Leadership Identity Development Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Student Leaders

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Although a growing body of scholarship describes the development of LGBT identity in college students and abundant literature provides evidence of the developmental impact of campus involvement, little has been known about the experiences of LGBT student leaders. We interviewed 15 students from three Midwestern institutions and analyzed data using an emerging model of Leadership Identity Development (Komives et al., 2003, 2004) to identify experiences that supported participants’ growth as student leaders. Students experienced challenges specific to leading in the LGBT context (e.g., having to come out as a spokesperson), as well as supports that were context specific (e.g., entering an LGBT community through involvement in campus activities). We discuss implications for the practice of leadership education and student group advising, as well as for future research.

In recent years, researchers have established a modest body of scholarship on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) college students (e.g., Abes & Jones, 2004; Dilley, 2002, 2005; Broido & Evans, 2002).

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1999; Stevens, 2004; Wall & Evans, 2000). Sometimes choosing the self-label “queer,” LGBT students have transformed the landscape of postsecondary institutions through student organizations, campus activism, and demands for access to queer theory and subjects in the curriculum (Rhoads, 1998; Sanlo, 2002). While these studies provide an empirical base for understanding LGBT students’ experiences on campus, the question of how involvement in LGBT-specific activities may influence LGBT students’ development remains largely unexplored.

A substantial body of theory and research supports the premise that involvement in campus activities leads to student development and learning, including the development of leadership skills and abilities (Astin, 1993; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There is also evidence that involvement in campus activities related to a specific element of identity—such as race, sexual orientation, or gender—supports exploration of identity construction (Arminio, Carter, Jones, Kruger, Lucas, Washington, Young, & Scott, 2000; Inkelas, 2004; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Liang, Lee, & Ting, 2002). What is less well explored is what, if any, influence this identity-based activism and involvement has on the development of students as leaders. Do identity-based leadership experiences contribute to the development of student leadership among members of historically marginalized groups? If so, what are the implications for students, the professionals who work with them, and the communities on and off campus whom they serve?

The purpose of our study is to explore the relationship between involvement in student leadership activities and the development of LGBT campus activists and leaders. Specifically, our study is designed to address the question:

What, if any, is the relationship between involvement in leadership of an LGBT student organization and student outcomes related to (1) leadership development and (2) LGBT identity?

The focus of this article is on leadership development in the context of LGBT student involvement; elsewhere (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005) we discuss LGBT identity development in this context.
The Development of College Students as Leaders

Although there is abundant literature related to student leadership development and a growing body of scholarship on LGBT students, there is scant research on the intersections of LGBT identity and leadership development. Indeed, there is relatively little research on any identity-based leadership experience in college, though nonempirical work (e.g., Liang et al., 2002) is becoming commonplace. Important exceptions include Rhoads’ (1997, 1998) case studies of identity-based student activism, Sutton and Terrell’s (1997) study of African American men, Arminio et al.’s (2000) study of leadership experiences of students of color, Yamasaki’s (1995) study of Japanese-American student organizations, and Porter’s (1998) study of gay and lesbian identity and transformational leadership self-efficacy. Although differing substantially in method and format (quantitative, qualitative, psychometric; articles, books, dissertation), the common conclusion is that being involved in leadership activities related to some facet of identity (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) promotes positive development of leadership or activism and personal identity.

College Student Leadership in Identity-Based Contexts

Within the rich literature on college students and leadership development, there is a subset of studies that explore leadership in identity-based contexts. Some of this literature approaches the topic in a theoretical or practical fashion (e.g., Arminio, 1993; Liang et al., 2000) or relates cultural or gender factors to existing leadership theories (see Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Komives, 1994; Romano, 1996). There are also a small number of empirical reports on leadership in identity-based contexts, and it is upon this group that we concentrate our attention. Common themes across this literature include the development of generalizable leadership skills, reluctance to take on the title “leader” among peers, discussion of the personal cost of leadership, and a group-based rather than individual approach to leadership. While these themes are not unique to student leadership experiences in identity-based groups, they take on special importance to students from groups historically marginalized in higher education: women, people of color, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender students.
Time and again, students leading identity-based groups provide evidence of the general leadership skills they acquire in these specific contexts. African American men who are leaders in their Greek Letter Organizations “credit their organizations for surfacing their hidden leadership qualities and strengthening their organizational and people skills” (Sutton & Terrell, p. 58). A student government president at a women’s college reported, “I’ve gained a lot of self-confidence from being in leadership positions. I’ve done things I never thought I could do. … I’ve become more outspoken. I have to talk and think on my feet, and make decisions” (Whitt, 1994, p. 202).

Across existing studies is the theme of reluctant acceptance of the title leader. As Arminio et al. (2000) noted, “Contrary to the conventional leadership literature . . . and leadership program marketing information, which glorifies and encourages leadership practices (Murray, 1994), most participants did not consider themselves ‘leaders.’ In fact, some resented the term ‘leader’ being used to describe them” (p. 500). Some students of color interviewed felt that the leader label separated them from other members of their racial group or marked them as someone who had sold out to an oppressive system (pp. 500–501). Similarly, Japanese-American student leaders tended not to take on formal leadership roles in campus-wide activities and shunned the label leader (Yamasaki, 1995).

A third theme across studies of identity-based leadership is that of orientation to leadership for the sake of the group rather than for individual gain. Student leaders of color “articulated a strong group responsibility for becoming involved” and “virtually all students interviewed discussed the importance of the team or the group” (Arminio et al., 2000, p. 503). Further, when asked to describe their best leadership experience, “most discussed their group’s best accomplishment rather than what they individually did” (Arminio et al., 2000, p. 504). Many of the African American fraternity leaders in Sutton and Terrell’s (1997) study “chose to share their leadership talents with agencies within the African American community” off campus (p. 61). Student leaders at women’s colleges engaged in “a consensus style of leadership in which everyone is valued equally” in “egalitarian and horizontal [leadership] structures, participatory governance, concern for individual circumstances, and alternative metaphors for organizing” (Whitt, 1994, p. 201).
Even this brief overview of leadership in identity-based settings indicates that there are common themes in the literature: the development of generalizable leadership skills, reluctant acceptance of the leader title, and an orientation to the group rather than the individual leader. Yet it is the development of leadership identity in individuals that is of most interest to the present study. How, then, in the context of an identity-based, group-oriented leadership experience do students come to see themselves as leaders—whether or not they choose to apply that title to themselves and their work? In the next section, we discuss leadership identity development (LID).

Developing a Leadership Identity

Underlying the notion of developing an identity as “leader” lies a complicated array of personal values, group norms, cognitive development, and perceived need to realize a particular vision (HERI, 1996; Komives et al., 1998; Komives, Casper, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2003, 2004). In the 1990s, research on student leadership gave rise to a handful of models of leadership or leadership development that incorporate these factors. There are two in particular that made major contributions to scholarship and practice feature non-hierarchical leadership in postsecondary settings: the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996) and the Relational Leadership Model (Komives et al., 1998). They form a foundation for an emerging model of LID (Komives et al., 2003, 2004) that is the conceptual framework for the leadership development portion of our study.

The LID Model

Komives et al. (2004) asserted, “Understanding the process of LID is central to teaching leadership and facilitating the learning of leadership” (p. 1). They have proposed a LID model that we find useful for exploring the experiences of LGBT student leaders. The model, developed from a grounded theory study of undergraduate student leaders, includes six stages of leadership identity, defined as a personal and social identity incorporating “an awareness that [one] can make a difference and can work effectively with others to accomplish change” (Komives et al., 2003, p. 1). As an individual moves across the stages,
she comes to an increasingly complex, deeper understanding of leadership, community, and self in relation to others. The stages of the LID model are:

1. **Awareness**—recognizing that leadership is happening around you; an “inactive” follower

2. **Exploration/Engagement**—intentional involvement, experiencing groups, seeking change, taking on responsibilities; an “active” follower or member

3. **Leader Identified**—leadership seen as positional roles held by self or others
   - *Emerging*: taking on individual responsibility, individual accomplishments, getting things done
   - *Immersion*: managing others, getting things done

4. **Leadership Differentiated**—move away from positional leadership view; leadership can come from anywhere in the group
   - *Emerging*: joining with others in shared tasks/goals from positional or nonpositional group role (leadership from anywhere); a participatory leader
   - *Immersion*: seeks to facilitate a good group process from positional or nonpositional leader role

5. **Generativity**—active commitment to a personal passion; accepting responsibility for the development of others, team learning, and for sustaining organizations

6. **Internalization/Synthesis**—continued self-development and lifelong learning, striving for congruence, and internal confidence; sees organizational complexity across contexts (Komives et al., 2004, pp. 2–3, italics in original)

Komives (personal communication, September 30, 2003) indicated that a substantial subject-object shift (Kegan, 1982, 1994) occurs between stages 3 and 4 when views of others change and view of self in relation to others changes so that stage 4 is clearly a differentiation of the concept of leadership—so if people are in a positional role, they see it as shared/participative and the value of others is clear; or they can participate in leadership as a member “without a title” and know they are doing leadership.
The developmental importance of the subject-object shift ("I am leader" to "I do leadership") cannot be overemphasized; the difference between being and doing/having an identity is central to racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation identity development models (e.g., Cass, 1979; Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995) and represents an important step in cognitive development as well (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1982, 1994).

Another key factor in LID is the influence of what Komives et al. (2003) term “adults.” The LID accounts for the importance of others (family, older peers, teammates, group members) as models and mentors, meaning makers and friends. The sponsorship of adults or older peers was noted as especially important for students of color at the predominantly White institution at which Komives and her colleagues collected the data that led to the LID.

Working with a philosophy consistent with the Social Change Model (HERI, 1996) and the Relational Leadership Model (Komives et al., 1998), the LID makes manifest the processes by which a college student learns “a relational-values approach to leadership which is inclusive, ethical, grounded in principles and values” and “seeks collaborative processes in working with others toward a common vision or common purpose” (Komives et al., 2004, p. 1). In the context of LGBT student leadership and activism—a context marked to a greater or lesser extent by “common vision or common purpose,” depending on the campus and its LGBT community at a given time—the LID represents a robust framework for examining the development of individual leadership identity.

Limitations of Stage Models of Identity Development

Although we embrace the LID for this study, it is important to acknowledge limitations of using stage-based models of identity development; indeed, Komives et al. (2004) claim “to use the term ‘stages’ cautiously” (p. 4). First, stage models assume a homogeneity of experience and developmental style that may or may not exist across generations and cultures. Second, assuming that stage models lead to an optimal point of development casts doubt on the legitimacy of identities that fail to “achieve” that optimal end point. Rhoads (1997) made a compelling argument that when applied to identity-based activism,
this assumption serves the purposes of the establishment in maintaining the status quo by marking individuals who appear “stuck” in the developmental phases of immersion or identity pride (e.g., Cass, 1979; Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995) are somehow not fully developed.

In spite of these concerns, we find the LID a compelling model for the study of LGBT student leaders. We value the LID’s emphasis on individual leadership development in the context of group roles, we appreciate the grounded theory approach to formulating the LID, and we support the notion that cognitive growth (i.e., the subject-object shift) is central to both leadership and LGBT identity development. The underlying emphasis on social justice, rooted in the SCM and relational leadership models, fits the agendas of the students in question—queer student leaders and activists.

Method

Given the exploratory nature of our research question we chose a grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which guided sampling, data collection, and data analysis. We selected a purposive sample (Patton, 1990) of 15 LGBT-identified student leaders and activists from three institutions in the Midwest. We conducted open-ended interviews and applied the LID model to the data, leading to the findings presented in this article.

Sites

We chose three campuses to participate in this study. “Research University” is a public research extensive institution of over 40,000 students, with a well developed LGBT student support infrastructure consisting of an LGBT campus resource office, LGBT student caucuses in the residence halls, and a number of LGBT student organizations. “Comprehensive University” is a primarily commuter institution, where fewer than 4,000 of the school’s 25,000 students live on campus. An LGBT campus resource office provides support to individual students, a youth education theater group, and an LGBT student organization that has struggled recently in vitality and membership. “Liberal Arts College” enrolls about 1,200 students through a highly selective admissions process. A distinctive curriculum that requires
students to participate in sustained domestic or international experiential education draws 80% of the student body off campus for one or more semesters, leading to a high turnover rate among leaders of student organizations, including the Gay/Lesbian/Bi Support Organization (GLBSO).

**Participants**

Students were identified as potential participants by the professional LGBT campus resource coordinator on the two university campuses and by the advisor to the LGBT student organization at the liberal arts college. (It is important to note that one of us, Brent Bilodeau, performs this professional role at one of the universities in the study.) We contacted students by email to invite them to join the study. Eight students from Research University, five from Comprehensive University, and two from Liberal Arts College participated in the study. Some students held positional leadership roles (e.g., chair, coordinator, facilitator, committee chair, etc.), while others were nominated based on their involvement as nonpositional leaders (e.g., the student who organized a collective political action in a consensus-based coalition). Participants include seven men, five women, and three female-to-male transgender students; they range from first-year students to a “sixth-year senior;” they represent a diverse racial, ethnic, and religious/spiritual mix; and include in-state, out-of-state, and international students. Purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) for this diverse sample has provided a rich data set for the examination of LGBT leadership and identity. Note: In discussing the transgender students, we use pronouns that match the students’ gender identities at the time of data collection.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Interviews followed an open-ended protocol that focused on involvement in campus and community LGBT activities, other (non-LGBT specific) campus and community leadership and involvement, and LGBT/queer identity. We conducted early interviews jointly, though subsequent interviews were conducted with only one of us present. Audio recordings were transcribed, and transcripts were analyzed
independently by each of us. Data analysis has followed a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with codes and themes generated early in the project modified and augmented as necessary in subsequent analyses. Analyses have also included a priori coding schemes to explore LGBT identity development (D’Augelli, 1994) and leadership development as framed by the LID model (Komives et al., 2003, 2004). For discussion of using existing theories to guide qualitative data analysis, see Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Strauss and Corbin (1998). The study was designed so that themes that emerged from the data were circulated into subsequent interviews with students, enhancing constant comparative analysis, providing a form of member check, and augmenting data triangulation and trustworthiness (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The findings we report in this article are those that resulted using the LID model as a coding scheme.

Findings

Substantial evidence in the data supports the claim that students involved in LGBT campus leadership derive benefits related to both LGBT identity and LID. In terms of applying the LID model (Komives et al., 2003, 2004) to the experiences of LGBT student leaders, the overarching finding from this study is that the context of involvement with LGBT student activities provides rich opportunities for development in each of the six stages of the model. We found ample evidence to support student LID in each stage, as well as implications for the impact that involvement has for fostering positive LGBT identity.

Students came to the study with a range of leadership experiences, on and off campus, within and outside the LGBT community. Some had participated in formal leadership training (e.g., through campus-based leadership development programs, youth organizations) and had extensive résumés of leadership activities, while others had never considered themselves “leaders” until they were invited to participate in the study. Nevertheless, the stages and processes of the LID model (Komives et al., 2003, 2004) are evident across the sample and illustrate the ways that involvement in activities specific to LGBT identity promotes development of leadership identity.
The LID model presents leadership development as a stage-based progression of building towards increasingly complex ways of “being” as a leader. It is interesting to note that of fifteen participants in the study, all demonstrated LID in stages 1, 2, and 3; six students demonstrated stage 4 development; four students reflected stage 5 characteristics; and three appeared to reflect stage 6 competencies. In this section, we illustrate the LID stages with data from interviews.

The Six Stages of the LID Model: Evidence from the Data

Stage 1: Awareness

A number of student participants reflect the stage 1 concept of “recognizing that leadership is happening around you” (Komives et al., 2003). Christopher (all names are pseudonyms) related:

I went to a few meetings, yeah . . . I knew it was a good experience because there were a lot of people who were involved and I got to see what they did and how they worked. A lot of good student leaders. So it was an opportunity to see how they operated, in the case that I in the future wanted to be a leader in that sense.

In addition this process of identifying adult/peer leaders and their activities often appears coupled with initial processes of “coming out” (D’Augelli, 1994; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). Some students commented on similar intersections between involvement, “coming out,” and the identification of role models. Jo spoke of her initial visits to the LGBT caucus in her residence hall: “Because I started surrounding myself with people who were already ‘out,’ so it made [coming out] easier, I guess, to kind of put myself out there and go to meetings.”

Jordon also described an intertwined process of coming out, relationships with peer mentors, and group experiences. Jordan said, “I started getting involved with one of the LGBT caucuses, PRIDE, which is in [the residence hall] where I lived, but that was about it.” Then, in the process of developing a close friendship with Alix, the president of another LGBT organization, Jordon felt compelled towards more involvement, “I started getting more involved because she was. I think
as my coming out process evolved, I started getting more involved with actual leadership.”

Peer mentors often provided connection to group involvement as well as serving as trusted confidants. Denise described her process of coming out to an acquaintance, Alice, and the subsequent invitation for her to attend an LGBT caucus meeting:

When I finally did tell her [I’m lesbian], she was like, “Oh you should come.” She was really cool because she was really laid back about things. I went to the meeting and she could tell I was still really nervous. It’s like she really didn’t do much but she did do a lot. I finally told her that two weeks ago. I was just like, “Alice I just wanted to let you know that you don’t even know how much you helped me.” Like just by her presence, being there by my door [in the residence hall] and her having rainbow stickers on it. That meant so much to me! I still don’t think she knows the extent of what she did for me—through going with her [to LGBT caucus meetings] and having somebody else to go with, because there’s no way I would have gone to those meetings by myself.

Peers played a key role in getting students involved, and LGBT identities formed the basis of those involvements.

Stage 2: Exploration/Engagement

Characteristic of stage 2, LGBT students reported experimenting with leadership and groups, as well as identifying skills to learn (Komives et al., 2003). Denise described exploring LGBT groups at Research University: “Actually, I’ve been going to meetings [of every campus LGBT organization] and almost every one multiple times. I just don’t go regularly. I switch off. That’s the involvement.” A number of students described the process of taking on responsibilities and support roles outside of holding a formal leadership position. Christopher described his involvement in a planning committee in terms of a “back-up” support role: “I was kind of involved behind the scenes. My friend was really involved in planning it. So I just gave input here and there.” Mike clearly identified a stage where he was a nonleader: “I didn’t really see myself as a student leader because I was not one of the higher-up people doing it. I was just doing what needed to be done.”
Other students described learning objectives related to involvement, prior to holding a formal leadership position. Denise said of her involvement with a campus LGBT caucus, “I was hoping to learn different things about being a leader. I know I have the raw basics of it.” Mike and Alix wanted to refine skills related to public relations through involvement in an LGBT group. Alix was very specific: “I wanted to learn how to write press releases. I wanted to learn how to get a good story across to a good reporter who had a contact. I actually even wanted to have a press conference.” And Rusty said, “I wanted to build skills about being involved.”

Developing a sense of personal confidence is also characteristic of this stage (Komives et al., 2003). Jo, a senior, reflected on the personal growth she has seen since her first year of college: “Freshman year I was not in any leadership position. I was really tentative about everything I was doing my freshman year. I was really, really low confidence in high school and that carried over to my freshman year.” Other students describe developing a sense of confidence that comes from being open about their LGBT identities while participating in leadership. Christopher said, “I did believe that it (involvement) helped me as an African American, LGBT person to be more comfortable and confident with myself and being able to tell people that.”

Stage 3: Leadership Identified

Stage 3 is characterized by leadership as being driven by positional roles, with a focus on individuals being responsible for groups and getting tasks accomplished (Komives et al., 2003). Jo said, “There is strength in numbers; and because of my leadership role, the ideas that I think are good are the ideas that get done.” Carrie said, “I’m called ‘president’ because I started out as student facilitator” and “[My co-president and I] do the scheduling, and we as leaders of the group make connections with people in the community, whereas the other students just sort of come in.” In working with groups, Alix related, I saw my role in meetings; well I’m kind of a control freak, and I don’t like when meetings stray, so it’s generally my role to say like, “Can we get back to the subject please?” Which is why I like being chairperson. Jo described herself as the “security nazi,” doing crowd control at various student events: “That’s where I got called names because I made them all come in single file . . . then I had guards in each spot.”
At stage 3, success is associated with task completion and getting a job done. Alix shared:

Once I was on the Press and Promotions Committee. I just wanted to do a good job and make sure that I was getting the word out, so I worked pretty hard on my part of the research—finding the addresses and stuff. Making sure that was really comprehensive.

At Liberal Arts College, Benzer described how he and a few other “very neutral” friends “took over” the LGBT student organization, which was being led by a “very radical” student. He felt that as positional leaders in the newly energized group, “You have to come up with strong goals . . . you have to come up with ways in which everyone can be active, so that people feel like they are needed in the club.” These strategies worked and attendance at the group’s events soared, even as Benzer’s language of “we as leaders” and “they as people in the group” remained fixed.

In stage 3 leaders have the ability to articulate their experiences as experience as being “meaningful” (Komives et al., 2003), which was also reflected by the experiences of a number of students. Christopher talked about participating in planning the Midwest LGBT Colleges conference after playing a role in one of the subcommittees: “I think hearing all their ideas (of the LGBT student leader coordinators) and hearing how much energy they put into this and how much time basically told me that it’s okay to be who you are.” When established student leaders described their experiences as meaningful, students like Christopher were motivated to take up leadership activities. Of her LGBT activist work, Ellen said,

The more involved I got, the more I was like, “Wow—this is going to be really, really hard.” But the more I was also like, “This has to be done because not enough people are doing it and it has to be done.”

When participants reflected on what they have learned from their leadership experiences, they often highlighted stage 3 activities. Jo shared:

And you know, just today I had someone ask me how to bring an entertainer here. And I gave him a half hour talk that was like step-by-step-by-step everything he had to do, and I wouldn’t have
been able to do that if it was not for (my leadership role at) the conference . . . I learned so many practical skills like that.

The emphasis on skills learned, tasks accomplished, and positions held are hallmarks of stage 3 leadership identity. Leaders are those with designated roles who are responsible for “getting things done.” Students in the “emerging” phase of stage 3 (S. Komives, personal communication, September 30, 2003) learned and practiced skills in the context of named leadership roles; students in the “immersion” phase practiced moving between leader and member roles. But across the sample, stage 3 identity development was marked by a clear sense that “there are leaders and there are follows, and it is the leader’s responsibility to get things done (even if they do that nicely and in involving ways)” (S. Komives, personal communication, September 30, 2003). A shift away from “leader” as role to “leadership” as identity signals the transition from stage 3 to 4.

Stage 4: Leadership Differentiated

Stage 4 is characterized by interdependence, focusing on shared leadership, collaboration, “leadership from anywhere” in the organization, valuing teamwork, and commitment to the group (Komives et al., 2003). While all fifteen participants demonstrated LID characterized by stages 1 through 3, fewer participants report stage 4 behaviors or experiences. Alix described the importance of having the ability to work as member and leader:

Because on campus, being president of a (LGBT) caucus is different, as I mentioned, than being involved in the (Midwest BLGTA College) conference, which I felt was a step up for me in terms of leadership role; not only could I be supportive and not only could I be a figure head, but I can also get in and get stuff done, and work on a committee. So it was inspiring.

Jordon defined leadership role in the context of a relational, participatory style:

I’m involved in the sense that I communicate with a lot of the members of the group; and in my leadership position, we communicate by email, personally or however else . . . I’m trying to get a feel of what [the LGBT students of color and international
students group] and the Alliance would like to do and that kind of stuff.

Two participants from Research University discussed the significance of the community of leaders involved with planning a major Midwest LGBT Colleges Conference that was held the spring before we began interviews. Ashley said, “It was exciting because it was a bunch of students working together to make it happen . . . it was nice because everybody there was on the same level.” When Jordon reflected on what was most meaningful about the conference, she focused on connection and interdependence, saying, “I think it was the interaction with the rest of the group, with the rest of the leaders and just feeding off each others’ passions and desire to make this (the conference) a huge success.”

Sometimes stage 4 leadership behaviors and attitudes emerged as a survival strategy. Ellen, for example, reported having to work collaboratively within the leadership group of the LGBT student organization at Comprehensive University because, “We only have four people, including myself, that come regularly and that plan stuff.” At Liberal Arts, Benzer and his friends overhauled the LGBT student organization in ways that would provide multiple points of entry and involvement for a population that is regularly in flux as students come and go from off-campus internship periods. Additional analysis is necessary to ascertain whether these students had internalized a stage 4 perspective, were using these strategies from a stage 3 conception of positional leadership, or some combination as they transitioned between stages.

Students recognized the power of a group working together with leadership happening “from anywhere” to do what had seemed impossible to them as individuals. Descriptions of personal roles in that accomplishment reflected the shift away from leadership rooted in individual positions to leadership shared by a group responsible for meeting mutual goals. Keys to this interdependence were communication, perseverance, and teamwork.

Stage 5: Generativity

This stage focuses on developing an active commitment to a personal
passion, accepting responsibility for the development of others, for team learning, and for sustaining organizations (Komives et al., 2003). Alix, Jordon, Carrie, and Ellen demonstrated the greatest degree of stage 5 characteristics. Alix described her personal responsibility for helping other group members develop multicultural competency as a reflection of how others helped her:

As a leader . . . I’m focusing on multiple oppressions . . . my best friend Jordon educated me constantly, and that helped me to move to understand that I need to be educated how I am oppressing others and to give up privilege when I can.

Of her commitments, Carrie said, “It wasn’t just gay rights, it wasn’t just anti-racist, it wasn’t just anti-poverty. They were all together and they were all related and that is really exciting for me.”

Stage 5 also includes the significance of an “active commitment to a personal passion.” (Komives et al., 2003). Jordon discussed the powerful commitment she and other group members shared regarding the Midwest LGBT College Conference:

We wanted to make it so that every single student at [Research University] at least heard about it; and knew that this was going on; whether it pissed them off or made them happy, we didn’t care as long as they heard about it.

At Comprehensive University, Skye wanted to make sure “this all keeps happening after I’m gone,” and Ellen—who was also the LGBT student representative to student life committee of the Board of Trustees—was working on ways to involve more students in the flagging student organization because, “It just has to keep going after we leave. It has to. There needs to be this voice on campus.”

Students repeatedly emphasized the ways in which their involvement reflected a personal passion. It is important to note, however, that this commitment was also evident at stages 2 and 3, which may indicate that the LID model does not most accurately describe the experiences of students in identity-based leadership positions.

Stage 6: Internalization/Synthesis
Alix, Ellen, and Carrie were the three students who expressed in their
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interviews attention to continued self-development, striving for congruence and internal confidence, and what looked like it might become a life-long commitment to leadership—all characteristics of stage six (Komives et al., 2003, 2004). Carrie’s life purpose was shaped by—and shaped—her commitment to leadership and activism. Asked about attending a national LGBT activists conference, she said:

That’s really changed me a lot, and also a lot of anti-war protesting, seeing how that was related and seeing how your queer identity was important in that too. Just the whole matrix of oppression. All those ideas have really changed me in a good way. . . . I really feel like I could be more satisfied with life because I can understand why things happen. . . . I think just being—having those kinds of ideas and working on this kind of work gives you a way instead of being nihilistic about life, you see that . . . it’s a big problem and there are big things and maybe when we do one [LGBT awareness] play it doesn’t really—it might not do anything, but at least you’re out there doing stuff, so it gives you a reason, I guess. A purpose, so that’s why it’s been great for me. Does that seem a little big?

The ability to place her LGBT and peace activism in a larger context of life purpose—and later in the interview to link a career in social work and community organizing to her desire to continue as an activist—marked Carrie as a student who had internalized a leadership/activist identity. Ellen was planning a career in social work and community organizing: “I have to sort of keep in mind that my degree [in social work] will help me be an activist and make a living at the same time.”

A sophomore when we interviewed her, Alix also expressed her commitment to a career that framed LGBT issues in a broader context: “In choosing an occupation for me in the future, I really don’t want to just do LGBT activism. I want to be able to span a multitude of areas that I’ll be able to work in.” Most significantly, she talked about her motivation for activism as the result of a traumatic life experience:

I was suicidal for a couple of months. And that was really hard for me—that time in my life. And I didn’t really realize it was linked to my sexuality at first, but when I made the decision to become an activist, when I made the decision that this is what I actually wanted to do with my life . . . that actually saved my life. It was
committing to that, it was realizing that I can do something to help other people with this. That changed the way I look at myself.

Alix’s testimony to the power of involvement, leadership, and activism also illustrates her identity as a leader who sees leadership as a “life-long developmental process” and recognizes her potential as a role model for others—important stage six characteristics (Komives et al., 2003, 2004).

Stage six describes the ability of those in leadership to see organizational complexity across contexts (Komives, et al., 2003, 2004). Carrie saw links among peace activism, queer activism, and other social justice movements. Alix actively fostered relationships between the Alliance of LGBT students and campus organizations focusing on students of color: “I also see my role this year as coalition building with a lot of other groups, making sure the LGBT community is inclusive of persons with multiple identities and oppressions.”

Leadership Identity as a Progression: Evidence of Development through LID Stages

Overall, we found that involvement in leadership and activism specific to LGBT identity promoted the development of leadership identity. Students’ descriptions of events and activities—and the meaning they made of those events and activities—demonstrated their progression along the trajectory postulated by Komives et al. (2003, 2004) in the LID model. For example, Mike joined an LGBT student conference planning committee to enhance his public relations skills (LID stage 2: exploration/engagement), noting, “I just like doing PR. It’s what I want to do when I graduate. . . . I didn’t really see myself as a student leader because I was not one of the higher-up people doing it.” During the course of his involvement, he transitioned into LID stage 3: leader identified, as he took a formal role as committee chair and took on individual responsibility. Ashley, too, got involved in event planning “for fun, to get to know other people on campus” (LID stage 2) and moved into stage 3 through her involvement (“I had experience organizing groups before, so I knew that I wanted to be able to use what I had learned in the past.”). Her activism led her further, into stage 4:
leadership differentiated as she took on more complex leadership challenges to join with others in shared goals; she said, “I was strong with people that were like-minded and similar interests and issues. I mean, you could really see progress being made.”

Alix came to the campus leadership experience already somewhat advanced in her leadership identity. Only a sophomore, she was comfortable with LID stage 4, having learned during her first year in college that there’s a lot of work to be done, and so I needed people to help me. I made a lot of mistakes with it, and that’s how you learn. So, I had to learn how to ask people for help . . . not only could I be supportive and not only could I be a figurehead, but I can also get in and get stuff done, work on a committee.

Alix no longer relied simply on positional, defined leaders (as in LID stage 3); she trusted her peers to contribute and valued their involvement, both hallmarks of stage 4 (Komives et al., 2003, 2004). Alix’s leadership was driven by “a commitment to a personal passion” (Komives et al., 2003, p. 3), an indicator of her advancement to LID stage 5: generativity. She internalized the identity of leader and credited involvement as a campus activist with saving her life: “[Activism] changed the way I look at myself.” Alix’s story demonstrates the power of LGBT-specific involvement not only to promote development of leadership identity, but also to fundamentally alter self-concept.

Summary of Findings

We found evidence of the six stages of the LID and evidence of individual progression through the stages of the model among the 15 LGBT student leaders whom we interviewed. Elsewhere (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005) we report evidence that LGBT leadership experience also contributes to the development of sexual orientation identity among college students. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in full the interlocking development processes of becoming a queer leader, though we believe that this is the next most interesting place to take up data analysis.
Limitations

Though we believe the study significant, we are conscious of some limitations. Interview research of this sort is limited by capturing self-reported “snapshots” of and reflection on development of LGBT identity and leadership identity. Fifteen LGBT-identified student leaders cannot represent the experiences of every LGBT student on a campus any more than three institutions can fully represent the diversity of postsecondary institutions in any region; strictly speaking, the results of this study are limited in their generalizability. The study, however, does shed light on important intersections of LGBT identity and leadership identity, and these intersections warrant further exploration in additional research.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Research

Our findings hold potential significance on at least two levels— theoretical and practical. First, we examined a widespread, but poorly understood, axiom of college student development theory—involvement in campus life leads to positive learning and developmental outcomes. The link between campus involvement and student development is well established in the research literature (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and the influence of involvement on identity development in particular emerged recently as a scholarly topic (e.g., Inkelas, 2004; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Rhoads, 1997, 1998). “There is no known work, however, on how leadership identity develops” (Komives et al., 2003, p. 1). As Komives et al. (2003) noted, “The thousands of research articles and books on the important topic of leadership development do not address how leadership actually develops” (p. 1). Application of the LID model to the experiences of these LGBT student leaders illuminates this important topic. Indeed, even as Komives and colleagues continue to refine the LID model, we find it a powerful tool with which to analyze and understand identity-based leadership experiences. Although our small sample places limits on any claim we make that the LID is empirically tested and generalizable, our data strongly support the use of the model in understanding college student leaders.

The second area of potential significance relates to educational practice in college student affairs. Significant resources are expended in
attempts to promote leadership development in higher education, yet these attempts lack the theoretical support that an empirically grounded and supported framework such as the LID model (Komives et al., 2003, 2004) can provide. Understanding the processes by which students develop the capacity for an ethical, inclusive, relational-values approach to leadership could deeply influence the ways that “leadership education” is conducted in higher education. For example, just as cognitive development theory suggests that college curricula can be designed to stimulate increasing cognitive complexity (see Baxter Magolda, 2001), the co-curriculum could be designed to support this cognitive shift. By incorporating explicit reflection on the meaning of leadership, positional leadership, and shared leadership, educators might transform student involvement from merely performing tasks to “get the job done” into an exercise in both the content (tasks) and processes (identity development) of leadership. Making clear connections with the leadership experiences of students in other identity-based groups (e.g., Black Student Union, Latina Caucus, Asian Student Alliance, Women’s Resource Group, Hillel) could help LGBT student leaders see their place in service to the larger context of a diverse campus.

Beyond general leadership education that might use LGBT leadership contexts as sites for exploration, curricula can be tailored to address issues in specific communities. An example of such an effort is the offering of “culturally-based” sections of a credit-bearing leadership education course at the University of Maryland. Students of any identity can opt into sections of this course that deal with African American, Asian Pacific American, Latino, or LGBT contexts for leadership (Slack, Casper, Kim, Weaver, & Yamin, 2005). In such a course, LGBT students could come to know more about the history and social context of LGBT leadership and the particular challenges this work poses.

Developing a leadership identity is about more than learning to delegate tasks and keep the group on track during meetings; although these are important skills for college students and future community leaders, the promotion of a sense of self as leader—capable of creating change for social good and sustaining a lifetime of leading and learning—is a more important goal for campus educators. Leadership tasks
will change with settings and roles; students who achieve an internalized leadership identity will ultimately change society.

There is much more to learn about identity-based leadership in general and LGBT student leadership in particular. We are looking, for example, especially closely at the points of intersection between leadership and queer identity to see if there may be unique aspects of LGBT leadership identity—one promising direction lies in our finding that students articulated “activist” identity and focus on “passion, vision, and commitment” at very early stages of the LID, contrary to what Komives et al. (2003, 2004) might have predicted. Additional areas for future study could include studying leadership identity in the context of other identity-based groups, as well as across groups. Are there some kinds of groups or group structures (e.g., fraternities and sororities, political action, social and support) that promote the development of leadership identity more readily than others? What happens to a student’s leader identity after he or she graduates? What influence does leader identity have on academic, social, and career domains? Finally, studies of how campus educators can best facilitate the development of leadership identity—as well as leadership skills—will be important additions to the literature.

References


Renn, B., & R. Schoenberg (Eds.), *Our place on campus: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender services and programs in higher education* (pp. 137–148). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.


