Queer student leaders of color: Leadership as authentic, collaborative, culturally competent

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Leadership as Authentic, Collaborative, Culturally Competent

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ABSTRACT

A phenomenological study yielded rich data about the essence of being a queer student leader of color. Six participants described a desire to be authentic, culturally competent, and collaborative leaders, but they faced challenges enacting these forms of leadership as they navigated oppression (e.g., disrespect, stereotyping, tokenization, exoticization) within a predominantly White Queer Student Group. These experiences prompted them to consider creating a queer people of color group for support.

Keywords: leadership, intersectionality, queer students of color, identity, qualitative
Developing and enhancing the leadership skills of college students has become an increasing focus of higher education scholars (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006). Formal leadership development programs for students have increased, as has the study of student leadership (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Komives & Wagner, 2012; Posner, 2004). Yet research about leadership development of students from diverse backgrounds has not kept pace. Scholars have lamented that most leadership research is “silent on issues of equity, diversity, and social justice” (Chin, 2010, p. 150) and literature on college student leadership has adopted a similar “color-blind approach” (Dugan, Kodama, & Gebhardt, 2012, p. 174). Not only is there a limited body of research on student leaders from diverse backgrounds (e.g., students of color or queer students), there are only two published empirical studies documenting leadership experiences of students from multiple marginalized social identities (e.g., queer students of color). This paper begins to fill the gap in higher education research on leadership and intersectionality by illuminating the experiences of six queer student leaders of color at one predominantly White institution.

Literature Review

In the past two decades, studies of leadership programs and leadership identity development have proliferated (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Komives, et al., 2006), but leadership research has only recently acknowledged the diverse social identities of student leaders (Dugan et al., 2012). In quantitative studies, the focus on diversity has often meant comparing results between groups, such as students of color and White students, or women and men. Kezar and Moriarty (2000) found that Black and White men were more likely to label themselves as leaders upon entry to college and also to rate their growth in leadership abilities more highly than women. Drawing upon the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, Dugan and Komives (2007)
documented how marginalized groups, including gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students and students of color, reported a greater openness to, and comfort with, change. These large-scale quantitative studies offer important generalizable information about leadership and social identity groups but do not provide any information about the ways minoritized students conceive of, or enact, leadership in relation to their social identities. Following Harper’s (2012) lead, we use the term minoritized “to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities” (p. 9). To understand how students from minoritized social identity backgrounds make meaning of leadership identity, roles, and behaviors, we must look to a small subset of leadership research. In the following sections, we summarize literature examining student social identities (i.e., race, sexual orientation) and leadership.

**Student Leaders of Color**

There is a growing body of literature pertaining broadly to students of color and leadership (Arminio et al., 2000; Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008; Liang, Lee, & Ting, 2002) and research specifically addressing leadership experiences of African American students (Museus, 2008; St. John, Rowley, & Hu, 2009), Asian American students (Chung, 2014; Liang et al., 2002; Museus, 2008), and Latina/o students (Davis, 1997).

Several studies have addressed race, racism, and leadership as experienced by students of color in campus leadership positions (Arminio et al., 2000; Dugan et al., 2008; Liang et al., 2002). Many of these studies suggested student leaders of color may conceive leadership to be group-oriented instead of adhering to traditional individualistic, hierarchical notions of leadership advanced in higher education (Arminio et al., 2000; Dugan et al., 2008; Liang et al., 2002). Arminio et al. (2000) interviewed 106 African American, Asian American, and Latina/o
student leaders and found they often eschewed the “leader” label, demonstrated loyalty to the group rather than self, and perceived a lack of role models among campus administrators and faculty members (Arminio et al., 2000). Davis (1997) argued that leadership development among Latina/os often begins in the context of community-based organizations, including Latina/o student organizations on college campuses.

Another common theme in leadership studies of students of color is that identity based student organizations, and leadership in those organizations, provide culturally affirming experiences in otherwise unwelcoming predominantly White campus settings. One study reported that ethnic student organizations facilitated African American and Asian American students’ adjustment to predominantly White institutions, offering “venues of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and sources of cultural validation” (Museus, 2008, p. 580). Chung (2014) examined the role of racism in Asian American student leaders’ experiences and challenged perceptions that Asian American leadership styles are the product of cultural differences. While the aforementioned studies have expanded the knowledge base on intersections of race and leadership in higher education, this body of work has not expressly focused on the connections between race and other social identities such as sexual orientation.

**LGBTQ Student Leaders**

Just as there is a body of literature about student leaders of color, there is an expanding literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) student leaders. Much of this literature emphasizes the overlaps between leadership development and LGBTQ identity development. A number of these studies also describe how students make meaning of campus leadership, sexual orientation, and political activism. Drawing upon a case study of seven
student organizations at an LGBTQ conference, Renn and Bilodeau (2005) found LGBTQ leadership experiences supported students’ identity development. In a different study, Renn (2007) interviewed 15 student leaders of LGBTQ organizations at three Midwest institutions, and concluded positional leaders tended to work within existing systems, while post-positional/transformational activists were inclined to challenge systems of power. Renn found that students’ entry into leadership positions coincided with increasingly public or “out” LGBTQ identities, referred to as an “involvement-identification cycle” (p. 318). Finally, Ostick (2011) investigated the development of leadership self-efficacy among 10 highly involved gay, lesbian, queer, and sexually fluid student leaders. He found sexual orientation identity enhanced self-efficacy by improving relationships and personal awareness (Ostick, 2011). These studies have advanced knowledge of LGBTQ student leadership experiences, yet have not focused on intersections of other social identities such as race.

**LGBTQ Student Leaders of Color**

In 2007, Renn called for research to explore the role of multiple identities in shaping LGBTQ students’ leader and activist identities. Only two published studies have filled this gap in the literature. Renn and Ozaki (2010) studied the psychosocial and leadership identities among 18 student leaders of identity-based organizations at a large public institution. They found students followed either a parallel path of experiencing leadership and psychosocial identities separately or a merged path in which the identities intersected (e.g., “gay leader,” “Latina activist”) (Renn & Ozaki, p. 14). In another study, Vaccaro and Mena (2011) documented the stressors experienced by six self-identified queer student activists of color including limited formal support and poor boundaries that led to burnout, compassion fatigue, and even suicidal ideation.
In this review, we have documented how little we know about the leadership perspectives and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, especially queer students of color.

**Methodology**

**Theoretical Framework**

Given our focus on the link between leadership and college students’ multiple, intersecting social identities, the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and multiple identity development shaped this study. While there are differences of opinion about the definition of intersectionality, Shields (2008) explained, “a consistent thread across definitions is that social identities which serve as organizing features of social relations, mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another” (p. 302). Early writings about intersectionality focused on the personal, educational, and social realities of those living at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1991; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Others have argued that intersectional paradigms should emphasize the interplay between minoritized and privileged identities (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Museus & Griffin, 2011). While some of our participants possessed privileged identities (e.g., cisgender, male, Christian), the study emphasized the intersectionality of two minoritized identities (i.e., race, sexual orientation) of queer leaders of color.

Literature about multiple identity development also informed this study. In 2000, Jones and McEwen proposed a conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity which was later re-conceptualized (Abes, Jones & Mcwen, 2007) to include meaning-making capacity. These works suggested a person’s identity is dynamic, shaped by multiple identities, and responsive to contextual influences such as family and socio-cultural conditions. Abes and Kasch (2007) described a process of “queer authorship” which happens when students “change the dominant
social order in order to redefine the meaning of their multiple identities and the contexts in which their lives are situated” (Abes & Kasch, p. 630). While these works are not about intersectionality per se, they describe how multiple identities inform development. The literature on multiple identities served as an important foundation to our theoretical framework as we explored how students with multiple marginalized identities (i.e., queer students of color) made meaning of their campus leadership perspectives and experiences.

Method

Dugan et al. (2008) asserted that qualitative methods may be particularly useful in exploring the influences of multiple identities on leadership development, as “leadership development is likely a function of the interactions among multiple identities experienced simultaneously” (p. 491). Qualitative phenomenological methods were used in this study. Inspired by philosopher Edmund Husserl (1913/1962), phenomenology as a qualitative method, “secures descriptive access to the immanent meanings within psychological life as it occurs in natural contexts [and] analyzes the complexities of these meanings” (Wertz, 2005, p. 175). Phenomenology is effective for understanding an individual’s lived experiences with a particular phenomenon, such as campus leadership (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Husserl, 1913/1962; Wertz, 2005). DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees and Moradi (2010) argued phenomenological research is one of the most effective methods for studying the complex lived experiences of queer people of color.

Sample. Since we were interested in delving into the phenomenological essence of the leadership experiences of queer students of color, we sought information rich cases (Creswell, 2007). Participants were recruited from a university diversity center and Queer Student Group (QSG) at one private, predominantly White, mid-sized university. The QSG was a university
club for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer activists and their allies. QSG members received an email invitation to participate in the study. Recruitment announcements were made during QSG meetings and flyers were posted in the campus diversity center. Individuals who met the following criteria were selected for participation in the study: (a) self-identification as a person of color, (b) self-identification as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, and (c) self-identification as a student leader. We broadly defined a “student leader” as any matriculated student who self-identified as taking leadership roles (formal and informal) on campus.

Six queer student leaders of color volunteered to participate yielding a sample size that aligned with typical phenomenological studies (i.e., 3-10) (Creswell, 2007). Each was a member of the QSG and four of the six held formal leadership roles in the QSG (e.g., president, secretary). Each participant also held other formal and informal leadership positions on campus. Participant genders were as follows: women (n=2), men (n=3), and (n=1) was considering a genderqueer identity. Students self-identified as Latino (n=2), African American (n=2), Chinese American (n=1), and biracial (n=1). All were undergraduate students who ranged in age from 18-21.

**Procedure.** The choice to conduct two interviews instead of three, as typical for phenomenology, was partly to accommodate the availability of busy student leaders, many of whom graduated after interview two. With the exception of one student who transferred schools, all participants engaged in two semi-structured, individual interviews in a calendar year. The interviews lasted 60-120 minutes. Open-ended questions included: “Tell me a little bit about how you self-identify”; “What is it like being a queer person of color on campus?”; “Tell me about your experience of being a member of the QSG”; “What is it like being a queer student leader of color on a predominantly White campus?” Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Analytic memos were kept throughout the process.
While much of the literature on phenomenological methods focuses on philosophical assumptions (Husserl, 1913/1962; Wertz, 2005), Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) offer a set of methodological procedures that guided our analysis. In the first phase of analysis, transcripts were read in their entirety to get a sense of the “whole” description as offered by the participants. Next, we used phenomenological reduction to determine meaning units. To do this, each transcript was divided into units (or sections) that reflected unique aspects of the participant's experience as a queer leader of color. Students talked about their: pre-college experiences, social identity development journeys, experiences with QSG, perspectives and struggles as student leaders, and search for a sense of community. In the final stage of data analysis, meaning units were transformed into an essence that described a holistic and structural image of the student leadership experience for queer students of color. Holistic and common meanings presented here relate to leadership perspectives, experiences with marginalization in QSG, and the search for support from other queer people of color.

We engaged in a number of qualitative strategies to address trustworthiness and credibility (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Morrow, 2005). First, we invited participants to review a draft of the emergent meaning units after interview one. All participants agreed the meaning units reflected their lived realities. Second, negative cases and discrepant information were revisited throughout the analytic process. Third, we utilized meaning units and themes that yielded 100% agreement among the researchers. Finally, we clarified researcher bias using analytic memos and researcher conversations about the ways our perspectives and social identities shaped our analyses. In qualitative work, the researcher is also the instrument (Jones et al., 2014). As a White bisexual woman who serves as a faculty member and a White queer man who is an administrator, our identities surely shaped our assumptions, expectations, and
ability to form trusting relationships with study participants who shared only some of our social identities. There is no simple way to reduce an imbalance of power between the researcher and study participants. In an effort to avoid obvious power issues, we chose not study anyone who was a student of the faculty researcher.

We did not adhere strictly to two processes sometimes found in classic phenomenological literature. Wertz (2005) argued phenomenologists must “set aside previous theories” (p. 175) and assumptions. Though we could not set aside prior knowledge about leadership or LGBTQ students, we approached the project with no assumptions about what we would find. We also did not engage in phenomenological bracketing (Husserl, 1913/1962) because we agree with contemporary educational and psychological scholars who argue bracketing is impossible (e.g., Jones et al., 2014; Morrow, 2005).

Limitations. This study had a number of limitations. First, because the label “queer students of color” represents a variety of intersecting identities and groups, additional research is needed to understand diverse students’ orientations toward leadership. This study was limited by a focus on two minoritized identities (race and sexual orientation). Further, intersectional research on leadership should incorporate explorations of student leadership that considers additional oppressed and privileged identity categories (e.g., intersections of race and sexual orientation for queer White students).

Findings

In line with the foundational tenet of phenomenology, we offer a multifaceted perspective on the essence of leadership for six queer students of color. First, we highlight student perspectives on authentic and culturally competent leadership. Next, we describe the tensions between collaborative and individualistic leadership styles. Then, we share challenges students
faced enacting these preferred styles of leadership (i.e., authentic, culturally competent, collaborative) as they navigated racism within the predominantly White QSG. We pay special attention to the ways their multiple minoritized identities shaped the phenomenological essence of their leadership perspectives, actions, and desires to create a queer people of color organization to address their unmet needs.

**Authentic and Culturally Competent Leadership**

While there were slight variations in the words students used to describe their perspectives on leadership, all talked about the importance of leaders being authentic and culturally competent. For participants, authenticity meant not only being aware of, but also honoring, their multiple intersecting identities. Ricardo explained, “I think it’s about being real. I think that’s one of the biggest things with leadership, with me, is being real about where we are in the world.” Yet, achieving the goal being an authentic leader was not always easy, especially for students who acknowledged that their identity understandings were in flux. Corey worried that if he was figuring out his complicated identity intersections, he might not be an effective leader, especially to peers who were also struggling with identity issues. He asked himself, “So how do I help people and guide people through this process that I haven’t been through myself yet?” During interview two, Corey was preparing to take on the presidency of QSG. In the previous year, he had embarked on a challenging identity journey. He explained, “I was learning about my multiple identities, and how they intersect, and leading through them.” He shared how this meaning making process led him to rethink what authenticity in leadership meant to him. He said,

It’s completely. . . kind of changed the way that I think about things, and how I’m intentional about the things that I do. . . now I have to rethink all these [leadership]
processes. . . Now that I’ve realized that I’m a person of color who is also queer, it’s changed some things for me actually, it’s… I don’t know if it will necessarily be easy being a person of – just being a person of color. Like I have to be a person of color who’s also queer.

Study participants recognized that being an authentic leader meant not only being true to themselves, but it also meant leading in a way that encouraged followers to honor their authentic selves. This required the creation of safe spaces in student organizations, like QSG, where all members could be authentic and respected by peers for doing so. Participants were especially sensitive to creating inclusive and culturally affirming spaces for members who held multiple minoritized social identities. Ricardo wondered how to integrate “moments of support” and “self-affirming conversations” for queer people of color in a predominantly White club. In James’ words, the QSG was “just gay,” meaning QSG conversations and activities rarely affirmed diversity and intersectionality among members. As a queer person of color, he felt obligated to role model authenticity and inspire the QSG to be more culturally competent. But, he was not always sure how.

Ricardo discussed how important it was for leaders to be culturally sensitive and to create safe spaces where students could explore their identity journeys. Yet, he found leadership development trainings to be severely lacking in helping him become an authentic and culturally competent leader. Ricardo described a formal leadership training in which he had participated as “awful” because it framed leadership in a “status quo … upper middle class, White” manner that invalidated his authentic self. He also explained how it did not prepare him to create safe spaces where others could be authentic. He said,
Leadership … I think that it’s. . .incredibly dynamic and not easily done. I don’t think. …
[leaders usually] set tones for environments of safety. It’s about mediation, it’s about
being sensitive, being compassionate. The one thing I think that’s missing in a lot of
leadership trainings I’ve gone through, when we’re defining leadership, it needs to be
culturally sensitive and culturally accurate.

**Collaborative Leadership**

As they attempted to engage in authentic and culturally competent leadership, students
often tried out different leadership styles. Group-driven (collaborative) and leader-driven
(individual) behavior became a central tension that students acknowledged in their learning
process. Because students viewed leadership as an authentic and culturally competent process,
they typically preferred a group-centered, collaborative style of leadership. They expressed a
desire to consult group members, gather ideas, and change course as needed. Laila contemplated
accepting the secretary position in QSG. She decided to run after learning about the president’s
“let’s see what the group wants to do” collaborative leadership style. Luis explained how
collaborative leadership yielded group cultures where “we all pitch in wherever we can.”

Though participants in the study described a desire to utilize collaborative over leader-
driven styles, many believed leaders sometimes needed to deploy a combination of pursuing their
individual goals and listening to group members’ concerns. Jun offered:

It’s hard to work in a group because when you’re organizing activities and doing activist
work there’s a lot of logistical and a lot of ideals that we don’t agree with, and there’s a
lot of things that we need to consider. … We run into a lot of problems with organizing
because we just want to be so democratic, and sometimes you just say: “Okay, we’re
going to make an executive decision. This has to work otherwise we’re not going to get
anything done.” So the challenge is coming to compromises and … really knowing where our strengths and weaknesses are with one another and balancing out each other.

As described by Jun, there were times when students felt pressed to engage in leader-centered behaviors to achieve group success. Those behaviors included delegating, directive guiding, hands-on work, and making “executive decisions” for the group. Corey explained how he preferred a collaborative leadership style where he could “recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the people that you’re working with and draw upon those strengths and weaknesses.” He acknowledged an occasional need to “step in and take control” if group members were unproductive in fulfilling delegated roles.

To our participants, ideal leadership was mostly collaborative with occasional leader-driven behaviors that allowed both leaders and members to reach their goals. But, meeting everyone’s goals was challenging. QSG’s role was variously seen as an activist/political group, educational and awareness raising organization, and a support group for queer students. In the words of Corey, “there are a lot of different agendas.” Ricardo described the struggle to be an authentic and collaborative leader who was true to his political leanings without forcing his radical agenda on members who wanted something else from QSG. He said,

Working as a leader in the queer communities, there’s always that fear that my politics are too radical. How do I phrase things to not put people off? Because, I want to recognize people at different places in their process, but at the same time hold true to my politics and where I stand. So it’s that nervousness of like…“Oh no. What am I supposed to do?”

Students felt collaborative leaders should recognize when a group’s activities did not resonate with members and help the group adjust accordingly. James explained that QSG officers
(including himself) wanted to pursue political and educational activities such as Transgender Awareness Week, but attendance at those events was low. James reflected that, “we didn’t have enough social events that really kept the people interested.” As a result of numerous new members who had recently come out and who were looking to make social connections, James described his goal to shift QSG from a “really big activist group” toward becoming more social in nature to meet new member needs. He shared,

I think the school sees QSG as a very political group and not as a group to meet people. … I think it’s really cool that we are [political] and that we do so much, but I just really think that it scares people because I know people that are on campus that are afraid to affiliate with QSG because of what QSG stands for and they don’t stand for the same thing. … We shouldn’t be afraid to have anyone that’s queer come [to QSG]. I just hope to change the image and just make it more open.

Despite his own activist goals, James concluded that he needed to be a collaborative leader when it came to determining QSG goals and activities. He said, “it’s not my choice, it’s not my group; it’s everyone’s group.”

From Marginalization to Support

Leading the predominantly White QSG presented unique challenges to participant aspirations to be authentic, culturally competent and collaborative leaders, especially when they encountered marginalization from QSG peers. In this section, student narratives show how queer student leaders of color were stereotyped, tokenized, exoticized, and disrespected. They realized the predominantly White QSG was not necessarily a safe space where they could authentically lead from the intersections of their multiple minoritized identities. Nor did they feel they could successfully inspire White queer students to be socially inclusive or engage in activism that
supported *all* people. The deep emotional toll of this struggle has been described elsewhere (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). Here we describe how students began to consider the possibility of creating a Queer People of Color Organization. Participants envisioned an organization where they could be authentic and engage with supportive peers of color who understood their identity and leadership struggles.

Jun explained how White QSG members treated her in stereotypically racist ways. First, she was treated as if she were invisible by White QSG and heterosexual Asian peers. She stated, “Being a queer woman of color … we’re not really being seen. We’re not recognized … [we do] not exist in the queer group or in the people of color group, so that’s really challenging.” She also explained how peers, “see me as. . .a model minority. . . It sucks because that’s passive racism and it’s a kind of oppression, and people don’t recognize that. That just really frustrates me.”

Ricardo described being president of the QSG as difficult, recalling an incident in which the membership debated whether to formally express an alliance with the Black Student Organization following a controversial racial incident. The predominantly White membership did not seem to understand how writing a letter in support of the Black Student Organization was relevant to their role as a queer student group. To Ricardo, who strived to be an authentic and culturally competent leader, a public show of solidarity from QSG made perfect sense. Ricardo explained his frustration:

At that point I almost like threw in my hat and walked away from the organization. I really was contemplating quitting because it really like hurt … As a person of color, I was like, “Are you serious? Like, are you people like not getting it?”
Despite disagreement with White members, Ricardo believed the group should make decisions democratically, preferring to serve as a collaborative leader. In the end, the QSG did not draft the letter of solidarity.

Ricardo also talked about how White members regularly judged and tokenized him. Experiences with marginalization led him to constantly question the motives of his peers. He said,

Being seen as a leader for a White group, one of the things I’m very conscious of is… being a person of color, and making sure that I’m not going to be tokenized, or what I’m saying is not being belittled or taken less as… And just being very conscious of those things, of the way that I may be being judged, or the things I have to say are being judged.

These experiences forced Ricardo to wonder whether or not he could be an authentic leader of the QSG. He also realized that the predominantly White organization could not offer genuine “support” and “affirming conversations” for all people, namely queer people of color. He and other study participants began conversations about creating a separate group for queer people of color. A majority of the students decided that such a space would allow them to find empowerment in the face of QSG marginalization. Jun explained that “Finding [empowerment] within students of color, and queer students of color especially, is a lot easier for me.” This group became a safe place to be their authentic selves and discuss tough intersectional issues, topics White peers would not understand. Corey expressed a need for an affirming space to explore his identity as a queer person of color:

I have to be a person of color who’s also queer. And it’s not even how do I come to grips with that, because I’m okay with being queer and I’m okay with being African American, but how do I do that within these two separate — these two different communities?
Corey was “struggling along two fronts”: His identities as queer and African American led him in “separate directions sometimes.” He wanted the safety of a Queer People of Color Organization to talk about these intersectional identity struggles. James envisioned a safe space to discuss not only leadership, but everyday concerns such as navigating dating relationships as a queer person of color. James described being ignored or, alternately, treated as exotic by White men. He did not “relate to White gay men as much as I used to, because now … I have different issues. … People don’t date me because I’m of color, and I didn’t realize that.” He certainly did not feel comfortable discussing these topics with White peers in the QSG. Jun and Ricardo also desired an affirming space where they could discuss the impact of the model minority stereotype and tokenization. Jun summed up the sentiments of her peers when she said she “wouldn’t be so lost” if there was a queer people of color group where she could find role models and support.

**Discussion and Implications**

Students in this study described a phenomenological essence of striving to be authentic, culturally competent, and collaborative leaders with multiple minoritized identities, in a predominantly White student group. Queer students of color faced a variety of leadership dilemmas including: navigating racism within QSG; becoming aware of others’ perceptions of their leadership; and considering the creation of an intersectional identity organization that would reflect their own developmental needs.

Participants gravitated toward more collaborative leadership practices, which may reflect relational orientations prevalent within their communities and families of origin. This finding affirms prior research on collectivist and relational leadership orientations of students of color (Arminio et al., 2000; Dugan et al., 2008; Renn & Ozaki, 2010). Supporting the findings of Arminio et al. (2000) in particular, students in this study described a group-oriented approach
that privileged the wishes of the group over individual motivations and ideologies. This experience was on display perhaps most poignantly in Ricardo’s simultaneous disappointment with the Queer Student Group for failing to offer solidarity to the Black Student Organization and respect for the group’s democratic decision-making. Our findings also suggest that enacting a collaborative leadership style conflicted with students’ desire to lead in a way that was culturally competent and authentic to their intersectional identities. Living up to their self-proclaimed leadership ideals of authenticity, cultural competence, and collaboration in a group of predominantly White members who exhibited racism and ignored intersectionality by focusing on “just [being] gay” was a struggle (James).

There is a plethora of literature about how college students develop leadership identities and skills (e.g., Dugan & Komives, 2007; Komives et al., 2006; Posner, 2004). Yet, much of this literature does not acknowledge issues of diversity, identity, and social justice (Dugan et al., 2012). The few studies that acknowledge differences or similarities among social identities (largely race), do so without an explicit emphasis on intersectionality. Our findings call attention to these gaps by explicating how queer students of color attempted to adopt leadership styles rooted in authenticity, cultural competency, and collaboration, but found enacting those perspectives in a predominantly White queer group difficult. Because this experience was emotionally taxing, they desired a separate support group for people of color. Our intention is not to suggest these students were ineffective leaders who gave up and retreated to a safe space. Our data show that leadership is hard and leading in the face of oppression is harder. Even students who were confident enough to live at, and lead from, the intersections of their multiple minoritized identities faced oppression and resistance when they attempted to put their culturally competent, collaborative, and authentic leadership ideals into practice. Our data suggest
leadership development programs and trainings must acknowledge and prepare students for the challenges of translating deeply held leadership perspectives (e.g., authentic, culturally competent, collaborative) into real world practice.

Findings also show traditional leadership models that emphasize positions, hierarchy, and leader-oriented action would be an ill fit for this group of queer leaders of color (Chin, 2010; Dugan et al., 2012). One student (Ricardo) explicitly critiqued leadership training as conforming to an individualized, hierarchical leadership grounded in “upper-middle class White” values. Participant narratives suggest a need to reconsider how student leadership is approached in academic courses and programming. Leadership development training should include an emphasis on collectivist approaches to leadership. Such an orientation necessarily entails a critique of highly individualized approaches to leadership that affirm a rigid leader-follower dichotomy.

Leadership training should incorporate a cultural competency lens (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004) that invites explorations of identity and how social identities inevitably affect leadership experiences. Scholars and practitioners must refrain from essentializing differences in leadership as only cultural or group-oriented. The context and effects of systemic oppression (Chung, 2014) must also be explicitly addressed in leadership development programming and research.

Study participants attempted to lead a predominantly White group that stereotyped (Jun), exoticized (James), and tokenized (Ricardo) their leaders of color. As a result, they felt invisible, judged, and disrespected by White peers. Despite this marginalizing QSG culture, participants expressed a desire to lead authentically and “be real” as queer people of color. They also realized that they needed a different place (i.e., Queer People of Color Organization) where they could
glean support. Student affairs professionals must consider the specific needs of identity-based groups, including intersectional identity groups, to provide support for all students. Practitioners must understand that students’ identity development processes are complex and that their perspectives on leadership likely reflect those complicated self-understandings. Even if only a few students request an intersectional identity organization (e.g., Queer People of Color Organization) there is an important need to be filled by such a group.

**Future Research**

Most studies of the interconnections between leadership and identity (including the present study) have taken place at predominantly White institutions. Future studies should expand beyond this institutional type. Our study was also limited to leaders in a predominantly White, queer student club. We cannot know if, or how, students of color in other types of campus organizations make meaning of identity intersectionality and leadership. In the future, researchers should explore identity intersections and leadership within so-called “mainstream” or campus-wide student governance organizations.

**Conclusion**

This study offered a nuanced view of the leadership perspectives and styles of queer student leaders of color within one predominantly White campus context. Findings prompt questions about the utility of deeply embedded leadership norms that value individualism and hierarchy as well as leadership practices that fail to acknowledge the connection between leadership and multiple social identities. Practitioners and researchers can utilize these findings to support student leaders with multiple marginalized identities as they attempt to enact authentic, culturally competent, and collaborative leadership while simultaneously navigating marginalization.
References


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