In this article, we describe a qualitative study of identities of 18 college students leading identity-based campus organizations at 1 large public institution. Identity-based organizations are those registered student groups whose mission includes serving the educational, cultural, social, or other needs and interests of students from a given psychosocial identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation). We observed 2 paths that students followed through their leadership experience: (1) A “parallel” path in which students experienced their psychosocial identity and their leadership identity separately, and (2) a “merged” path in which students merged these identities into a sense of being, for example, a “gay leader” or a “Latina activist.” Based on our findings that student leaders in identity-based organizations experience both psychosocial identities and leadership identities as salient—whether parallel or merged—we make recommendations for higher education practice, policy, and research.

Keywords: college students, race, gender, sexual orientation, leadership education

Scholars have clearly established that involvement in campus activities leads to student learning in a number of domains (see Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), including leadership development (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Logue, Hutchens, & Hector, 2005). A growing body of literature has supported the claim that involvement in campus activities related to a specific element of psychosocial identity—such as race, sexual orientation, or gender—contributes to development of that identity (Arminio et al., 2000; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Inkelas, 2004; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Renn, 2007). College student leaders may also begin to develop what has been called a “leadership identity,” or sense of self as able to lead and make changes in the world (Komives, Casper, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). Limited evidence has suggested that leaders of identity-based student groups such as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) student organization (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005a, 2005b) or an African American student organization (Harper & Quaye, 2007) experience leadership development and identity development in the relevant domain.

Given the potential “double impact” of identity-based student leadership on student development, and given the need to respond to calls to prepare college graduates to take up leadership in a diverse democracy (see, e.g., Butler, 2000; Hurtado, 2003; Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005), the purpose of this study was to explore how student leaders of identity-based groups describe their experiences and how this knowledge might inform higher education programs and policies. Specifically, we designed the study to address the question: How do student leaders of identity-based groups experience leadership identity and the psychosocial identity or identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) on which the group is based?

College Student Leadership

An abundant literature on student leadership (e.g., HERI, 1996; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006) has supported the student affairs functional area of leadership education (see ACPA Commission for Student Involvement, n.d.; National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs, n.d.). Other supporting literature includes stud-
ies using psychosocial identities (gender, race, ethnicity) to examine student leadership in general (see Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Komives, 1994; Romano, 1996). A more limited body of research has addressed student leadership in identity-based contexts, and it is on this more limited set of literature that we concentrate here. The notion of leadership identity development (Komives et al., 2005) is also compelling because it addresses identity, and we include it as well.

Student Leadership in Identity-Based Contexts

Scholars have undertaken a handful of studies of leadership in identity-based settings. For example, Sutton and Terrell (1997) and Harper and Quaye (2007) studied African American men, Arminio et al. (2000) examined leadership experiences of students of color, Yamasaki (1995) studied Japanese American student organizations, and Renn and Bilodeau (2005a, 2005b) explored the identities of LGBT student leaders. The studies as a group indicated that being involved in leadership activities related to some facet of identity (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) promotes positive development of leadership or activism and of personal identity. In addition, studies of identity-based leadership produced themes including development of generalizable skills, reluctance to take on the title “leader,” perceptions of a personal cost of leadership, and a group-based rather than individual approach to leadership.

An unsurprising outcome of identity-based leadership is the development of general leadership skills. LGBT student group leaders became more confident of their leadership ability and developed delegation, program planning, and public relations skills (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005a). Leaders of African American student groups reported gains in organizational, budgetary, and interpersonal skills (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Sutton & Terrell, 1997).

Existing studies reported that students are reluctant to accept the title leader. Arminio et al. (2000) noted that most participants in their study did not consider themselves leaders and some resented being described as such. They 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. Men in Sutton and Terrell’s (1997) study were more willing to perceive themselves as leaders among the African American students on campus, but the majority did not consider themselves leaders in campus wide groups. Similarly, Japanese American student leaders tended not to take on formal leadership roles in campus wide activities and shunned the label leader (Yamasaki, 1995).

Studies also found personal costs of leadership. Students felt pressured by high expectations and constant visibility (Arminio et al., 2000). Some LGBT student leaders noted academic costs associated with learning to manage multiple-time commitments, and some noted social and familial costs incurred as a result of heterosexism, homophobia, and harassment manifested once students were identified as LGBT leaders (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005b). Being a leader in an identity-based context, then, was not a complete buffer from hardship, nor did the context provide equal support to all participants.

The fourth theme across studies of identity-based leadership is that of orientation to leadership for the sake of the group rather than for individual gain. African American men led to advance the African American community, to respond to community needs, and to promote cross-cultural engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2007). When asked to describe their best leadership experience, student leaders of color focused on group rather than individual accomplishments (Arminio et al., 2000). African American fraternity leaders shared their talents with the African American community off campus as well as on (Sutton & Terrell, 1997).

A final theme is that of psychosocial identity development in the domain of the identity in question. Leaders in LGBT student organizations were found to develop along five of the six identity processes in D’Augelli’s (1994) framework of LGB identity development (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005b), Arminio (1993) and Arminio et al. (2000) found that racial identity development was an outcome of leadership involvement of students of color, and Ozaki (2004) found that the identities of multiracial students influenced and were influenced by their leadership of a biracial student organization.

Leaders in identity-based contexts, then, may share common experiences whether their organization reflects a gender, racial, ethnic, or sex-
ual orientation identity. Some of these experiences could be expected in any student organization, but others seem specific to leading identity-based groups. Student development theorists have attended often to the psychosocial identity outcomes and the leadership development outcomes of campus involvement (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), yet only recently have turned their attention to what can be called leadership identity development. Understanding the identities of LGBT, African American, or women leaders will require learning how students understand themselves as leaders as well as LGBT people, African Americans, or women. We turn now to the emerging area of leadership identity development.

Developing a Leadership Identity

Leadership development models of the 1990s, for example the social change model of leadership development (HERI, 1996) and relational leadership model (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006), provided important theoretical foundations for leadership education in post-secondary education yet they focused on the “doing” of leadership rather than the “being” of leader identity. The egalitarian values and social commitments of the social change and relational leadership models formed a base for a model of leadership identity development (Komives et al., 2005) that elucidates the processes of student leadership development.

Komives et al. (2005) created the leadership identity development (LID) model from a qualitative study of undergraduate student leaders. They defined leadership identity as a personal and social identity that acknowledges one can make a difference by working with others to create change. The model includes six stages: The first three incorporate an understanding of leadership as a positional role as students becomes increasingly involved in activities and the last three incorporate an understanding of leadership as a phenomenon not restricted to formal roles or positions, but as an internalized understanding of organizational complexity across contexts (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, et al., 2006). The importance of this shift cannot be overemphasized; the difference between being and doing or having an identity is central to racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation identity development models (e.g., Cass, 1979; Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995).

The LID explains the processes by which a college student learns a relational and collaborative approach to inclusive and ethical leadership (Komives et al., 2005). Taken together with the tendency of identity-based leaders to eschew the label leader (Arminio et al., 2000; Yamasaki, 1995), the LID model raises interesting questions about how leaders of identity-based groups understand leadership identity and themselves within the leadership context. It also provides a robust theoretical foundation for addressing our research question.

Method

We used a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis to explore the experiences of leaders of identity-based college student organizations at a large, predominantly White public university in the Midwest. Data were collected in two waves using identical procedures: First, eight students from this university participated in a larger, multicampus study of LGBT leaders (Renn, 2007); second, the following semester we interviewed 10 additional students from other identity-based organizations on this same public campus. Eighteen leaders of identity-based student groups from one campus thus comprise the sample.

Sample

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for both waves of data collection, we sent an email inviting participation from leaders of LGBT campus groups, identified by the director of the campus LGBT resource center. Eight of the 12 invited students agreed to be in the study. We then recruited participants through other identity-based student groups registered on campus. We defined 65 groups among the over 400 registered student organizations (RSOs) as fitting our criteria as “identity-based”—their name and organization purpose, available in an online format available to the public, indicated that their central purpose was focused on particular gender, racial, or ethnic groups. By e-mail we invited the presidents and chairs listed in the public directory to participate in the study. A first round of interviews was completed and followed by a second round of
invitations to more leaders within the student groups. Through purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) we sought to develop a sample that was representative of the range of identity-based student organizations on campus—groups based on personal identity characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and gender. Ultimately, we invited 32 students from these groups, and 10 volunteered to participate in the study.

As summarized in Table 1, the participants were diverse in terms of gender and race. They were traditional-age sophomores, juniors, seniors, and two “super seniors” (fifth year and beyond). All participants served in the role of organization president/chair, copresident/chair, or vice president on a campus of over 30,000 undergraduate students, of which 16.5% were students of color at the time of data collection.

### Data Collection

We collected data through one-on-one, open-ended interviews with student leaders. We relied on a semistructured protocol of questions that provided consistency across interviews, but still allowed for movement and exploration within the discussion (Seidman, 1991). We encouraged participants to reflect on the identities that were the focus of the group that they led (e.g., racial identity if they were leading a group based on race), their leadership experiences in that group and others, and how the two may have interacted. We asked about past involvement and leadership before and during college as well as other activities (academic, work, extracurricular, sports) that shaped their college experience and identity. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 min and were audiorecorded.

### Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded for categories, themes, and patterns. We used a grounded-theory approach to develop our codes from the data, as previous research on this topic is scant (Boyatzis, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initially we each conducted line-by-line coding of the same subset of three transcripts to develop preliminary codes, compared our analyses, and agreed on a set of these inductively developed codes and code definitions that we used to analyze the remainder of the transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We followed Boyatzis’ (1998) procedures for establishing Interrater reliability in data-driven code development.

Next we used an axial coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We regrouped codes into meaningful categories across the data from individual participants to develop themes and patterns that emerged from students’ accounts of the relationship between their psychosocial identities, their leadership identities, and their roles as leaders of identity-based student organizations. Working with a relatively small data set facilitated our ability to perform this step of data analysis in close collaboration with one another, enhancing what Boyatzis’ (1998) termed consistency of judgment in interpretation.

### Table 1

**Characteristics of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed race</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in school</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth year and beyond</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category on which student leader’s organization is based</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender/gender identity (e.g., women, transgender students)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation and gender identity</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination (e.g., Black women, LGBT students of color)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

*a Does not total 18 because some participants were mixed race.
Findings

Three themes related to the research questions emerged from the data: (1) Leaders of identity-based student groups reported heightened salience of the psychosocial identities in the domain specific to that group (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation); (2) most (13 of 18) student leaders of identity-based groups were in the first three positional leadership stages described by the LID model (Komives et al., 2005); and (3) except in the case of the LGBT student leaders, there did not seem to be much interaction between leadership identity and psychosocial identity (i.e., a student might experience herself as a feminist and as a leader, but not as a “feminist leader,” or a student might experience himself as African American and a leader, but not as an “African American leader;” but a gay man described himself as a “queer activist”).

In analyzing data, we identified two main identity “paths” through the process of initial involvement in an identity-based group into the leadership role. We called these parallel and merged identity paths, to denote the extent to which students described their psychosocial and leadership identities as parallel or merged. In both cases, students arrived on campus, were motivated to get involved, and either joined an identity-based group or created one to meet their interests. Students who took the parallel path began and continued their involvement in identity-based organizations viewing their psychosocial identity and leadership as separate from each other, even though they became leaders in identity-based organizations. Students taking the merged path typically began their involvement with sense of self as leader and sense of self as, for example, lesbian, merged these identities along the way and came to think of themselves as “lesbian leader.” We represent the paths to identity-based leadership and the concepts of psychosocial and leadership identities in Figures 1 and 2.

We organize our discussion of the three themes (psychosocial identity, leadership identity, and parallel/merged identities) chronologically along these paths to illustrate students’ reported experiences in each area and the ways that identities did and did not interact with one another for these students.

Identities Before Campus Involvement

Before entering college, families, peers, academic experiences, and extracurricular activities contributed to the ways that students perceived their psychosocial and leadership identities. One third of the students came to college with a strong sense of their psychosocial identity, meaning that their gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity was salient to their sense of self; others did not begin to explore these identities until they were on campus. For example, one woman who was president of a feminist organization commented that she has “always considered [her]self a feminist.” In contrast, the president of the Native American student organization spoke about the ways his family did not “practice any traditions or ceremonies . . . so really my first real exposure to the native culture was when I got to the university.”

Students also brought to campus a notion of themselves as leaders. This leadership self-concept largely had to do with their leadership experience and involvement before college. Participants had been members of Boys’ and Girls’ State, led community service initiatives, been drum majors and church youth group leaders, interned with business and government
agencies, worked substantial numbers of hours to save money for college, and been involved in a wide range of extracurricular leadership activities in high school. Coming to college, they fully expected to be involved in student leadership. Most participants came to college with these leadership identities based on previous experiences, yet four were exploring leadership for the first time on campus. Participants’ entering identities are represented in the first two boxes in each figure (see Figures 1 and 2); psychosocial and leadership identities coexisted but did not interact.

### Entry Into Campus Involvement

Participants’ psychosocial and leader identities served as motivation for getting involved in or starting their own groups on campus. As students explored their options for extracurricular activities they first surveyed or tried out existing student organizations, typically having been introduced to them during new student orientation week events. Another avenue into groups was provided by peer and nonpeer (faculty, staff, etc.) mentors, who suggested that students join certain identity-based organizations. Fourteen of the leaders we interviewed found a niche within existing identity-based groups on campus, becoming involved as a group members, attending meetings and events (LID Stages 1 and 2), then taking on more responsibility as leaders (Stage 3).

From data analysis emerged three motivations for entry into identity-based groups. First, most (15 of 18) students described their motivation to get involved as an inclination to make friends and participate in college life. Through their involvement they then their explored psychosocial identities, found their identities reflected in the group, and rose to leadership positions. The initial prompt to get involved was social, but the decision to join an identity-based group led to increased salience of the psychosocial identity. A leader in one of the Asian Pacific American student groups illustrated this phenomenon:

> I thought it was a place to, like, meet more people, meet other freshmen. That was my primary goal to meet people and make new friends. Then when I was elected I was like, “Ok this is a great resume builder . . .” But then it turned out to be like, “Oh, I’m really interested in this stuff.”

Second, 12 students also described how the leadership identities they brought with them to college influenced and motivated their decisions to be involved in student organizations. For example, the chair of a group for underrepresented people in his academic major (e.g., women, Latinos, or African Americans in business, engineering, or law) had participated in a high school chapter of the same organization and said, “I was involved in it in high school . . . so when I came down here I kind of decided I’d get involved with the university local chapter.” Another student commented, “I’ve always been kind of a leader, so it was just what I did when I came here.” Students who followed this pattern of motivation to get involved sought more than only social interaction; they sought leadership itself, as defined in positional ways.

The third motivation leading to involvement in identity-based groups was a desire to explore a psychosocial identity or participate in a group of like-others working for some common cause. Six students came to campus with a strong sense of feminist, African American, biracial, queer, or other identity; the remaining 12 students experienced college as their first opportunity to explore gender, racial, ethnic, or sexual orientation identity. In either case, these students were motivated to join identity-based groups
because of the identity in question, not simply as a means to meet people or a vehicle to campus leadership. They were compelled by identity to join the groups they did,

I’ve always been interested in things about being Asian American . . . because when I was in high school it seemed like kind of a taboo subject. You didn’t want to separate yourself from everybody . . . . So it’s kind of a turn around.

It was interesting to note also that a number of participants referred to academic courses and experiences as the genesis for their interest in gender, race, or ethnicity. Nine students—half of the sample—described a class on race and ethnicity or a paper assignment on gender, race, or ethnicity leading to self-exploration of these concepts. A women’s group leader said,

I’d really not been involved in anything beforehand and then, like I said, I did my research paper [on the women’s movement on campus] and that was really inspiring, and that was really what inspired me to do all of this.

Psychosocial identities—and the opportunity to explore them and be involved in an identity-based group—were powerful motivators for several participants.

Starting a New Identity-Based Group

Four participants entered identity-based leadership not by getting involved in and working their way up through an organization, but by forming new organizations. They did not find groups on campus with which they identified or that shared their goals, and in this case the leaders started their own groups. One woman originally joined the umbrella group for Asian Pacific American (APA) student organizations on campus and through that experience was introduced to a feminist student group; yet when she found her perspective as an APA woman differed significantly from the perspectives of many of the feminist group members, she began her own organization for APA women. Another student in our sample cofounded an organization for transgender students, the first on this campus. Study participants who founded organizations either had a specific negative experience with an existing group or felt that there was no group on campus that represented their identities. One said,

I went to the [women’s group] meeting, and then there was this big fight, and someone said someone else was racist, and then she said she wasn’t. And I just didn’t want to be part of anything radical and fighting like that. So I started [a new women’s group.]

Founders of identity-based student organizations bypassed the usual trajectory of involvement in student organizations from general member to committee member, then to officer and executive board.

A key factor in students’ decision to start new organizations was the degree of congruence they felt with existing identity-based organizations and student leadership within them. Another key factor was students’ sense of leadership self-efficacy—the degree to which they felt capable of leadership. Yet even for these students, whose leadership identities and psychosocial identities shared space at the core of their motives, leadership and psychosocial identities were held as a distinct, not merged.

Experiences During Leadership of Identity-Based Groups

Whether students started their own group or joined an existing one, and whether they got involved primarily for social, leadership, or identity motives, there were common features of the identity-based leadership experiences. We identified four factors influencing the experience of and interactions between students’ psychosocial and leadership identities: (1) a cycle of increased involvement and identity salience, (2) social interaction and friendship groups, (3) the academic-cocurricular interface, and (4) the context of the university. This crucible of identity-based leadership was where the parallel and merged paths began to differentiate, though students in both groups shared a number of common experiences.

First, at the point of being a leader in an identity-based group, students’ leadership identities and psychosocial identities promoted a cycle of increased identification as leader and as, for example, African American, feminist, queer, or transgender. Sixteen students reported that the more deeply they experienced the psychosocial identity the more they became involved with the student group, eventually taking on leadership positions, which in turn resulted in a stronger reported psychosocial identification. Some of these developments seemed in-
trinsic, as in a deepening of commitment to an identity, whereas others were externally prompted by, for example, being responsible for representing the interests of a racial or ethnic community in student government or by feeling tokenized as “the trans[gender] person” in an LGBT organization. The head of a women’s organization came to understand that her heightened visibility as a feminist activist came as a result of her leadership position: “I guess I don’t realize how much what I’m doing [with the women’s organization] is noticed by others,” including faculty, administrators, and family. Heightened visibility caused her to have to articulate her identity and her values about it in a variety of settings, prompting her to deepen her commitment to both her gender and leadership identities. The more she was involved, the more she identified publicly as feminist, and then the more she took on leadership to enact her vision of a feminist agenda. Her experience illustrates the cycle of involvement and identity salience, a cycle Renn (2007) observed as a key component of LGBT student leaders’ experience.

Second, social interaction with group members contributed to the ongoing involvement of these students. Participants were not only interested in extracurricular involvement and leadership, but wanted a way to meet new people and develop relationships. They joined organizations to “make friends,” “meet new people,” and “get to know people here.” They were sponsored into leadership by “my friend who was cochair,” “my friends in the group,” or “my friend the [resident assistant].” Furthermore, all of the student leaders who began their own groups did so with a core group of friends, for example, “the girls from my hall” or “my friend from high school.” The social interaction with peers both influenced leaders to become more involved in groups and provided a foundation of members when beginning new groups. Much of the literature (HERI, 1996; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006) on student leadership emphasizes relationships, but the role of friendships among students in campus organizations is less well explored. Evidence of this phenomenon was clear in our data and bears further exploration.

Third, students saw academic work as either contributing to their increasing leadership ability or hindering it; all of them placed a high priority on their academic work. Thirteen students were able to balance their studies with leading an identity-based group and spoke about the pressure of leadership as contributing to their ability to organize their lives and structure their time. Five others described their inability to balance academics, cocurricular activities, and, often, student employment, and some of these students took time off from school or from cocurricular activities for some period in an effort to get back on track academically. One “super senior” said, “So I was sort of majoring in the [student group] and didn’t pass all my classes that year. I had to take time off to refocus.” We have already mentioned the role of academic work in stimulating student interest in their identities, and the importance of this interaction cannot be overstated. Academic work related to identity can have powerful effects on students’ experiences, identities, and campus involvements (see also Renn, 2004).

Finally, the university context also influenced the students’ identity-based leadership experiences and through them, their psychosocial and leadership identities. Participants spoke about their experiences leading identity-based groups in relation to other campus groups (e.g., the university student government) and other identity-based groups (e.g., multiple-APA groups, African American groups in residence hall associations and as separate organizations, and multiple-women’s groups). Comments were often in relation to funding structures, staff support, and campus politics, including the identity politics of having multiple-identity-based groups competing for resources, sometimes against organizations sharing the same identity (e.g., women, LGBT, a particular race or ethnicity). Four of 18 students began participation in one identity-based group and, dissatisfied, found (or started) another. Half of the students in the sample experienced harsh criticism from other students in their groups, sometimes based on leadership style but more often on identity politics. The two biracial students in our sample who had been leaders of ostensibly monoracial groups (i.e., a group based on a single racial or ethnic category) experienced this criticism most directly, and four female student leaders reported substantial difference of interpretation of feminism and women’s identities, often wrapped up with concerns about racism in the feminist community. Students leading the three
organizations in our sample that represented combined identities (e.g., LGBT students of color, women of color) founded these organizations in part as a response to campus identity politics.

In addition to student identity politics, the campus culture related to student organizations influenced these leaders’ experiences. According to all participants, the ethos and organization infrastructure on this large campus supported starting a new group if a student could not find a group to join. This ethos contributed to the apparent ease with which students started new organizations, sometimes with little more than an organization name, some “friends from the [residence hall] floor,” and a constitution based on a template.

**Parallel Paths, Merged Paths**

Leaders of identity-based student organizations came to their roles out of interest in being involved generally or in exploring a particular identity. None of the students we interviewed said that their goal had been to be “a leader in X community.” They wanted to be social. They wanted to be leaders. They wanted to be part of an identity-based group. However they did not for the most part set out to become leaders in a particular identity-based community, and for the majority that followed the parallel path, they did not experience themselves that way once they were in fact leaders in those communities. Their psychosocial and leadership identities remained separate and were brought simultaneously to bear through the experience of identity-based leadership. That said, they also experienced a cycle of increasing involvement and increasing psychosocial identification. So the psychosocial and leadership identities for these students on a parallel path never merged, but they did operate to reinforce one another in the experience of identity-based leadership.

All of the students who did experience a merging of psychosocial and leadership identities were leaders in LGBT student organizations. Several of them described the ways that their LGBT identities were reinforced in the student groups, and the tasks involved in leadership, especially those related to representing the group to peers, administrators, or the media, forged a link in their identity between gay and leader or queer and activist. One said,

I think my connection with the LGBT community is defined as activism. That’s how I feel I fit into this community . . . . My involvement is a political involvement, and that’s how I feel connected with this community and that’s where I get my visibility from, and that’s where I feel that my identity is affirmed, through activism . . . . I think it is a large part of my LGBT identity. I don’t think my experience would be at all the same if I wasn’t an activist.

For this student, the two cannot be separated: To be LGBT is to be activist.

The conflation of psychosocial and leadership identities for LGBT students, fed by an involvement-identity cycle in which being more involved leads them to be more out as LGBT, and being more out leads to being asked to take on more campus leadership (Renn, 2007), may not be unique to LGBT students, but the ways that sexual orientation identity development is framed in the United States may contribute to it. If the depth of one’s gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity is perceived in part based on how out one is in different contexts (as it is in a number of gay/lesbian identity development models, see Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994), then the activities involved in leading the LGBT community will automatically mark one as more out and reinforce one’s own sense of “outness.” The same might not be said for a student of color leading his or her community; to lead the Black Student Union does not generally require a student to come out as Black. A woman speaking on behalf of a women’s organization is not revealing a previously hidden identity, although a woman speaking as a feminist might be.

It is unclear why so many of the LGBT students experienced a merged sense of leadership and LGBT identity and all of the other students maintained a separate sense of psychosocial and leadership identities. Certainly this is a question worth further exploration, with a larger and more diverse sample. It is also not clear whether one path or the other is ultimately more beneficial to students.

**Limitations**

The study is necessarily limited by the nature of the sample. It was a single-campus study, with a small sample (18 students). As in many other studies of college student identities, the research design was not longitudinal, and thus the ability to describe identities over time is limited to the ways that students described their...
past experiences and emotions. Eighteen leaders of identity-based student groups cannot represent the experiences of all identity-based leaders on a campus any more than one large public institution can represent the diversity of post-secondary institution. Yet, we believe that what we learned from and about these leaders of identity-based student organizations has something to add to the literature on college student identities and to consideration of policies and practices related to developing diverse leaders for society.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Research

In this study, we built on existing research on identity-based involvement (e.g., Arminio et al., 2000; Inkelas, 2004; Renn, 2007; Sutton & Terrell, 1997) and on Komives, Longerbeam, et al.’s (2006) model of LID to explore the experiences of leaders of identity-based student groups. We found that students followed different paths to leadership of identity-based organizations, but along the way and once in leadership positions experienced both leadership identity and psychosocial identity in the relevant category (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity). For some students, leadership identity and psychosocial identity were held as parallel constructions that interacted but did not converge; for others, these identities merged. These findings hold at least four implications for education theory, practice, and research.

First, we affirmed that involvement as an identity-based leader has outcomes related to leadership identity and psychosocial identity. This affirmation supports existing research on leadership development (e.g., Komives et al., 2005; Komives, Longerbeam, et al., 2006) and involvement in identity-based groups (e.g., Arminio et al., 2000; Inkelas, 2004; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005b; Sutton & Terrell, 1997). This finding provides empirical support for the continued practice of developing, supporting, and maintaining identity-based groups on campus, even at a time when accusations of “balkanization” and separatism continue (see Chang, 2002; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Tatum, 1997). Even if the argument that students should have spaces on campus to explore psychosocial identities is not compelling to some audiences, the argument that students are acquiring leadership skills and leadership identities may be. Gender, racial, ethnic, or sexual orientation identity may be the motivation for involvement, but outcomes include increased leadership identity and experience as well.

Second, we have outlined differing paths through which students get involved in identity-based groups and rise to leadership positions. There is a surprising silence in the empirical literature on college students when it comes to understanding why they choose the involvements that they do. Astin (1993) and many others since (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) analyzed the impact of involvement, yet the reasons why one student chooses the Black Student Alliance while another African American student runs for Student Government Association president and a third starts a new group for African American women are not well known. Some students entered identity-based groups out of a desire to make friends or involve current friends in an activity. Our interpretations also suggest that the desire to find a peer group where students’ psychosocial identities can be explored and affirmed provides substantial motivation to join identity-based groups, so much so that students will start new groups if they do not find a group that is congruent with their identities.

Whether joined for involvement/leadership motives or out of an interest in psychosocial identity, the identity-based groups provided access to campus engagement. As Komives et al. (2005) and Renn (2007) found, peer and adult mentors and sponsors were important conduits for facilitating student involvement and leadership. Understanding the variety of paths to engagement illustrated by our participants might prompt questions on this campus (or others) about how best to reach out to new and returning students, how to support a range of student involvements, and how to use identity-based groups as hooks to get students involved. Understanding paths to leadership could also lead to improved leadership education programs that take into account a variety of student motivations and experiences.

Third, our findings prompt the question: Does it matter whether students merge their psychosocial and leadership identities? Are there implications for higher education or for leadership of identity-based community organizations (e.g., NAACP, National Organization for
Women, National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, etc.)? Certainly these organizations need skilled leaders, and the participants in our study demonstrated leadership identities that would keep them on track to continue to develop leadership skills while in college. However observing students’ parallel construction of leadership and gender, race, or ethnic identities prompts us to wonder if parallel identities are enough to sustain community leadership for social change. In contrast with the self-identified queer activists—where queer and activist were understood as inseparable constructs—Renn (2007) studied, the students we interviewed for this study did not describe identity-based leadership as a passionate commitment that they incorporated into their core identities and constructed career goals to support.

Finally, we were surprised that only five of the students we interviewed seemed to have reached beyond a positional conception of leadership (LID Stage 3). Having not made the necessary subject-object shift to see leadership as something that is and can be done by anyone from anywhere in the organization (Komives, Longerbeam, et al., 2006), 13 of these students saw themselves and other officers as leaders, but had not yet made commitments to relational leadership and generativity. Our sample selection may have influenced this finding because we invited “student leaders”—all students named as presidents or chairs of identity-based groups in the Registered Student Organization directory—to participate in the study. Perhaps students who have moved beyond a positional understanding of leadership are not in these roles. If that is the case, then formal leadership education programs aimed at officers in student groups are both in an excellent position to facilitate the leadership identity development of these students and missing a key audience. Leadership education aimed at positional leaders could be designed to complicate their understanding of leadership, and additional programming for students who have moved beyond a positional understanding of leadership could be introduced. If leadership educators are to have the empirical support they need to improve programs, there is a clear need for additional research on which students hold which leadership identities, how they come to have those identities, and what can be done to promote leadership identity development.

As with many small sample, exploratory studies, ours raises more questions than it answers. We learned how 18 students on one campus came to leadership of identity-based groups and what they experienced once they get there. We identified a common pattern of involvement and cycle of involvement and identity development, and remain interested in the parallel and merged constructions of leadership and psychosocial identities. Leadership educators and others concerned with the development of leaders for a diverse society must also take up the question of how to recruit, cultivate, and support leaders of identity-based groups.

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