Jonathan T. Pryor
California State University, Fresno

# QUEER ADVOCACY LEADERSHIP:

## A Queer Leadership Model for Higher Education

## Abstract

This study explored the experiences of college staff members engaged in advancing LGBTQ equity at a small fine arts college in the Midwestern United States. This qualitative case study advanced a conceptual framework for queer leadership in higher education. Findings illuminate how campus leaders engaged queer leadership strategies and LGBTQ advocacy to advance LGBTQ equity through college policy and practice. This study reveals rich implications for college administrators and higher education leaders advancing change for LGBTQ equity.

## Introduction

College and university administrative staff members hold a significant role in supporting the advancement of LGBTQ equity on college campuses in the United States. Yet, little is known about college staff advocacy or activism in higher education (Kezar, 2010), particularly within the context of championing advancement for sexual and gender diverse communities (Martin, Broadhurst, Hoffshire, & Takewell, 2018). Historically, institutional changes related to improving the campus for LGBTQ communities have been the result of active student initiatives, responses to campus incidents, or through the effort of campus leaders, despite resistance from other institutional actors (Dilley, 2002; Marine, 2011; Renn, 2010). These forms of LGBTQ activism have been responsible for driving much of the progress for LGBTQ people in higher education, shaping not only individual institutional policies but also the profession of higher education and student affairs (HESA) (Marine, 2011; Sanlo, 2002).

Further, college and university staff participation in campus activism has historically been tempered (Kezar & Lester, 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004). Yet there is a dearth of scholarship focused on LGBTQ leadership or staff in higher education related to improving the climate for LGBTQ communities (Kezar, 2010; Martin et al., 2018; Renn, 2010). Successful challenges to dominant power structures in higher education, particularly for queer voices, has historically been the result of bottom-up grassroots strategies (Marine, 2011; Sanlo, 2002). Grassroots leadership provides an alternative yet necessary view from earlier theories about leadership related to how change can happen in bureaucratic higher educational structures. As a model, it requires bottom-up efforts from those who lack authority or delegated power, and creates opportunities for collective organizing to create organizational change (Kezar, Gallant, & Lester, 2011; Kezar & Lester, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to explore the successes and struggles of college staff leaders who advocate for LGBTQ equity. College professional staff often hold

limited power, as they are not protected by tenure and are often beholden to upper administrators' expectations. Specifically, I explore the experiences of staff leaders at Metropolitan Arts College (MAC) who have served as agents of change on their campus to improve the institutional climate by advocating for LGBTQ inclusive policies or practices. The primary research question guiding this study is: How do professional staff campus leaders at MAC engage queer leadership tactics in order to change policies and practices to improve the climate for LGBTQ individuals?

## Literature Review

Queer Leadership. The term queer may be applied to social practices that challenge the normative expectations of gender and sexuality. Most notably, queer theory disrupts heteronormative conceptions of sexuality and gender, challenging social practices through the lenses of marginalized or non-normative identities (Abes, 2008; Dilley, 1999; Pinar, 2003). Dilley argued that the application of queer theory seeks to place queer viewpoints at the center of inquiry, questioning perspectives frequently left uninvestigated. Within this study, I define queer leadership as the intentional process to advance equity for sexual and gender minoritized communities through grassroots leadership strategies; specifically championing social change through institutional policy and practice. Queer is then applied as an inclusive term respecting the multiple dimensions of sexual and gender diversity, challenging hetero/cisnormative practices in higher education.

Queer leadership scholarship in higher education is scant, but it serves as guidance for connecting queer leadership strategies to grassroots leadership. Previous explorations of queer leadership have provided minimal guidance in defining queer leadership. For example, Lugg and Tooms (2010) demonstrated strategies for exercising queer leadership through the implementation of inclusive practices by challenging heterogenderism in education systems. Their exploration of queer leadership focused on challenging institutional norms of professionalism, most notably through expectations of gender-based dress codes, and the resultant panoptic gaze queer school leaders often encountered (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Challenging institutional norms and creating demonstrable change is a key element to engaging in queer leadership practices.

Additionally, in their assessment of staff professionals in the southern United States, Martin et al. (2018) reveal staff advocacy for LGBTQ equity encompassed the staff's own advocacy efforts and inclusive practices through educational outreach, resulting with an impact on institutional policies and procedures. In an exploration of queer student activists, Renn (2007) noted how activists "embraced a public gender and/or sexual identity in opposition to normative, straight culture and moved away from a positional view of leadership to an approach that incorporated commitment to change social systems for the purpose of decentering power" (p. 323). Queer student activists challenged traditional notions of leadership with the pursuit of transformational change (Renn, 2007). These examples provide varied illustrations of queer leadership in practice. They also demonstrate how queer leadership dismisses normative gender or sexual identity expectations, it can challenge normative leadership strategies, and disrupts educational systems that historically rejected LGBTQ people.

Activism. Student activism has been a mainstay on college campuses dating back to the 18th century when student riots and unrest were often focused on campus specific grievances or policies (Broadhurst, 2014). Social issues became a larger concern in the 20th century, leading student activists to have a significant impact on the advancement of college and university policies, practices, and programs in

support of minoritized college students (Linder, 2019; Rhoads, 1998). LGBTQ organizing on college campus dates back to the mid 20th century, and leading to the advancement of campus LGBTQ programs as early as the 1970s (Marine, 2011).   In light of the 2016 Presidential election, student activism has become more visible as students, faculty, and staff address social injustices related to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, immigration policies, and disability justice (Evans & Lange, 2019; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Student voices, when supported by faculty and staff, have demonstrated success in advancing activist agendas (Kezar, 2010; Kezar & Lester, 2011; Linder, 2019).

The role of staff in advancing LGBTQ initiatives is less understood and warrants further exploration (Kezar, 2010; Pryor, in press; Renn, 2010;). Staff, particularly those within the subfield of student affairs, has played an important role in supporting student activism (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004), but are also called on to manage student concerns to avoid disrupting the campus environment (Linder, 2019). Educators are then placed in a position of supporting the needs of the institution, creating a tension between supporting social justice initiatives and student development, or maintaining institutional complacency (Linder, 2019; Self & Hudson, 2015). This tension serves as a primary inquiry for this study, which seeks to illuminate the role of professional staff in advocating for social justice initiatives.

## Conceptual Framework

As the progress of LGBTQ equity at colleges and universities is rooted in grassroots organizing (Marine, 2011), grassroots leadership (Kezar et al., 2011; Kezar & Lester, 2011) guided this study's conceptualization of how queer leadership may manifest among institutional leaders. This study was guided by an interest in exploring how campus professional staff leaders utilize this form of leadership to establish more just campus climates specifically for LGBTQ communities.

To explore this, this study advances a framework for queer advocacy leadership, applying a queer lens to Kezar and Lester's (2011) framework for grassroots leadership in higher education.   Kezar and Lester's (2011) model of grassroots leadership in higher education provides an important frame for exploring how queer leadership is employed, given the often- conservative climates LGBTQ leaders must navigate. Grassroots leadership in higher education examines bottom-up, tempered efforts of change within organizational settings (Kezar et al., 2011; Kezar & Lester, 2011).   Thus, grassroots leaders have to navigate the bounds of their contextual setting (e.g., universities), challenging what is traditionally a top-down leadership environment. Such tempered approaches deviate from the more radical forms of activism found in other grassroots approaches by seeking to play within the hierarchy of the institution, often an unavoidable but expected hurdle when seeking to change historically oppressive systems of power.

The framework for this study conceptualized queer leadership as an extension of grassroots leadership, specifically focused on queer-centered advocacy, leadership, and change. This model (see figure 1) is also informed by extant literature that illustrated the success of advocates for LGBTQ equity in higher education and the resultant growth of LGBTQ support in higher education student affairs (Dilley, 2002; Linder, 2019; Lugg & Tooms, 2010; Marine, 2011; Martin et al., 2018; Renn, 2007; 2010; Sanlo, 2002). I offer a similar model (Pryor, in press) in an adjacent study that explored how LGBTQ activist staff advocated for queer policy initiatives at another institution. Here I explore how non-LGBTQ staff advocate for queer equity through educational leadership. I argue, to queer grassroots leadership it is necessary to view grassroots leadership framework phenomenon areas individual, group, and organizational through a queer lens (Kezar & Lester, 2011; Pryor, in press).  These include: a) queer advocacy; b) queering leadership; and c) queer policy and practice, respectively.
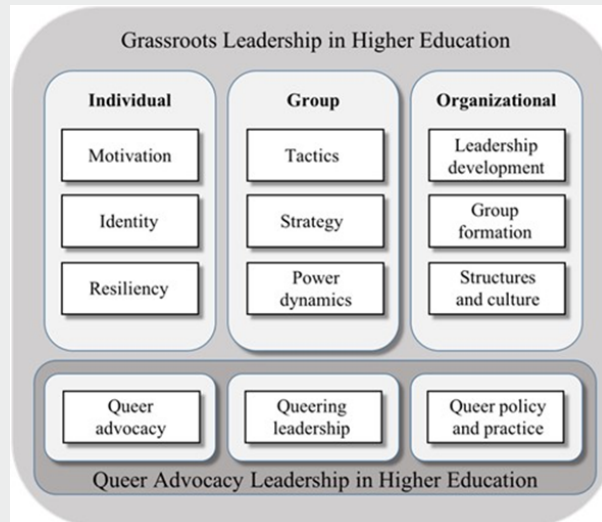
Figure 1.Adapted conceptual model for queer advocacy leadership in higher education (Kezar & Lester, 2011).

Queer advocacy adds a level of depth to the grassroots leadership individual phenomena (Kezar & Lester, 2011) providing an important extension to the individual phenomena foci identity and motivation. Queer advocates maintain a position of privilege in how and when they choose to advocate. Advocates may or may not identify as LGBTQ, although their social identities may complicate and inform their strategy toward advocacy. Identity is a prominent feature of grassroots leadership (Kezar & Lester, 2011), however I argue that naming oneself as a queer advocate in a climate that historically marginalized LGBTQ communities, creates a barrier for these leaders. Queer advocacy is taken up by the leader to center their LGBTQ advocacy as part of their identity.

Queering leadership centers queer identities in leadership practice and extends grassroots leadership efforts in disrupting power dynamics in higher education institutions. Thus, centering queer identities in leadership practices requires a disruption of heterogendered culture deeply embedded in institutional practices. Heterogendered practices manifest through heteronormative (Abes, 2008; Dilley, 1999) and genderist (Bilodeau, 2009)

ideologies in higher education, often perpetuated by non-LGBTQ individuals unaware of their power and privilege or how heterogenderism impacts the LGBTQ community. Centering queer issues through leadership practices, especially when LGBTQ issues are overlooked and misunderstood in educational leadership, affords a necessary layer of complexity to the group phenomena of grassroots leadership.

A significant contribution of queer leadership necessitates advancement toward changes in policy or practice in an organizational structure (Pryor, in press). Notably, Renn's (2007) work illuminated how queer activists sought transformational leadership to advance social change. Here then, queer policy and practice provides an extension to the organizational phenomena structures and culture within the grassroots leadership model (Kezar & Lester, 2011), advancing progress toward LGBTQ specific policies and initiatives. Lugg and Tooms (2010) argued for shifts in policy as a cornerstone to queer leadership work. This model serves as one important outgrowth to grassroots leadership, which allows for the centering of queer advocacy, disruption of heterogendered practices through queering

leadership, and advancement of policy and practice to advance LGBTQ equity in educational leadership.

## Methodology

Qualitative research allows researchers to illuminate the understanding of a particular experience or setting, providing rich and deep context to the experiences of individuals (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Patton, 2002). Qualitative case study methods were employed to understand and make meaning of the leadership experiences of LGBTQ leaders and how they navigate campus political climates to pursue, create, or implement change. More specifically, case study research is a way of getting at detail within a particular context, revealing the complexities within a particular case setting. Because I sought to understand how student affairs staff members at MAC engage in LGBTQ leadership practices, I embrace a constructivist case study paradigm (Jones et al., 2014).

Participants and Site. The Metropolitan Arts College was selected because it represented a typical small fine arts college in the Midwestern United States. Applying Kezar et al.'s (2011) criteria, 'typical' indicates an institution not committed to innovation, activism, or change. MAC was not selected as a special case, but as an institution representing a collegial structure representative of a number of institutions across the United States (Birnbaum, 1988). Although this study's findings are not generalizable, MAC's institutional structure and type model transferable experiences for typical Fine Arts campuses. Recent policy changes at MAC led to this study's inquiry, specifically the advancement of LGBTQ inclusive policies centered on allowing students to list their gender pronouns and chosen name on academic rosters and college software platforms. Participants also advocated for an expansion of gender-inclusive restroom access across multiple academic buildings on campus.

MAC is a small private art school in a Midwest City of the United States, with a student population of 1,000 full-time students. The campus serves as a case, a system bound by the institution and the leadership experiences of the participants (Yin, 2014). As this study is interested in staff leadership, I sought participants who: a) are not currently in a position specifically dedicated to LGBTQ equity, b) are not in executive leadership roles (e.g., vice-presidents, president); c) serve as a student affairs staff member; and d) self-identify as involved with queer leadership efforts on campus.

To recruit participants, I relied on community professional networks and identified a gatekeeper to assist in confirming participants involved with advocating for LGBTQ initiatives at MAC. A total of six participants (table 1) were recruited from MAC, including five staff members and one graduate intern.

Kerry served as the Dean of Students for MAC, where she has served in multiple campus life roles over the last 10 years. She identified as a white, straight, cisgender woman, who has advocated for LGBTQ policy expansion at MAC. David served as the Assistant Dean of Students for MAC, having worked at MAC for nearly 4 years, he too identified as white, straight and cisgender, advocating for LGBTQ policy expansion. Despite their titles, Kerry and David navigated change leveraging strategies employed in grassroots activism. Although grassroots leadership scholarship maintains advocacy happens from the bottom-up (Kezar & Lester, 2011), Kerry and David's context of a small fine arts college created a structural difference where their role at MAC allowed them certain leadership privileges, but the smallness of the campus still required them to maneuver within a system and institutional power dynamics that prevented them from making top-down changes. Their strategies required bottom-up movement to obtain buy-in and to be effective. Thus, I viewed their involvement in this study as staff members who were still limited by power structures beyond their control.

Other participants included Bobby, an Asian immigrant, gay, cisgender man, who had previously worked at MAC for seven years. During Bobby's time at MAC he supported the LGBTQ student organization and helped launch a Safe Space program for campus, Brenda a

straight, cisgender woman, worked in student affairs at MAC for nearly 20 years. Elaine, a white, straight, cisgender woman, worked in student affairs at MAC 25 years. Brenda and Elaine were committed to LGBTQ student support and provided valuable context to MAC. Casey, a white, queer, gender non-binary person, provided support to LGBTQ students as part of their counseling practicum at MAC.

Table 1
*Participant Demographics & Involvement*

| Name | Salient Identities | Gender Pronoun | Campus Role | Experiences with LGBTQ Advocacy at MAC |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Kerry** | White straight Cis Woman | She/Her | Dean of Students | Led initiative to implement chosen name and gender pronoun policy. Supported LGBTQ equity practices and professional development for campus. |
| **David** | White straight Cis Man | He/Him | Assistant Dean | Supported chosen name and gender pronoun policy implementation. Led initiative to expand gender inclusive restroom spaces on campus. |
| **Bobby** | Asian Immigrant Queer Cis Man | He/Him | Advisor | Served as advisor to LGBTQ student organization. Designed and implemented campus safe zone trainings. Experienced tokenization related to queer identity. |
| **Brenda** | White straight Cis Woman | She/Her | Registrar's Office | Supported the implementation of the chosen name and gender pronoun policy. Actively worked to support and nurture LGBTQ students on campus. |
| **Elaine** | White straight Cis Woman | She/Her | Student Services | Actively worked to support and nurture LGBTQ students on campus. |
| **Casey** | White Queer Gender Non-binary | They/Them | Graduate Intern | Served as a graduate intern and provided advisement and support on LGBTQ best practices. |

Data Collection and Analysis. As interviews provide the strongest source of data for case study research, primary data collection relied on in-depth semi-structured interviews with six staff members (Yin, 2014). The first round of interviews averaged 91 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview protocol addressing relevant experiences within the queer leadership framework. The interview questions focused on themes related to the framework and research question, with particularly interest on a) the participants individual approach to leadership and change; b) tactics and strategies for organizing and creating change; c) challenges navigating institutional structures; and d) process or barriers for implementing change initiatives. Following the first round of interviews, Kerry and David were selected for an additional interview due to their direct leadership efforts implementing policies for LGBTQ equity. This second round of interviews focused on their leadership strategies and philosophies approaching change on campus. Finally, to triangulate the research findings I relied on informal participant interviews, meeting observation visits, and researcher journaling to contribute to the overall richness of the case (Yin, 2014). Informal interviews allowed me the opportunity to understand nuances of the case site by informally speaking with campus community members (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) to understand the campus culture and climate. These field notes then were utilized as secondary sources to enhance and support the study's findings.

Due to employing multiple sources of data, constant comparative data analysis was employed to effectively compare all data sources (Jones et al., 2014). Initial data analysis began during early stages of data collection by writing memos and logging field notes from case visits and interviews. Analysis of interviews and texts followed a priori set of deductive codes following the queer leadership framework. I then employed open and axial coding (Patton, 2002) techniques to capture nuances of the case not identified through the deductive measures. Findings are presented based on the analysis, using the queer leadership framework.

## Trustworthiness

To further establish trustworthiness, I am guided by Jones et al. (2014), who argue for the use of both inquiry and relational competence. Inquiry competence ensures the case selection, data collection, and analysis provide dependable and credible results. MAC was selected due to its typical status as a fine arts college, where change initiatives related to LGBTQ equity were recently implemented. To ensure sound data collection and analysis I relied on multiple forms of data, enhancing confirmability o f the findings. R elational i nquiry t o t his s tudy e nhances trustworthiness by signifying the researcher's positionality within the scope of the study (Jones et al., 2014). My role as a student affairs staff member at a neighboring institution who was involved with LGBTQ education and outreach allowed me access to the gatekeepers of the study and the campus site. As this study sought to illuminate the experiences of queer leaders, my identities certainly impacted the dynamic between myself and the study's participants, establishing credibility and trust between myself and participants. Thus, naming these areas of privilege and power are important for understanding how I maintained trustworthiness during data collection and analysis.

## Limitations

This single institution case study is not able to fully capture all that can be known about queer leadership, and thus there are some important limitations to acknowledge. Findings related to queer leadership or the phenomenon of grassroots leadership are meant to provide implications that may be transferable to HESA leadership practice and education, policy, and a deeper understanding of queer leadership. Further, sample limitations provided barriers to further interrogate how queer leadership may manifest across other social identities or institution types. Due to the scope of the project, it was not possible to explore leadership across additional institution types or geographic locations. However, this does not detract from what can be learned from these particular findings and contexts. In addition, the study may serve as a model for further exploration of queer leadership in other settings, particularly small collegial college campuses like MAC.

It is also important to acknowledge how my identity as a White, gay, cisgender man, as well as my work as a queer educator and activist, informs my work approach to this study. These identities very much guide my inquiry pursuit of advancing an agenda dedicated to LGBTQ equity. Most importantly I must recognize that these identities may still influence the rapport I developed with participants, as well as the lens in which I approached data analysis. Finally, collecting case data as an outsider limits my time and exposure to each case and served as a limitation toward fully understanding each institutional context; I sought to counter this limitation through thorough and rigorous data collection.

## Findings

Metropolitan Arts College (MAC) is located in Metropolitan City (MC), a large city on the border of two Midwestern states, with a metro region population of nearly 2.5 million people. MAC is neatly tucked in the heart of MC, located near historic shopping sites and accessible to galleries and spaces

for students to display their work. MC provides an important backdrop to the environment at MAC. It provides students the opportunity to engage with a diverse community, that is historically supportive of the arts, and located within a fairly socially liberal community. MAC recruits many students from rural communities, many coming from areas referred to as "the Bible belt," making MC, as Bobby noted, "the belt buckle of the Bible belt." For some students, MAC becomes a refuge from conservative family environments; for others from suburban city or rural communities, it is a culture shock.

Participants described the LGBTQ campus climate at MAC as fairly warm, noting there have been some improvements in the last few years. Participants described the campus climate as relatively accepting, especially due to the short-term initiatives advanced by participants. However, there have been some incidents on campus that has raised concerns among staff. For example, students attended classes in which their professor purposely misgendered them. Additionally, Bobby shared an incident when a student reported hostilities due to their gay identity. These hostilities did not seem common, but certainly speak to some challenges LGBTQ students may encounter at MAC.

## Queer Leadership Strategies

Findings illustrate how staff members at MAC were successful in shifting institutional practices, both by advocating for changes in campus policies and by implementing campus outreach to impact LGBTQ equity at MAC. Applying the proposed queer leadership framework of LGBTQ advocacy, their experiences provide valuable lessons for college and university staff navigating this work. I explore how participants navigated the institutional structures and demonstrate how this framework grounded in grassroots leadership is important for thinking about not only challenging institutional practices, but making meaningful change to policy and practice.

> LGBTQ Advocacy: Claiming a Commitment to Allyship.

> We all have this philosophy of we're all going to do whatever is necessary to be there for our students. So I think just with the small nature of the college it helps me to do that. That's why I always like small private [colleges], that's where my heart is. That's where I know I can be the front line one day and the next day I can be the leadership. --Kerry

Staff leaders discussed what it was that brought them to the work of supporting LGBTQ students on campus. This theme, LGBTQ advocacy, considers the individual staff members dedication to LGBTQ equity work, while also reflective of the individual's motivations and identity. Most staff leaders held privileged cis/heteronormative (non-LGBTQ) identities, which did not negatively impact their approach to LGBTQ equity work at MAC. Despite this, Bobby and Casey shared how their queer identities played a role in supporting LGBTQ students, sometimes leaving them to feel tokenized. Bobby's experience becoming the "default staff member" to advise the LGBTQ student organization, highlighted his tokenism. Bobby's gay identity was not the catalyst for his involvement, but it did lead him to support LGBTQ students. He expressed apathy for his role, as he did not feel compelled to engage in LGBTQ activism or advocacy. Counter to his non-queer colleagues, there was an assumed expectation that he support LGBTQ students.

A primary motivator for other participants' involvement with LGBTQ advocacy relied on their commitment as student affairs professionals. All other participants expressed a passion to supporting LGBTQ students. This commitment kept the participants engaged and focused on pushing forward, despite any potential setbacks. Kerry commented, "We love what we do, and we know what we do makes a difference, and it's very rewarding." Participants described intrinsic rewards for service, especially because extrinsic rewards were not guaranteed. Such intrinsic motivation and reward reaffirmed their commitment to support the LGBTQ community at MAC.

These findings at MAC reveal most participants held a

strong connection to advocacy and identify as LGBTQ advocates within their individual work. Their identities as advocates consisted of three primary components, addressing: (1) their commitment to issues of social justice, (2) their positional ability to move campus policy forward, and (3) their willingness to evolve in their awareness of LGBTQ issues. Most non-LGBTQ participants rejected any activist identity, drawing a distinction between activism and advocacy. For them, activism was more aggressive and less organized action resulting in reactionary events such as protests or disruptive events, whereas advocacy relied on a more collegial proactive approach to working toward specific goals within institutional structures.

Another sub-theme among participants' role as queer advocates was their willingness to engage in their own learning. All participants spoke about how they handled situations when they were corrected for their ignorance related to LGBTQ topics, either employing incorrect terms or not being familiar with some LGBTQ identities. Their advocacy required a commitment toward self-improvement, without assuming that their political or social views dictated their behavior or earned them some credibility. This openness to learn was an important nuance to the queer advocate frame, as it allowed them to have a stronger connection to students and student concerns. Particularly when students approached them with issues in the classroom, being misgendered, or not having their name honored. These student challenges are what led Kerry to begin advocating for the new chosen name and gender pronoun policy. According to Kerry, to support LGBTQ students required an element of authentic listening and learning. Kerry reflected,

> I think allyship means to listen. To listen, to ask questions, and understand. It also means to, in my opinion, ask what are the needs?… And I think the other part is doing what we can as individuals to help move initiatives forward to provide a welcoming and equitable education.

Kerry's experience reflects how a campus administrator may choose to support student voices by listening and hearing what students need. This openness to change not only reflects a dedication to queer advocacy, but it also demonstrates how non-LGBTQ people can better engage in queer advocacy work, through intentional ally development.

> Queering Leadership: Navigating Group and Leadership Dynamics.
>
> An instructor on the first day of class stood up and as he's calling roll, said this name, not once, not twice, but three to four times, and finally the student had to raise their hand. And was outed. And so I saw the hurt in him, and thought there's got to be a different way.
> -- Kerry

Queering leadership necessitated that queer voices, concerns, and experiences were central to the work and advocacy of the participants. Centering LGBTQ voices in their leadership practices was an important component for participants success. This quote provided by Kerry illustrates the challenges students reported to her, leading her to pursue action. To do this, participants: a) relied on student narratives to demonstrate an import for student success; b) relied on small wins to achieve greater results; and c) aligned institutional values with best practices for LGBTQ inclusion.

Kerry's quote here also illustrates how supporting LGBTQ students was central to her work as a leader. Kerry's advocacy for the recent implementation of the chosen name and pronoun policy was in response to this student's experience. The student's legal name did not reflect their chosen name, thus was not on the class roster or any of his advising records. She discussed how the student's experience challenged her to begin advocating for others like him. By establishing herself as someone who will listen and act on student concerns, Kerry established trust with students and was able to advocate for change to improve the climate for LGBTQ students.

Leveraging student feedback through personal stories helped campus leaders advocate on behalf of students. In particular, they helped other administrators grasp the importance of the chosen

name and pronoun policy, as well as the need for more gender inclusive restrooms, and for participants, tying it to students opened the door to convince others of the need for the policies. Participants argued that the appeal to student success led to the successful policy creation and implementation, but it also begs the question as to why such a policy had to be linked to student achievement to succeed, rather than creating it because it is the just thing to do. The need for this strategy might also indicate how challenging MAC can be for LGBTQ individuals if they must appeal to other faculty or administrators through the lens of success.

Additionally, Kerry and David's initiative to expand the number of gender inclusive restrooms on campus was quite successful. They achieved small victories with some units, yet still experienced resistance from other areas on campus. Despite initial rejection from a couple academic areas on campus, Kerry and David were intentional in letting their request for inclusive bathroom expansion "cool" before attempting again. The strategy of accepting small wins (Kezar & Lester, 2011) allowed their efforts to move forward, despite some areas of hesitation. This hesitation, while perhaps uniformed and unintentional, is rooted in genderist attitudes about transgender people and it perpetuates heterogendered discourses of campus spaces (Nicolazzo, 2016; Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Pryor, 2018). Kerry and David's strategy ultimately paid off and helped them expand gender inclusive restrooms to nearly all buildings on campus, but they had to work through departments and colleagues that initially espoused anti-trans attitudes.

Leaders also relied on the institution's values and best practices in HESA to leverage the development of LGBTQ-inclusive programs. For David, the mission is an important value of which members of the MAC community are keenly aware. Further, Kerry was intentional in sharing knowledge she gained from other campuses or professional conferences she attended to facilitate change. If it made sense for MAC students, and she received the buy-in from colleagues, she pursued it. The Campus Pride Index, a national database for assessing colleges and universities in the United States on their LGBTQ inclusive policies

and practices, served as an assessment tool to measure how campus is performing in regard to its efforts toward LGBTQ inclusion. This use of the Index allowed campus leaders to see what areas needed improvement and gave some credibility to change efforts moving forward. Thus, sharing what they learned from professional associations and best practices, helped these grassroots leaders better advocate for students.

As participants pursued their initiatives, push-back was relatively common. Brenda commented, "The biggest resistance was that the perception that we didn't need these things. It was the convincing [faculty and advisors] that these things were needed." Brenda spoke of the difficulty of getting campus colleagues to understand the necessity of queer inclusive policies, particularly the pronoun and restroom initiatives. Part of queering leadership was working through these hurdles and centering LGBTQ students who were most hurt by a lack of policy in their leadership practices. Overcoming resistance required consistent outreach to partners across campus. Kerry spoke about the importance of knowing the audience with whom she was working, using her relationships with units on campus as entree for advocating for the change.

> Queer Policy and Practice: Navigating Organizational Structures.
>
> Whether it's art school or another campus in the country, you're going to have an LGBT population, so your school should strive to have an equal playing field for all students. So if that means you have to have policies in place to ensure non-discrimination, you have to have policies in place. Because, as a society, we have not come so far that we don't need them. We need them. We need them. - Elaine

This quote from Elaine illustrates participants attitudes toward implementing change on their campus. By emphasizing policy, staff recognized the necessity of having LGBTQ supportive policies in order to more formally prohibit exclusionary

practices. This demand for new policy initiatives lead to shifts in the organizational culture. Participants not only implemented the policy but then established training opportunities for campus faculty and staff to understand best practices associated with the policy. Like an institutional mission, policy can ultimately guide the values, norms, and assumptions that shape the campus culture (Kezar & Lester, 2011), which may ultimately lead to a warmer LGBTQ campus climate.

In some respect, MAC fostered a warm environment for pursuing change. Although participants experienced some resistance, the size and culture of the institution allowed for participants to strategize how they would push forward their plans. David reflected, "we have a high degree of administrative agility at this institution, to make change based on needs. There's not the red tape or politics that larger institutions have to make things happen." These structures and culture contribute to an environment that, in recent years, is flexible and open to shifting toward progressive values. For example, the success of the name and pronoun policy and the expansion of gender inclusive restrooms reflect the nimble campus culture and improving campus climate for LGBTQ individuals.

Although barriers to their efforts were evident, the collegial small arts college environment facilitated opportunities for individuals to advocate, both in their relationships with students and on behalf of initiatives supporting students on campus. As such, participants credited the campus structure and culture as helpful to implement policies. These efforts provided important contributions toward improving the campus climate and culture and evidenced staff grassroots leadership strategies. Yet, the focus of and advancement toward LGBTQ policy and practice emphasizes an important distinction toward grassroots efforts.

Movement toward inclusive policy and practice is a cornerstone to queer leadership in higher education, as this creates inroads toward dismantling heterogendered ideals (Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Pryor, 2018). MAC has made considerable efforts toward improving the campus climate for its LGBTQ students. The most notable improvements were increasing the number of gender inclusive restroom spaces, the campus name and pronoun policy, and engagement of the LGBTQ student organization. Coupled with advocacy and efforts to center LGBTQ issues in their leadership approaches, staff at MAC have engaged in purposeful efforts toward LGBTQ equity, that could result in lasting changes to campus policy and practice.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Staff leaders queer centered initiatives at MAC led to demonstrable change toward improving the college's campus climate. These leaders' experiences also call into question, what is queer leadership? Can leadership be queer? Who can engage in queer oriented work? Grassroots leadership served as a valuable frame for reorienting thought about what are traditional modes of leadership, highlighting how staff at multiple levels can engage with leadership work (Kezar and Lester, 2011). Leveraging Kezar and Lester's (2011) framework provides a complexity to thinking about centering queer work through multiple lenses. It also situates queer leadership through lenses of individual engagement with LGBTQ advocacy, how leaders center LGBTQ experiences in their work, and how their work leads to demonstrable change on their campus.

The role of participants who did not identify as LGBTQ demonstrated a strong commitment and role in support of LGBTQ colleagues and students. Their advocacy was often personal and value-driven. All non-queer participants claimed a commitment to LGBTQ advocacy or allyship in their work, many taking on public and active roles on campus to support LGBTQ-centered initiatives. Although their work was meaningful and personal, consequences of their privileged gender and sexual social identities related to their queer advocacy were minimal; they were not perceived as a threat nor were they recipients of threats from colleagues or peers because of their work and/or identities. This distinction is

important, as LGBTQ individuals in advocacy or more activist oriented positions may likely have different experiences. Due to the small number of LGBTQ identified participants in this study, I was unable to gauge those possibilities.

In addition to their individual connections to LGBTQ advocacy, their personal values and commitment to advancing best practices in higher education student affairs drove these leaders to advocate for LGBTQ equity. Kerry and David both articulated an important adherence to best practices in HESA. As administrators in the field of student affairs, these values are ingrained in the field (CAS, 2019; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002), and were guiding principles for several of the participants, particularly Kerry and David. Participant values informed their motivation for doing the work. However, the personal risk in their advocacy was minimal. This reality suggests there may be multiple lenses for considering how participants engage queer leadership. What would this model look like if participants were queer with an activist oriented lens, or if all participants were LGBTQ people of color, challenging systemic issues of race, gender, and sexuality. These findings are limited but begin a dialogue for considering how other non-LGBTQ folks can begin to advocate for their students.

This model is not intended to place limitations on how individuals may engage in queer-centered advocacy on campus. It provides one way in which higher education professionals may engage in queer leadership work. Queer leadership should not be confined to a single monolithic definition; such an approach would be limiting the multiple ways of being queer or doing LGBTQ work and would fall into perpetuating heterogendered norms (Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Pryor, 2018). Also, limiting a queer leadership definition assumes leadership is not contextual (Pryor, in press). Instead, the proposed framework serves as an extension of grassroots leadership, informed by the extant literature.

Implications for Leadership Practice. Findings from this study point to important implications for higher education leaders and leadership educators seeking to create opportunities for change on their campus, particularly within collegial college structures like MAC. A particularly important component of grassroots leadership and queer community organizing, is the establishment of community and support (Dilley, 2002; Kezar & Lester, 2011; Marine, 2011; Sanlo, 2002). In addition to reinforcing the importance of community building, findings illuminate the value of college and university staff members to leverage their networks and personal power to advocate for minoritized communities. Staff at MAC leveraged their roles and experiences to advance substantial change. Finding this allyship among their peers required participants to be engaged and purposeful in interrupting heterogenderist attitudes and practices on campus. Allyship and advocacy has been viewed and discussed interchangeably, but as a term allyship has been called to question as it is often over-assigned by individuals not engaging in a commitment to social justice advocacy (Grzanka, Adler, & Blazer, 2015). Leadership educators should incorporate the importance of community building in preparing leaders to advance socially just and queer centered work.

Another important implication from findings was the role of student engagement. To establish an environment of support for students, participants reflected on the importance of using student voice to advance their cause. Although student voices were a useful tool, there is an important line to balance to ensure students are empowered and not tokenized, that their involvement is collaborative and not objectified. At MAC it may seem as if the student voices were relied on to push issues forward, rather than the staff relying on best practices. The intent of the staff leaders was compassionate, but it demonstrated a potential risk in further marginalizing students when they are called upon to be their own advocates. Thus, leaders must be mindful to not just use student voice, but to empower and engage students in change and leadership processes.

It is necessary for staff advocating for LGBTQ equity to consider the ways individuals who are

perceived to be non-queer are allowed to navigate heterogendered contexts more freely than their queer peers. Leadership educators should make note of the privileged identities held by Kerry and David, who largely championed the initiatives at MAC. Kerry and David experienced considerable ease as they established the name and pronoun policy and the inclusive restrooms on campus. This opens the conversation to whether or not their privileged identities as non-queer individuals benefited them in their progress. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, Bobby and Casey's few experiences indicate some microaggressive actions toward LGBTQ staff on campus. The implication here is not only might queer leaders' progress be slowed, but their experience also reflects a questionable campus climate where meaningful change would not be possible without non-queer support. This demonstrates a troubling reality of whose work and identities is privileged and most listened to. It also demonstrates the importance of allies engaging in LGBTQ equity work and captures how individuals with privileged social status possess power to advance change.

Conclusion. This study conceptualizes a queer leadership framework through grassroots leadership in higher education (Kezar & Lester, 2011), to capture the nuances of staff leadership strategies based on previous queer scholarship efforts. As scholars and college staff continue to advance work toward LGBTQ equity on college campuses, it is imperative that their work dismantle normative practices that perpetuate heterogendered norms through policy and practice (Abes, 2008; Nicolazzo, 2016; Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Pryor, 2018). Thus, critical queer policy work must not only trouble the normative histories of LGBTQ exclusion and oppression, but also expand the ways campus leaders do queer work on campus (Bilodeau, 2009; Preston & Hoffman, 2015) by disrupting binary approaches to LGBTQ policy expansion and creating multiple ways of being queer and supporting queer identities. Providing leadership educators with a practical model for queer leadership, coupled with critical queer policy work, may provide guidance to improve campus climates through these recommended practices for the field of higher education student affairs.

# References

Abes, E. S. (2008). Applying queer theory in practice with college students. Journal of LGBT Youth, 5(1), 57-77.

Bilodeau, B. (2009). Genderism: Transgender students, binary systems and higher education. Saarbrucken, Germany: VDM Verlag.

Birnbaum, R. (1988). How colleges work: The cybernetics of academic organization and leadership. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. (2019). CAS professional standards for higher education (10th ed.). Washington, DC: Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education.

Dilley, P. (1999). Queer theory: under construction. Qualitative Studies in Education, 12(5), 457-472.

Dilley, P. (2002). Queer man on campus: A history of non-heterosexual college men, 1945–2000. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.

Evans, M. E., & Lange, A. C. (2019). Supporting student activists: An appreciative inquiry. New Directions for Student Leadership, 2019(161), 65-77.

Grzanka, P. R., Adler, J., & Blazer, J. (2015). Making up allies: The identity choreography of straight LGBT activism. Sexuality Research and Social Policy, 12(3), 165-181.

Hoffman, G. D., & Mitchell, T. D. (2016). Making diversity "everyone's business": A discourse analysis of institutional responses to student activism for equity and inclusion. Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 9(3), 277.

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues (2nd ed.).  New York, NY: Routledge.

Linder, C. (2019). Power-conscious and intersectional approaches to supporting student activists: Considerations for learning and development. Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 12(1), 17-26.

Kezar, A. (2010). Faculty and staff partnering with student activists: Unexplored terrains of interaction and development.  Journal of College Student Development, 51(5), 451-480.

Kezar, A. J., Gallant, T. B., & Lester, J. (2011). Everyday people making a difference on college campuses: the tempered grassroots leaderships tactics of faculty and staff. Studies in Higher Education, 36(2), 129-151.

Kezar, A. J., & Lester, J. (2011). Enhancing campus capacity for leadership: An examination of grassroots leaders in higher education.  Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Lugg, C. A., & Tooms, A. K. (2010).  A shadow of ourselves: Identity erasure and the politics of queer leadership.  School Leadership and Management, 30(1), 77-91.

Marine, S. B. (2011). Stonewall's Legacy: Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Students in Higher Education: AEHE (Vol. 152). John Wiley & Sons.

Martin, G., Broadhurst, C., Hoffshire, M., & Takewell, W. (2018). "Students at the margins": Student affairs administrators creating inclusive campuses for LGBTQ students in the south. Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 55(1), 1-13.

# References

Nicolazzo, Z. (2016). "Just go in looking good": The resilience, resistance, and kinship-building of trans* college students. Journal of College Student Development, 57(5), 538-556.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pinar, W. F. (2003). Queer theory in education. Journal of Homosexuality, 45(2-4), 357-360.

Pryor, J. T. (2018). Visualizing queer spaces: LGBTQ students and the traditionally heterogendered institution. Journal of LGBT Youth, 15(1), 32-51.

Pryor, J. T. (in press). Queer activist leadership: An exploration of queer leadership in higher education. Journal of Diversity in Higher Education.1-13.

Preston, M. J., & Hoffman, G. D. (2015). Traditionally heterogendered institutions: Discourses surrounding LGBTQ college students. Journal for LGBT Youth, 12(1), 64-86.

Renn, K. A. (2007) LGBT student leaders and queer activists: Identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identified college student leaders and activists. Journal of College Student Development, 48(3), 311-330.

Renn, K. A. (2010). LGBT and queer research in higher education: The state and status of the field. Educational Researcher, 39, 132-141.

Rhoads, R. A. (1998). Student protest and multicultural reform: Making sense of campus unrest in the 1990s. Journal of Higher Education, 69(6), 621–646.

Sanlo, R. (2002). Scholarship in student affairs: Thinking outside the triangle, or Tabasco on cantaloupe. NASPA Journal, 39, 166-180.

Sanlo, R. L., Rankin, S., & Schoenberg, R. (Eds). (2002). Our place on campus: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender services and programs in higher education. Westwood, CT: Greenwood.

Self, J. M., & Hudson, K. D. (2015). Dangerous waters and brave space: A critical feminist inquiry of campus LGBTQ centers. Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 27(2), 216-245.

Wolf-Wendel, L. E., Twombly, S. B., Nemeth Tuttle, K., & Gaston-Gayles, J. L. (2004). Reflecting back, looking forward: Civil rights and student affairs. Washington, DC: NASPA.

Yin, R. K. (2014). Case study research: Design and methods (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.