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The Leadership Stories of Students of Color at Dominantly White Christian Institutions

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Abstract

Leadership has been identified as an important component of higher education and the college student experience (Dugan, 2006; Komives, Dugan, & Owen, 2011; Shertzer & Schuh, 2004; St. John, Rowley, & Hu, 2009). Although there has been an increase in leadership initiatives across higher education, many institutions, specifically dominantly White Christian institutions have struggled to find ways to involve students of color in leadership. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study explored the leadership experiences of 11 students of color from 3 dominantly White Christian institutions (DWI). This article will provide a broad overview of the study while focusing on how the participants perceived, experienced, and made of meaning of the influence of race in shaping their leadership experiences. Furthermore, implications for fostering a campus environment that better supports and encourages students of color as they navigate the leadership journey will be discussed.

Introduction

The study of leadership has played a significant role in education research and has been an important outcome for higher education. A majority of institutions in the United States identify leadership as a key component of their mission. Although there are a variety of leadership initiatives within higher education, many institutions are challenged to engage students of color in leadership opportunities. Research has indicated students of color who become involved in leadership roles, specifically at a dominantly White institutions (DWI), tend to experience a sense of belonging within the campus community, which shapes their overall experience (Johnson et al., 2007; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Paredes-Collins, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012).

Research on leadership within higher education has traditionally examined the experiences of White male students, and only a limited amount of research has been done on the experiences of students of color. Current research has indicated campus climate and identity development significantly affect a student of color's decision to engage in leadership during his or her college experience. For example, researchers (Arminio et al., 2000; Baughman & Bruce, 2011; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Littleton, 2002) have determined students of color tend to have negative perceptions of mainstream leadership positions. Mainstream positions within residence life and student government represent a more hierarchical approach to leadership versus the communal or collective leadership perceptions and practices of people of color (Bordas, 2012). For students of color, becoming a leader at a DWI may require abandoning their cultural identity and conforming to the dominant culture, which then negatively affects their interactions with peers of their same racial/ethnic group. Feelings of exclusion and isolation tend to create a negative perception of campus climate for students of color, which often causes them to disengage from the college experience (Ancis et al., 2000; Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study examined the dynamics of the leadership experience for students of color on dominantly White Christian institutions (DWCI).

The term "predominantly" White is commonly referenced in describing institutions of higher education at which Whites account for 50% or more of student enrollment as well as the institution's administration and faculty. For the purpose of this study the term "dominantly"

rather than "predominantly" was utilized to capture how language, history, geographical locations, campus practices and policies, and the White demographics define the systemic structures of the institution (Collins & Jun, 2017; Gusa, 2010). "Dominantly" accounts for how the White cultural ideologies of the institution and the imbalance of racial diversity on campus influenced how the participants navigated their leadership experiences.

Research has indicated cultural differences, racial/ethnic identity, and campus climate influence a student of color's decision to become involved in leadership. The pages that follow will outline how the participants perceived, experienced, and made meaning of their experiences as student leaders at DWCIs.

Methodology

As research indicates, student leadership roles enable students to connect with campus culture, to have a positive educational experience, and to increase personal development (Astin, 1984; Chambers & Phelps, 1993). To build upon previous research and explore new forms of student leadership experience, this qualitative study was designed to examine the experience of student leaders of color at dominantly White Christian institutions, and to explore the ways these student leaders of color perceive, describe, and interpret their leadership experiences.

The research question that guided this qualitative study's methodology and its phenomenological approach to gathering data was: What are the leadership experiences of students of color at Christian, dominantly White institutions, and in what ways has their racial identity shaped their experiences? To address this question, a methodology based on a phenomenological approach was used to gather data on what the participants experienced, how they experienced it, and how they made meaning of their experiences (Sutton & Terrell, 1997).

Based on the focus of the research, three institutional sites were secured within the southern region (i.e., Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas). Within this region there are several Christian institutions at which 60% or more of the undergraduate population is ethnically White. The rationale for selecting this type of institution includes three factors: (a) the limited studies conducted on underrepresented student leaders relate to such research sites, (b) the institution is based in Christian tradition, and (c) accessibility. At each institution,

a gatekeeper, such as administrators or student life staff member, was utilized to identify and connect with potential student participants.

Consistent with guidelines appropriate to phenomenological investigations, purposeful sampling techniques were employed to identify participants. The 11 students that participated in the study identified as a non-White and non-international undergraduate student who had a willingness to share their leadership experiences. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. Table 1 lists the participants (by pseudonym) and provides demographic data.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Classification	Major	Minor	Did you hold any leadership positions in high school? Y/N
SL1	20	Female	African American	Junior	Psychology	Bussiness Management	Y
SL2	22	Female	African American	Senior	Early Childhood/ Elementary Ed.	N/A	Y
SL3	21	Male	African American	Senior	Political Science	Theology & Sociology (Areas of Interest)	Y
SL4	22	Female	Hispanic/ Mexican	Junior	Dance	Bussiness Administration	N
SL5	20	Female	African American	Sophomore	Nursing	N/A	N
SL6	20	Male	Asian – Vietnamese	Sophomore	Bussiness Administration-Management	University Studies	Y
SL7	21	Female	Asian – Filipino	Junior	Mechanical Engineering	Math	Y
SL8	22	Female	Korean American	Senior	Applied Linguistics/ TESOL	Humanitarian Studies	Y
SL9	23	Male	African American	Senior	History	Sports Management	N
SL10	20	Female	Black & Mixed Race	Sophomore	Psychology	Human Studies	Y
SL11	20	Female	African American	Sophomore	Biology/Pre-Med	N/A	Y

Note. The average age was 21 years and 8 of 11 participants had leadership experience prior to attending college.

After explaining the purpose and importance of the study, the participants were invited to participate in a 60- to 90-minute semi-structured open-ended interview at the location of his or her choice. Along with the

researcher taking and assessing field notes, each interview was audio-recorded (with the participant's permission) and then later professionally transcribed verbatim.

Findings and Discussion

As Guthrie, Jones, Osteen, and Hu (2013) described, leadership development is heavily influenced by environmental factors and "relies on the increasing fit between environmental requirements and self-concept" (p. 32). This article will focus on how race and the influence of culture and societal norms shaped the participants' experiences as student leaders within a dominantly White Christian campus.

The Effects of Being Different

As one participant commented, "Being just a little bit different can affect your entire experience" (SL8). Being of a different racial/ethnic group caused the respondents to (a) question people's motives, (b) question their own ability as a leader, and (c) feel the pressure of representing their race or ethnic group well. For example, one student commented:

> For me, it was hard making a decision becoming a part of this team because there was nobody there that looked like me. I was thinking, will they take me because I look different? Will they take a chance on me because they've never had somebody that's from my culture on their team? It's harder making a choice when the people on the team you want to be a part of looks [sic] different than you. (SL4)

This demonstrates the power of a majority culture to sway a student of color's choice to become involved in leadership. Throughout the interviews, the majority of the students described the challenges of being one of few students of color serving in a leadership role. Participants frequently discussed the importance of having more individuals of color in leadership roles so they as leaders will have someone with whom to identify and from whom to learn. There is power in peer relationships and in seeing other students of color, and it is profoundly important for students to have faculty and staff who look similar to them. Students have a natural gravitational pull toward peers, faculty, and staff who can understand them, identify with them, and relate to their experiences. A female student involved with student government explained, "There were few people of color…because they see a lot of White people, people of color don't usually think they could fit in…so they didn't do it" (SL4).

Overall, the participants expressed that the lack of racial representation within leadership drove them to become leaders at their institutions.

Why Me?

Willingness, passion, and drive were key motivators for students to choose leadership roles. However, as the participants described their experiences, they expressed skepticism of others' motives and feelings of obligation to represent their racial/ethnic group well. Because of the psychological warfare these experiences create for student leaders of color, self-doubt is amplified. As race rose to the forefront of the Korean American student's mind, she began questioning others' intentions, her own leadership abilities, and her ability to fulfill or correct stereotypes of Asian Americans (SL8). Another student reflected on the mental toll questioning others' motives can take. She reported being skeptical as to whether others were being genuine, or "are they doing this just because I'm Black and they just want to make a good impression? Or are they just doing it because they genuinely like me?" (SL2).

Self-doubt creates imposter syndrome, which often causes students of color to (a) compare themselves to their peers, (b) feel underqualified, and (c) attribute their leadership roles to their race rather than to their own abilities (Peteet, Montgomery, & Weekes, 2015; Sherman, 2013). Imposter syndrome can have significant implications for student leaders of color, because they may (a) disengage from leadership, (b) avoid all situations where they can be compared to their white peers, (c) constantly feel inadequate to lead, and (d) experience unhealthy levels of pressure as they seek to be successful as leaders (Peteet et al., 2015; Sherman, 2013). This self-doubt can be exacerbated for student leaders of color at DWIs because of the additional challenges surrounding their racial identity (e.g., discrimination). Serving as one of few students of color in leadership heightens a student's level of self-doubt. Such students may feel there is a specific role they are supposed to fill, and they are not living up to others' expectations. They feel they are constantly in the spotlight, which causes them to be more self-conscious about their identity. Finally, they internalize their negative views from others and begin to question their legitimacy as leaders.

Disconnecting from Cultural Identity

Participants also described the perception that being a leader meant betraying one's cultural identity. This perception was influenced by the White environment of campus and the White normativity

instituted and reinstituted daily within society at large (Moore & Bell, 2017). For example, the African American basketball player reported shifting his language depending on whether he was speaking with fellow teammates or with the athletic ministries group (SL3). Other studies described similar experiences, in which racial/ethnic minority students recounted having to change their verbal and body language when engaging with different groups and events on campus (Arminio et al., 2000; Hawkins & Larabee, 2009). Maramba and Velasquez (2012) described this as bicultural socialization, as students of color must navigate their racial identity with the dominant culture. The pressure of blending their culture with the dominant culture of the institution forces them either to conform or be ostracized socially (Arminio et al., 2000). Such adaptations caused the participants' peers to believe they were abandoning their cultural identity (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

Two African American females illustrated this point when they discussed their experiences of being called Whitewashed and being White-shamed by their African American peers. For example, one student realized her perspectives and outlooks changed when she became a leader and this, in turn, changed her friends' perspectives of her. She discussed how students of all races considered her to be Whitewashed because, according to them, she "talked White" (SL2). Offended by such a statement, she expressed how such a mindset implies only White people speak correctly. Perceiving someone to be right or wrong based on the way they speak instead of focusing on the content or substance of their speech caused this particular student to feel "less of a person of color" (SL2). Because she spoke in a certain way, used different terms, and appreciated different music considered to be outside her cultural norm, she expressed how others questioned her membership in or loyalty to her culture (SL2).

Such experiences confirmed underrepresented students viewed leadership on campus as *White-marked* (Arminio et al., 2000; Baughman & Bruce, 2011; Guthrie et al., 2013; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Lavant & Terrell, 1994; Littleton, 2002; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Slavin Miller, 2007; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). If a student of color decides to engage in leadership at a dominantly White campus, then that student is perceived as choosing to be a part of a system that continues to reinforce White power and privilege through its daily practices.

Pressure to Represent

The participants expressed a feeling of "onlyness" which appeared to put a significant amount of pressure on them to perform in their leadership roles (Harper et al., 2011). Not only are they constantly speculating about other's motives, but also, they feel a burden of responsibility to represent their racial/ethnic group. In their research on Black resident assistants, Harper et al. (2011) described these feelings as "'onlyness'—the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one's same racial or ethnic group" (p. 190). As was the case in the study by Harper et al. (2011), these students felt an inordinate amount of pressure to perform well and feared their failure could affect future student leaders of color. For instance, the senior basketball player emphasized the importance of being on his "A-game" while being a leader (SL3). When asked to describe what it means to be on his A-game, he stated,

> So, my peers, my Caucasian peers, let's say they're not prepared for a meeting. That's okay, but I'm gonna make sure that I'm prepared, I'm gonna make sure that I'm punctual, and doing everything I need to do to represent myself well, to represent my family well, and even in some cases to represent my people well, as in African American people. (SL3)

Systemic issues within dominantly White institutions can create moments where student leaders of color feel obligated or forced to represent their racial/ethnic group, which creates a significant burden for these students.

These feelings are exacerbated when student leaders of color have to manage what Huerta and Fishman (2014) defined as "dual-personas" (p. 95) by serving as student leaders, as outlined in their job descriptions, while simultaneously functioning as spokespersons for their entire race, fulfilling an unwritten job description generated by the environment of dominantly White institution (Doan, 2015; Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). This added pressure causes the students to worry about how their actions and words may be interpreted and to experience stress about their ability to fulfill prevailing stereotypes and expectations. Some participants, for instance, discussed having to use discernment when interacting and communicating with their various teams and groups.

These added pressures, burdens, and obligations contribute to a negative perception of the institution's racial climate, and they affect students' sense of belonging. As research discusses, having a positive perception of campus climate and a sense of belonging are invaluable in recruiting and retaining students of color in leadership roles (Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015; Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, & Milem, 1998; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012).

Implications

Research results raise awareness of practices that could enhance the interest, engagement, and involvement of students of color in leadership while reducing the pressure to represent and dismantle institutional systemic issues. These recommendations provide practical ways for institutions to improve their campus environments to make leadership opportunities more appealing to underrepresented students.

Deciding to serve in leadership within the context of a dominantly White Christian institution can be exhausting for students of color. As has been noted, students feel obligated to perform well both for their racial group and for themselves as well as pressured or burdened to fit into the dominant culture. These feelings derive from the experience of being "the only" in leadership (Lowe, 2017). Institutions need to be strategic in minimizing these pressures by changing minority/majority relations, addressing systemic and institutional issues, and creating safe spaces.

Minority/Majority Relations

A paradigm shift is needed in the dynamics of interaction between the minority and majority cultures. Institutions have typically focused on bringing the underrepresented group into the majority group or integrating individuals of color into the dominant group. Institutions need to make institution-wide commitments to develop and implement initiatives to teach students how to move together instead of expecting the minority group to assimilate. The entire community needs to take steps toward understanding others in a more inclusive way.

This more comprehensive and deliberate approach will create, encourage, and implement more positive cross-racial interactions (Paredes-Collins, 2013). Sims (2008) suggested "task- oriented, discussion-based, issue focused, and goal-oriented program[s]" are essential if students are to have more positive cross-racial interactions (p. 698). Developing

co-curricular programs such as student retreats, service-learning projects, living-learning communities, leadership training, and other interactive initiatives will advance the engagement process. These programs will encourage students to work together to accomplish a goal, to understand one another, and to build relationships. It will also be important to develop, implement, and sustain seminars, workshops, and programs that cultivate intergroup dialogue and improve intercultural understanding, social success, and cross-racial communication (Sims, 2008). Finally, new student programs can play an important role in creating other opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. Affecting such a systemic shift will require a collaborative, campus-wide effort by multiple departments in order to create a campus culture that intentionally fosters a campus community that values and respects all members of the institution.

Systemic and Institutional Change

In order to make improvements in the campus racial climate, institutions will need to begin with a process of thoroughly assessing institutional policies, procedures, and processes to determine which systems construct racial barriers for students of color. Institutions can utilize Hurtado et al.'s (1998) framework to assess and develop strategies for creating systemic and institutional change in relation to the campus racial climate. This framework encourages institutions to evaluate campus climate by examining (a) racial diversity of institutional constituents, (b) interpersonal interactions between individuals and groups on diverse issues, (c) students' perceptions of and attitudes about racial/ethnic inequity, and (d) institutional history of racial/ethnic discrimination. To make improvements institutions must assess and give attention to these four institutional dimensions.

First, institutions must acknowledge and address their historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion. Diversity councils should be created to review traditions, policies, and practices to determine the systemic structures that enable and sustain forms of oppression and privilege within the campus community. As Paredes-Collins (2013) noted, "When institutions acknowledge their exclusionary past in conjunction with a clear commitment to move forward, it can pave the way for a shift in both consciousness and culture (p. 133). One change of practice would be to restructure the current hierarchical structure of student leadership. Instead of hiring or structuring student leadership positions to be hierarchical, institutions could create councils. From a cultural alignment, students of color gravitate toward councils because they support

the collective or we culture to which they are accustomed to. A council structure elicits leadership opportunities for students but does not perpetuate the exclusive hierarchical structure.

Secondly, institutions need to increase racial representation across all avenues of the campus community. This process will begin with a careful examination of the physical presence of diversity within student, faculty, staff, and administrative groups. The first dimension of Smith's (2009) diversity framework, *institutional viability and vitality*, emphasizes the importance of human capital. Efforts will be necessary to increase the racial diversity of faculty and staff across academic and co-curricular departments, including higher-level administrative positions. Having diverse representation at all levels of institutional life and decision-making demonstrates a commitment to building human capacity (Smith, 2009). The visibility of this commitment to diversity will communicate the importance the institution assigns to having a multicultural community.

Furthermore, institutions will need to leverage a variety of solutions toward increasing compositional diversity. One example would include developing formal and informal mentoring programs or affinity groups on campus. Such initiatives can create avenues for students of color to have faculty, staff, and mentors with whom they can identify, to whom they can relate, and from whom they can learn from as underrepresented leaders (Ishihara, 2017). Through such programs, students of color feel cared for, invested in, and supported. Another solution for offsetting the deficit in people of color on campus is inviting community members to serve as mentors. Even though these individuals are not employees, students can still benefit from those influences. Increasing mentors of color as well as implementing mentor programs will communicate an institution's commitment to investing in the success of all students.

Third, institutions need to focus on developing co-curricular and academic programs that increase the quality and frequency of interactions among faculty, staff, and students from diverse backgrounds. This will require the development of a comprehensive diversity plan that emphasizes the value of diverse perspectives. Tatum (2003) argues that students "need to see themselves reflected in the environment around them – in the curriculum, in the faculty and staff, and in the faces of their classmates" in order not to feel invisible or isolated (p. 215).

Finally, institutions should assess the racial climate on campus through quantitative and qualitative studies to determine which institutional policies, procedures, and attitudes do and do not create a sense of belonging.

Paredes-Collins (2013) suggested Christian institutions would benefit from utilizing the Diverse Learning Environments Survey. This assessment would allow these institutions to assess the climate for diversity, diversity initiatives, and diversity learning outcomes. Using nationally-normed instruments similar to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) could also be helpful.

By changing the racial climate of campus by increasing racial representation and incorporating comprehensive diversity programs into the academic and social fabric of the institution will help decrease the exaggeration of differences among students.

Safe Spaces

One final way institutions can minimize the pressure students of color experience is by creating safe spaces. These spaces allow underrepresented students to connect, reflect, and share their experiences with students who visually represent them and share similar experiences. Study participants described such spaces as "home" or "safe havens." Tatum (2003) argued having a safe place "to be rejuvenated and to feel anchored in one's cultural community increases the possibility that one will have the energy to achieve academically as well as participate in the cross-group dialogue and interaction many colleges want to encourage" (p. 80). As other researchers have noted, these "counter-spaces" because they facilitate a sense of belonging and provide students a refuge from a racially insensitive campus climate (Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000).

Such spaces can be created for racially and ethnically diverse students in two ways. First, institutions can establish either an ethnic cultural center or intercultural affairs office (Paredes-Collins, 2013; Patton et al., 2007). These sites offer space for underrepresented students to meet, openly discuss race-related issues, and form community. These counter-spaces also offer support, enable subgroup belonging, and implement initiatives that educate the campus community about diverse backgrounds and cultures (Paredes-Collins, 2013; Patton et al., 2007). Second, institutions should work with students to develop ethnic student organizations. Students who become involved in these organizations tend to become more socially integrated, experience a more profound development of their racial/ethnic identity, and find social support. These groups also provide a space for underrepresented students to share their voices, advocate for the needs of other underrepresented students, and share strategies for success. In addition, these organizations offer relationship-building

opportunities with other students, faculty, and staff of color. Safe spaces need to be an institutional priority, so students of color will have a place where they can feel comfortable within the dominantly White community.

Institutions must be strategic and intentional in creating opportunities for encouraging positive minority/majority interactions, making systemic institutional changes, and establishing safe spaces on campus. Implementing such strategies could minimize students of color's sense of being burdened or obligated to represent their group, while at the same time improving the racial climate for diversity on campus.

Conclusion

The goal of Christian higher education, from both a mission and faith integration standpoint, is to transform students. For students of color, this process of transformation needs to be an inclusive one. If institutions of higher education expect to influence the ways students–and students of color in particular–develop as leaders, then faculty, staff, and administrators need to understand the risks of being a leader of color, the critical race perspective, and the influence of the cultural and systemic structures of the campus environment.

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