowered in their leadership journeys, they often take on the role of mentoring and supporting their peers, cultivating a culture of reciprocity and support (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2015). Generativity amongst followers emerges through storytelling, peer mentorship, and modeling. In co-curricular, or campus activities, Black men can influence campus culture by showing others what culturally relevant, critical consciousness, and awareness leadership practices look like. As followers and future leaders witness these examples from their Black men peers, they are more likely to engage in leadership themselves, contributing to developing a pipeline of Black men's leadership on campus, particularly through engagement with campus activities.

Conclusion

Black college men with increased leadership learning, knowledge, and experiences lead with vision, care, and resilience, especially when institutions center their identity, create and sustain culturally affirming environments (contexts), and recognize their leadership's generativity (follower). Committing to an asset-based approach rooted in cultural affirmation, higher education institutions can move beyond deficit narratives and instead cultivate environments that nurture Black men's holistic leadership development. As leadership educators, practitioners, and learners, we must recognize and reimagine campus activity engagement that promotes Black men's participation, not just solely as participants, but also as critical to transforming campus cultural norms. Black men's leadership development thrives when they are empowered to lead as their whole selves, within communities that reflect and uplift their lived experiences. Empowering Black men to be change agents at their institution through a collectivist leadership model. Campus activities that support the development of Black college men do so through creating structures that value their identity as Black men in addition to fostering a sense of belonging and community that uplifts Black men. Contrary to this notion, leadership programs or organizations who choose to reimagine their current practices to better serve Black college men, we offer readers the following reflection questions to reflect on regarding how to support Black men's engagement in campus activities:

1. What potential structural and systematic barriers are deeply rooted in the institution's cultural norms and practices that limit Black men's engagement in campus activities?
2. Is it possible that this campus activity is asking Black men to assimilate to achieve social acceptance from their peers and institution?
3. What are the needs of the Black men in your specific community and have you catered this experience around addressing them?
4. How are your leadership development practices moving beyond the "Talented Tenth" fallacy of uplifting only a small group of exceptional leaders to instead cultivate leaders who are committed to collective uplift?
5. How do you gently but intentionally challenge cultural or gender norms within campus activities, such as hypermasculinity or individualism, that may limit or harm the broader Black student community while still affirming identity and fostering belonging?

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