

The Impact of Friendship on the Leadership Identity Development of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the past experiences of six post-secondary students who self-identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Queer (LGBQ) and held leadership roles in student organizations at one large public institution. The purpose of this exploration was to better understand the impact of friendship on the development of a leadership identity. Utilizing Komives et al.'s (2005) Leadership Identity Development (LID) model as a framework, data were obtained from a series of three in-depth interviews with each participant and analyzed through a grounded theory approach. The significance of friendship was noted across all stages of the LID model. Based upon my findings and the suggestions put forth by the participants, a number of recommendations are made for higher education research and practice.

Introduction

Despite a positive shift in societal perceptions of non-heterosexual people, the journey to accepting one's non-heterosexual identity, or "coming out," can be a very personal and often lonely process bereft of guidance or support from parents, friends, or family who may not be accepting of alternative sexual identities. One consequence of this non-affirming environment is that the establishment of a positive self-image as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer (LGBQ) individual can be extremely difficult (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Sanlo, 2004). In a national survey of over 5,000 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and queer university students, faculty, and staff, Rankin et al. (2010) found that nearly one quarter (23%) of respondents reported experiencing harassment of some form and over 80% indicated that sexual identity was the basis for the harassment. One-third of the participants stated that they had "seriously considered" leaving their institution due to its unfriendly climate and over half of the students, faculty, and staff who responded to the survey stated that they choose to hide their sexual and/or gender identity in order to avoid negative consequences. What is more, 13% of the respondents indicated that they feared for their own physical safety.

Many institutions of higher learning now recognize that a significant number of students do not fit within a heterosexual norm and thus, may feel marginalized by common and widely accepted social practices or policies across campuses. In an effort to address such disparities, some institutions have taken proactive steps to implement specific programs and initiatives (Dilley, 2002a, 2002b; Rankin et al., 2010). However, research on these new programs and initiatives speak to the deficiencies that still remain due to inadequate support and funding (Beemyn, Curtis, & Tubbs, 2005; Renn, 2010; Ritchie & Banning, 2001). As such, many

programs that focus solely on the LGBQ student population rely heavily on student leadership as a means of sustaining focused initiatives.

A significant amount of research suggests that involvement in campus activities, organizations, and learning communities promotes the development of college students and leadership skills (Astin, 1993; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stewart, 2008; Zeller 2008). Additionally, participation in campus activities related to a specific component of identity (i.e. race, gender, or sexual orientation) has been shown to have a positive effect on identity development (Arminio et al., 2000; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Olive, 2010). Along those same lines, the benefits of LGBQ based campus activities on the leadership identity development of LGBQ students have also been established (Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005a, 2005b; Renn & Ozaki, 2010). What still requires further exploration, however, is the impact of *friendships* within LGBQ based student organizations on leadership identity development (Renn & Ozaki, 2010). The purpose of this study is to explore the role that friendships among students in LGBQ campus organizations play in the leadership identity development process. Specifically, this study's primary research question asks: "What is the impact of friendships on the leadership identity development of LGBQ student leaders?"

Several operational definitions are necessary before moving forward as a number of relational terms are used in this study to describe the connections between peers. Additionally, other sexuality-based terms may be unfamiliar to some readers. For the purposes of the present study, *friends* and the concept of *friendship* are defined as a mutual attachment or bond between two individuals who share an affinity for each other that extends beyond a mere working relationship. A *peer* relationship is one in which two people who are similar (in age, experience, social status, etc.) maintain an ongoing social interaction. A *mentoring* relationship functions on a professional level and occurs when an experienced person (the mentor) guides and supports another individual in developing specific knowledge and skills. With regard to sexuality-based definitions, *gay* denotes a man who is sexually attracted to other men, a *lesbian* is a woman who is sexually attracted to other women, a *bisexual* person experiences sexual attraction toward both men and women, and a *queer* person is someone who eschews any type of gender or sexuality label (PFLAG National, n.d.).

Student Leadership Research

Among student leadership scholars, there is widespread agreement that leadership is a relational, transformative, process-oriented, learned, and change-directed phenomenon (Rost, 1991). The foundation for much of the research related to college student leadership development draws from one or a combination of two models: the social change model put forth by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) in 1996, and the relational model developed by Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998). The HERI social change model was originally crafted as a guide for college students to follow on how to work effectively with others toward the creation of positive social change (HERI, 1996). According to the social change model, leadership is developed through a framework involving collaboration between individuals, groups, and communities – each of which strive toward seven key values which are referred to as "The Seven C's" (HERI, 1996, p. 29). The Seven C's values include: consciousness of self,

congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship. Ten years later, a relational model of student leadership development was introduced through the work of Komives et al. (1998). The definition of leadership put forth by the relational model was similar to that of the social change model as it defined leadership as “a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change of make a difference to benefit the common good” (Komives et al., 2006, p. 23). The process of leadership as seen through the relational model consists of having a defined purpose, empowerment, inclusivity and ethical practices. Both the social change model and relational model have provided a solid theoretical foundation for understanding college student leadership development. However, as Renn and Ozaki (2010) explain, these models “focused on the ‘doing’ of leadership rather than the ‘being’ of leader identity” (p. 16).

Drawing upon shared elements between the social change model and relational model, Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) created a leadership identity development (LID) model comprised of the following six stages (pp. 404-405):

1. Awareness – recognizing that leadership is happening around you; uninvolved or “inactive” follower
2. Exploration/Engagement – intentional involvements; experiencing groups for first time; taking on responsibilities; an “active” follower or member
3. Leader Identified – leadership seen as positional – held by self or others
 - Emerging – trying on new roles; taking on responsibilities; individual accomplishments important
 - Immersion – managing others; practicing different approaches/styles
4. Leadership Differentiated – leadership no longer seen as positional; multiple sources of leadership within a group
 - Emerging – joining with others in shared tasks/goals; participatory leadership style
 - Immersion – seeks to facilitate a good group process whether in positional or non-positional leader role
5. Generativity – active commitment to a personal passion; accepting responsibility for the development of others; promotes team learning and sustainability of ideas and group
6. Internalization/Synthesis – continued self-development and life-long learning; striving for congruence and internal confidence; sees leadership as a life-long developmental process

A significant transition occurs between stages 3 and 4 of the LID in which one’s view of self in relation to others changes. Kegan (1982, 1994) described this transition as a subject-object shift in perception which occurs in the third of his five orders of consciousness during which one is able to recognize himself or herself as separate from others. When applied to the LID, the subject-object shift that culminates in stage 4 results in one functioning as a

participatory leader who recognizes and values the needs and contributions of others. Renn and Bilodeau (2005b) highlight the importance of the subject-object shift to the leadership development process as it relates to identity and argue that “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” (p. 4).

LGBQ Student Leadership Development Research

Amid the research on identity-based leadership experiences in college, there exists a common theme which supports the argument that being involved in identity-based leadership roles fosters not only leadership development but personal identity. Unfortunately, the amount of research pertaining solely to LGBQ student leadership development remains small. Aside from Porter’s (1998) study of gay and lesbian identity and transformational leadership self-efficacy, Renn and Bilodeau’s (2005a, 2005b) grounded theory study of 15 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students stands as the only scholarship related to leadership and identity development within non-heterosexual student organizations. Drawing from D’Augelli’s (1994) life span model of sexual orientation identity development, Renn and Bilodeau (2005b) found that serving in leadership roles within non-heterosexual contexts encouraged students to come out more broadly to friends, family, and the campus community. Komives et al.’s (2005) LID model, discussed above, was also employed in the analysis of their data and results from that process indicated that participation as leader in such organizations fostered leadership identity development and, in some cases, the achievement of a subject-object shift toward favoring participatory leadership above positional power (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005a).

Renn and Ozaki’s (2010) study of 18 college students who were leaders of identity-based campus organizations also looked at the impact of group participation on psychosocial and leadership identity development. The results of their analyses underscored the significance of social interaction and importance of peer relationships. Renn and Ozaki explained, “the social interaction with peers both influenced leaders to become more involved in groups and provided a foundation of members when beginning new groups” (p. 21). While most of the research on leadership identity development points to the significance of relationships, “the role of friendships among students in campus organizations is less well explored... and bears further exploration” (p. 21).

Given the scant literature currently available that relates to the development of a leadership identity in an LGBQ organization, the present study endeavors to build upon current knowledgebase and, in doing so, respond to Renn and Ozaki’s (2010) call for a deeper exploration of the role and impact of friendships on the leadership identity development process within an LGBQ context. While all developmental stage models assume, on some level, uniformity across life experiences and learning styles, the LID remains useful as a tool toward understanding a student’s evolution into a leader. Thus, it serves as the theoretical framework for the present study.

Method

As the primary purpose of this study was to deepen the understanding of friendship's impact on the leadership identity development of LGBQ students, a qualitative methodology was chosen for sampling, data collection, and data analysis (Merriam, 2002). A convenience sample of six postsecondary students who self-identified as LGBQ and held leadership roles in student organizations on campus comprised the sample. Data were obtained through a series of three interviews with each participant and analyzed through a grounded theory approach. Additional information regarding participant selection, data collection, and analysis follows.

Participants

Once approval had been received from the Institutional Review Board, a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of six postsecondary students who self-identified as LGBQ was obtained from a large Midwestern university. The university maintained an LGBQ student support office which consisted of one director, a student advisory board, and multiple LGBQ student groups. The director supplied the names of five students who served as leaders in the LGBQ student groups on campus. I contacted the five individuals via e-mail and solicited their participation – all five responded and agreed to take part in the study. One of the female respondents indicated that she knew of another student who served as a leader within her student group and might be interested in participating. I contacted this person and solicited her involvement – she too agreed. The final sample was comprised of three male and three female students and are referred to in the present article by the pseudonyms of Becky, Christine, Tonia, James, Brad, and Stephen. One of the females self-identified as lesbian, one labeled herself bisexual and the third stated that she was queer. All three male participants self-identified as gay. All of the participants held positional leadership roles within their respective organizations, as well as participated on the campus-wide LGBQ student advisory board. The sample was diverse in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and field of study. See Table 1 below for additional demographic information:

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual ID	Ethnicity	Socioeconomic Status	Declared Major
Becky	21	Lesbian	White	Middle	Political Science
Christine	21	Bisexual	White	Middle	Pre-Med
Tonia	24	Queer	White	Lower-Middle	Women's Studies
Brad	23	Gay	White	Upper-Middle	Engineering
James	21	Gay	Biracial	Lower-Middle	Business Finance
Stephen	22	Gay	Hispanic	Middle	Political Science

Data Collection

A series of three in-depth interviews with each participant were completed over a span of six months. I encouraged the participants to choose the location for each interview as a means of establishing trust and increasing their comfort level. Being flexible with regard to venues aided in the obtainment of different (and in some cases sensitive) types of information since the participants felt more at ease in locations of their own choosing, such as an apartment, campus space, or community center. Additionally, varying where we met also resulted in greater access to other forms of pertinent information such as photographs, memorabilia, and personal documents. Four of the six participants chose to meet in their own apartments which afforded me with an opportunity to not only see where and how these individuals lived, but also provided me with an enhanced view of each person. In addition to the one-on-one interview sessions, I also visited with each participant in more casual settings such as a coffee shop or restaurant.

I used Seidman's (2005) *Three-Interview Series* model as a structure for the interviews in which a life history was obtained during the first session, followed by a deeper exploration of lived experiences in the second session, and concluding in the third session with a "reflection on the meaning" (p. 14). I obtained written consent prior to the start of the first interview and all sessions were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by an individual who possessed no knowledge of the participants' true identities. All interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Each time the transcript of a session was completed, it was sent to its corresponding person along with my interview notes. Doing so enabled each participant to review, modify and/or enhance the data where he or she deemed it necessary.

The first interview consisted of 12 semi-structured questions that were initially derived from preexisting literature on life-history methods (Cole, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001) and subsequently refined through a peer debriefing process. These questions not only focused on the person's life history, but also the leadership roles each person had maintained. The second interview centered on significant past experiences (personal, academic, and professional) and allowed me to further explore the relationships that each participant identified as important to their development as a leader. The third and final session afforded me with an opportunity to conduct member checking (Merriam, 2002) about specific pieces of information, as well as the themes that began to emerge from the data. Additionally, the final interview provided each participant with a chance to reflect upon the impact that various friendships played in his or her leadership identity development, as well as supplied an opportunity for closure of the process.

Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach was employed in the analysis of data (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002). While initial analyses were informed by the LID model (Komives et al., 2005), codes and themes were solely derived from the data and evolved through a constant comparative process (Merriam, 2002) as new data became available. What was gleaned during earlier interview sessions informed and enhanced subsequent interactions as the study progressed.

The trustworthiness (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2002) of my findings was established in three ways. First, to ensure the dependability of the study, a robust audit trail was maintained.

This audit trail consisted of a research journal and copious notes taken throughout the research process which included my own thoughts and personal reflections related to the participants, their histories, the themes identified, and the possible connections that may exist between these data. As such, my journal not only served as a means of documenting my actions and thoughts, it also assisted me in the triangulation of data, the theme building process and bracketing my own interpretations when necessary. Second, to ensure that the themes I identified truly represented the participants, a thorough process of member checking was conducted in regard to the transcripts and themes identified. Each interview transcript was reviewed by its respective participant for accuracy and clarity and the themes that emerged from those transcripts were also examined by the participants. As such, the participants and I worked collaboratively to identify and link categories to themes. Third and finally, I utilized peer debriefing (Merriam, 2002), wherein I consulted with colleagues knowledgeable in leadership identity development to enhance the theme building process, as well as to bracket my own potential biases.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the role that friendships among students in LGBQ campus organizations play in the leadership identity development process. The primary research question asked: “What is the impact of friendships on the leadership identity development of LGBQ student leaders?” In line with the preexisting literature on the LID model (see Renn & Bilodeau, 2005a, 2005b; Renn & Ozaki, 2010), all of the participants in this study exhibited characteristics of stages 1, 2, 3 and 4. Five students displayed stage 5 development and three participants demonstrated attributes of stage 6. In each case and across all stages of the LID, the impact of friendship was noted and, while sexuality did play a part in most of the participants’ experiences (i.e. they were leaders within LGBQ student groups), no significant differences were noted between the leadership identity development of these six LGBQ students and that of the heterosexual students who took part in Komives et al.’s (2005) study. Differences, however, were discovered in regard to the ways in which LGBQ students connected with other LGBQ students. In this section, I present information mined from interview data that exemplifies the significance of friendship on the leadership identity development process. Additionally, I provide examples which speak to the importance of LGBQ visibility on campus and institutional initiatives. Where necessary, names and locations have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants and their respective friends.

Stage 1: Awareness

One of the primary goals of the first interview session was to obtain life history information. During this process, all of the participants conveyed stories involving at least one friend in their past that they looked up to and viewed as a leader. James explained the following about his childhood best friend,

Looking back now, I can see that John was a leader. I mean, when we were younger, he always sort of ran things. In our scouting group, John was looked up to by me and the other boys and whenever our scoutmaster had to leave or something, John was put in charge. John was cool and I wanted to be like him.

Christine relayed a similar story about one of her best friends in middle school. Christine said, “In school, Rebecca was viewed as a leader by most of the kids in my class – at least most of the girls. Wherever Rebecca went, we seemed to follow.”

Others spoke of more recent friendships and how those impacted their awareness of leadership. Stephen explained,

When I first arrived on campus, I didn't know anyone. I liked that 'cause it was like a new start but it was lonely. Eventually, I made some good friends and they got me involved with other activities and groups on campus. That's what happened with the [gay political science] group... I started going to meetings because of my friend Dan who was the treasurer at the time. After a while, Dan became the leader of that group and I took on his role as treasurer.

Becky, Tonia, and Brad told similar stories in which a close friendship was the impetus for their participation in campus groups and activities.

Stage 2: Exploration/Engagement

Close peer relationships and friendships had a significant impact on all of the participants' decisions related to their involvement in campus groups and activities, as well as in the development of self-confidence. In regard to involvement and participation, Becky explained,

Almost all of the groups and activities I do on campus are the result of my friendships. I mean, when I first got here, I didn't really know what was available – especially as a lesbian. I saw flyers and stuff about the groups, but what really made me want to try things out were my friends which makes sense because we share similar interests. Some of them also encouraged me later on to take the lead role in planning activities which is how I eventually became president of the group.

Tonia also credited her participation in various campus groups and activities to her friends:

Being Queer on campus can be lonely at times so my circle of friends is pretty tight – we do many of the same things. The first meeting of the [LGBQ] group that I attended was because of a friend. She wanted to get more involved as an activist on campus but I didn't. That changed over time though - once I saw what she and some of the others were doing to make things better on campus, I started doing more like organizing our weekly meetings and planning some of our trips out to the bars.

Brad was also brought to the LGBQ student group by a close friend and attributed his initial leadership role in that group to the same person:

He was always saying how good I was at organizing things so when we needed a coordinator for that year's National Coming Out Day activities, he nominated me. At first, I wasn't sure I could do it but things turned out really well.

Brad went on to explain that the individual who previously handled the National Coming Out Day activities initially served as a mentor but then later became a good friend:

Bill had ran the [National Coming Out Day] activities for a couple of years and since I'd never done it, I asked him for help. He really took me under his wing – pointed me toward the right people on campus to talk to and guided me through the process. We got to be great friends during the process.

What initially began as a mentoring opportunity between Brad and Bill eventually evolved into a close friendship which spanned a number of years.

The impact of friendship on the development of one's self confidence, a hallmark of this LID stage (Komives et al., 2005), was noted across all participants and is evident in the above examples. Becky attributed her eventual position as president to the encouragement she received from her friends. When asked whether this might have happened without her friends' support, Becky replied, "I doubt it - I was pretty meek back then and their support really helped me step out of my comfort zone." Tonia's initial reticence to take an active role in the LGBTQ group gave way as she recognized the benefits in what her friends were doing on campus: "I saw small changes in some of the decisions that were being made by the University because my friends were speaking up and that pushed me to do more in the group." Similarly, Brad's acknowledgement of his success in planning his group's National Coming Out Day activities stemmed from the nomination of one friend and the mentoring of another.

Stage 3: Leader Identified

Leadership is perceived as positional in stage 3 and success is based primarily upon reaching set goals and accomplishing tasks. Whether intergroup or intragroup, for the participants in this study, friendships served as a resource in the attainment of goals and completion of tasks. As president of her student group, Becky frequently looked to her close friends within the group for help: "I am really close with a few of the girls in my group and I know they are picky like me so if there is a big project or event coming up, I'll usually ask for their help first." Brad also admitted that he relied heavily on his friends for help in the execution of his group's National Coming Out Day event:

National Coming Out Day is one our biggest events each year and I wanted to make my year the best we've had. There was no way I could have gotten it all done by myself though. My friends posted flyers and drew announcements on sidewalks in chalk – they were total lifesavers.

Participants made use of friendships outside of their respective groups to reach goals and complete leadership tasks. Christine, James, and Tonia described situations in which they had enlisted the support of friends who were not part of their particular group to finish a task or project. James provided the following justification for these instances: "sometimes there is just no one in the group that can help because of classes or other stuff, so you have to look outside

the group in order to get things done.” Aside from availability, expertise was also a catalyst for capitalizing on friendships external to a particular group. Stephen shared,

As treasurer of the poli-sci group, I had to do a quarterly report on the budget which is something I had never done before. The person before me obviously didn't know what they were doing because our records were a mess. I like things to be in order, especially when I am in charge of them, so I asked one of my friends who had been the treasurer of the accounting student group help me out.

Stage 4: Leadership Differentiated

Group interdependence and participatory leadership are indicative of stage 4 development according to the LID model (Komives et al., 2005). All six participants spoke directly to this topic and the impact of friendships. The statements made by Becky and Brad in the preceding section not only exhibited the value of friendships when accomplishing tasks but also displays their realization that more could be accomplished if they shared some of the leadership duties among friends. Christine shared: “I am always asking for help. I've got too many things going on – there's no way I can get it all done!” James recognized the value in shared leadership through the actions of his close friends who served in various leadership roles during his childhood and adolescence: “I learned a long time ago that you can get more done if you're willing to share some of limelight.”

Friends who modeled a participatory style of governance were also key in this stage of development. Stephen explained,

During my first year in the group, I saw how Dan would delegate certain things to people. I think it not only helped him get things done but also helped us learn the ins and outs of the group. When elections came up for the next year, I felt more comfortable stepping up because of the experiences I had during the previous year.

Tonia conveyed a similar observation: “Katie was great at pulling everyone together when we promoted a campus event – she was really organized. Each task was assigned to one or two people which helped distribute the workload - everything wasn't just dumped on one person.”

Stage 5: Generativity

Comments made by Becky, James, Stephen, Tonia and Brad contained characteristics of stage 5 development. Each spoke not only of his or her commitment to a group, but also the friends within the group. Becky, James, and Stephen indicated that they felt responsible in some way for the development of their friends and the sustainability of their group. As president of her group, Becky accepted “full responsibility” in mentoring her successor: “I see that as part of my role – to make sure that one of my friends is able to step in next year.” Becky also mentioned the benefits of being a mentor: “I don't know everyone within the group so when I have the opportunity to mentor someone in a new role, I get to know them better and many times, we become good friends.” James said the following about his duties as a leader:

Part of my job is to educate the new members on what the group does – what we stand for. That way, when I graduate, the group will keep going. We’ve done some awesome things since I joined – I don’t want all of that to go to waste.

Stephen shared a similar perspective on ensuring the continuity of his political science student group: “We won’t be here forever – it’s up to me and the other group leaders to prepare the newer members for next year.”

Tonia and Brad attributed their feelings of commitment to a personal “passion” they possessed for the LGBQ group’s mission and goals. Tonia displayed a clear desire to improve the conditions on campus for her friends:

Some of my friends are not out on campus because they don’t feel safe and I feel like it’s up to me to be a voice for them and any other student who may feel left out because they don’t fit the typical mold.

Brad’s shared a similar viewpoint regarding the LGBQ student group: “Some people have no idea what it’s like to be gay or lesbian so I’m very passionate about our cause. What we do is so important – not just for me and my friends, but the whole campus community.”

Stage 6: Integration/Synthesis

The impact of friendship on one’s desire for life-long learning and continued self-development was evident as I discussed future plans and goals with Tonia and Brad. Tonia’s occupational aspirations were a direct result of her past leadership experiences in the campus’ LGBQ group which were prompted in large part by her friend:

When I got here, I really didn’t have a clear idea of what I wanted to do after I graduated but I knew that it would have to be something that would keep me engaged – I get bored quickly. My time in the [LGBQ] group really helped me narrow things down. Going on for my master’s degree and, hopefully, my doctorate later on just makes sense because I see being a professor in Women’s Studies as a way for me to continue learning and growing.

Brad’s friends helped him realize the dynamic nature of leadership:

As I’ve taken on more and more things, I realized that you never stop developing as a leader because everyone is different. There’ve been a number of times where my friends have helped me see that I was wrong or wasn’t taking the other person’s feelings into account. What works for one person won’t work with another so I’ve learned to adapt.

Summary of Findings

The importance of friendship on the leadership identity development of the 6 LGBQ participants in this study was noted across all stages of the LID model. Childhood, adolescent,

and present-day friendships facilitated growth in a number of ways. Friends acted as role models who exhibited good leadership practices and as mentors providing training and guidance when needed. When participants were reticent to join in an activity or fill a leadership role, friends provided the motivation, encouragement, and support to do so. Though indirectly related to this study's primary research question, a common suggestion that arose during interviews should also be mentioned. Four of the participants spoke of the difficulties they experienced upon arriving to campus and trying to meet other LGBQ students. Due to these challenges, Becky, Tonia, Brad, and Stephen each suggested that institutions might consider establishing Living-Learning Communities (LLC) for LGBQ students. Becky explained,

When I first got here, it was really hard to meet other [LGBQ] students because there weren't any flyers posted or anything. If I'd been given the option for an [LGBQ] community, I may have selected it and that would have made things much easier.

Brad's argument for an LGBQ LLC went further than simply increasing the ease of networking:

I think it would definitely make things easier for newbies, but I think it would help the entire LGBQ community on campus. Having our own living learning community would show folks that WE ARE HERE – that we exist. I also think it would say something to the other students who may not feel comfortable being totally out yet. They'd at least know they had a place to hang out.

Tonia's rationale for such a community stemmed from her activist role: "I think having our own community would bring us closer together – it would definitely strengthen our collective voice on campus."

Limitations

All research contains inherent limitations and this qualitative study is no different. The first limitation stems from the fact that none of the participants self-identified as transgender and while research on this marginalized population has increased within the last decade, there still remains a significant gap in the knowledgebase. The sampling strategy presents another limitation as the entire sample was obtained from one Midwestern university. While the purpose of qualitative inquiry is not to generalize, one should remain cognizant of the fact that the experiences of the six participants in this study cannot fully represent the totality of all LGBQ student leaders. That said, what has been gleaned about friendship's impact on the leadership identity development of LGBQ students through this study does provide a significant contribution to the literature on student development and is transferrable by the consumer of this research to other contexts.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Research

All of the participants in this study connected with the LGBQ student population on campus through some form of activity whether academic or socially focused. Over time, Becky, Christine, Tonia, Brad, James, and Stephen endeavored to align their academic and career goals with that of the various LGBQ groups and activities on campus and each held leadership

positions within those organizations. The findings from this study hold both theoretical and practical significance. From a theoretical standpoint, it addresses Renn and Ozaki's (2010) call for further exploration into the role of friendships in campus organizations and examined the impact of those friendships on the leadership identity development of LGBQ students using Komives et al.'s (2005) LID model. My examination not only affirmed that friendship plays a significant role in the leadership development of LGBQ students, it also highlighted the ways in which friends help each other grow as leaders. What was learned through the 6 participants in this study adds to the current literature on leadership identity development and speaks directly to the relational aspects of becoming a leader. The findings underscore the importance of several psychosocial dimensions of college student development including the creation of supportive interpersonal relationships and a strong sense of self-confidence (Baxter-Magolda, 2001; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kegan, 1994).

Friends played key roles in the participants' decisions regarding participation in the LGBQ organizations, committees, and groups on campus. Involvement in these groups were a benefit in that they provided opportunities to meet other LGBQ faculty, staff, and peer leaders. Through these interactions, Becky, Christine, Tonia, Stephen, James, and Brad were able to gain a better understanding of what it means to be a leader. This enabled the participants to discern what characteristics, behaviors, and traits "felt right" to them and what did not. This process also aided in the growth of a positive self-image, as well as increased self-confidence. All of the participants stated that, as they grew to understand themselves better, their self-esteem increased and their orientation to the world became more autonomous. That is to say, serving in a leadership role introduced new situations in which each person was required to rely upon the meanings they had assigned to past experiences, as well as the knowledge gained through those experiences in order to make decisions. In most cases, friends provided a source of motivation, encouragement, and support.

Several practical implications also arose from this study which relate to student development. If the participants in this study are representative of their counterparts, colleges and universities would be wise to consider the ways in which friendships can be fostered among students. As this study's focus was on LGBQ postsecondary students, the following suggestions are geared toward that population. The first implication relates to increasing the visibility of LGBQ students on campus. While research suggests that society's views may have improved over recent years (Breen & Karpinski, 2013; Lambert, Ventura, Hall, & Cluse-Tolar, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2011; Schwartz, 2010), some LGBQ youth are still unwilling or unable to reveal their sexual identity. The addition of a LGBQ option or "check box" on admission paperwork is not sufficient for reaching this closeted sect of students. Therefore, colleges and universities would do well to increase the level of support and opportunities for visibility given to LGBQ groups on campus. Students would be better served if their institutions made sure that anyone interested was able to connect with an organization anonymously and through confidential channels. This could be accomplished through the use of an institutional Web site whereby students are able to self-select information on groups and activities related to various populations on campus. Along those same lines, such information could also be supplied during orientation programs which are mandatory at most institutions.

The creation and support of LGBTQ mentoring programs is another practical implication that arose from this study. Becky, Tonia, Brad and Stephen all spoke of the mentoring programs within their respective groups and found them extremely beneficial – both as a mentee and later as a mentor. These individuals stated that their mentoring relationships, which later developed into friendships, had a significant and positive impact on their college experience and leadership identity development. Such opportunities, however, are not available in all colleges and universities. Institutions lacking such programs might consider establishing formal procedures for mentoring relationships to occur.

Lastly, Becky, Tonia, Brad, and Stephen’s suggestion regarding LGBTQ living-learning communities is another practical means through which to facilitate development. Four major types of learning communities have been identified by Shapiro and Levine (1999). These include: (1) cohorts involved in large courses or first-year experiences; (2) paired or clustered courses; (3) courses that are team-taught; and (4) residential learning communities (also called “living-learning” communities). While the first three of these categories focus primarily on an institution’s curriculum, the fourth type pertains more to a student’s experience outside the classroom. A significant body of research on living-learning communities suggests that such groups provide many benefits to students (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2004; Inkelas et al., 2007; Muntz & Crabtree, 2006; Soldner & Szelenya, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Zeller, 2008) such as: easing the social transition into college, increasing levels of confidence regarding academic and professional success, promoting a greater sense of belonging, and fostering a deeper appreciation for diversity (National Study of Living-Learning Programs, 2007). Such programs would most likely assist new LGBTQ students in connecting with older peers, increase participation in LGBTQ activities and groups that are available on campus, and serve as a resource for developmental support and encouragement.

As with any study of this nature, more questions are produced than answers. The students in this study shared their experiences and, in doing so, exposed the impact of friendship on the development of their leadership identity; however, there is still more to learn. One potential direction for future inquiry would be to repeat the current study with a larger, more diverse sample which included transgendered individuals. Another possibility for future research would be to conduct a longitudinal study in which a cohort of students was followed throughout their college experience. Longitudinal data could provide an even greater understanding of friendship’s impact on leadership identity development. A final area of proposed study could investigate the potential gender differences that may exist in regard to friendship’s impact on leadership identity development.

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