

Centering minority-serving institutions to counter dominant narratives about leadership identity development

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Abstract

This article focuses on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs). These institution types are united by their commitments to racially and ethnically minoritized communities, expanding educational access, facilitating culturally affirming education, and developing collective and socially responsible leaders. As a counternarrative, the authors situate leadership identity development (LID) at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) to decenter whiteness in leadership scholarship and enactment and to elevate MSIs and their impact on students' leader and leadership identity development (LID).

INTRODUCTION

Most higher education institutions in the United States were founded on capitalism, patriarchy, and systemic racism; built on the backs of and by the hands of enslaved Black and Indigenous peoples (Dancy et al., 2018). Since their inception, U.S. colleges have sought to holistically develop students (i.e., white students) to their highest potential, inspire change agents for the greater good, and develop future leaders (Selingo, 2013). Despite these broad goals, the enactment of this mission has looked different for racially minoritized students and across institution types like minority-serving institutions (MSIs).

MSIs endeavor to actualize higher education's intended mission to facilitate student development, cultivate change agents, and develop future leaders by using different—and culturally affirming—tools (e.g., people, approaches, policies, and values). The term MSI encompasses seven federally recognized types, including among others: Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs; Gasman et al., 2015). MSIs support a diverse cadre of students by

providing intentionally designed, racially and culturally specific initiatives and academic support that historically white institutions often neglect.

MSIs are evolving; Some MSIs are mission-driven—founded to serve excluded populations (e.g., Black students). Others are historically and predominantly white institutions (HPWIs) that have become MSIs by enrolling more racially minoritized students. This article focuses on HBCUs, HSIs, TCUs, and AANAPISIs. These institution types are united by their commitments to racially and ethnically minoritized communities, expanding educational access, facilitating culturally affirming education, and developing collective and socially responsible leaders. We examine leadership identity development (LID) at MSIs to decenter whiteness in leadership scholarship and enactment (e.g., Suarez, 2015; Whitney & Collins, 2021). We elevate MSIs and their impact on students' leader and leadership identity development (LID).

Historically and predominantly white institutions are often centered in dominant leadership narratives (Whitney & Collins, 2021). MSIs have always been committed to leadership development (Smist, 2021). However, MSIs' "tools" (e.g., collective leadership, civic engagement, activism, racially and culturally affirming practices) often deviate from white-washed approaches and, thus, are often not recognized for their impact on leadership development. This article is a counter-narrative to normative assumptions about leaders and leadership. To this end, we describe how select critical perspectives guided our analysis of LID and power across institution types. Before offering implications, we trace literature about leader and LID in HBCUs, HSIs, TCUs, and AANAPISIs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We used critical race theory's (CRT) counter-narratives and whiteness as property tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to critically consider the influence of context and power on leadership practice and development. CRT is a useful framework for deconstructing racist power dynamics while implicating systems, structures, and institutions. Fundamentally, whiteness, like property, operates based on exclusion by creating racial privilege and othering non-white people. We used whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) to examine how and to what degree leadership practice and development has excluded minoritized groups.

Further, MSIs' commitments exemplify CRT's counter-narrative tenet. Counter-narratives privilege minoritized groups' realities, experiences, and perspectives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to oppose dominant narratives' "status quo" directly. Throughout this article, we use counter-narratives to understand and elevate MSI's unique impact on LID. This approach is also echoed in other articles in this issue, especially Article 4 on social identities and LID and Article 5 on critical perspectives on LID.

Positionality

As two self-labeled and academically validated and credentialed leadership educators, we, the authors of this article, have benefited from leadership education's hegemonic norms. To consider oneself a leadership educator is to understand that one is actively a part of a system that privileges certain practices, behaviors, values, and cultures while discounting others. For example, Lauren's career has occurred exclusively at well-resourced white-serving 4-year institutions (e.g., UCLA). These institutions offered leadership development initiatives, many of which reinforced narrow notions of leadership that generally

rewarded whiteness, middle-classness, and gender performance. Natasha, a proud alumna of Spelman College, directly benefited from the culturally affirming leader(ship) identity development at HBCUs and thus thinks more critically about what leadership looks like and how racial and ethnic congruence in leadership contexts contribute to diverse ways of knowing and doing leadership. From these perspectives and commitments, we seek to disrupt normative understandings of leadership education, highlight MSIs' unique attributes, and affirm counter-narratives' value-added.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AT MSIs

Article 3 in this issue reviews foundational research on LID. Beyond Komives and colleagues' (2005) initial theorizing, scholars are examining LID across institutional contexts and populations. However, deconstructing leadership as a property of whiteness requires a decentering of privileged perspectives and contexts. We will briefly review scholarship about LID in diverse institutional contexts before centering MSIs as a counter-narrative.

Cohen-Derr (2018) demonstrated how students at elite universities often develop an achievement orientation focused on competitive, rather than collaborative, leadership approaches in making meaning of their LID. Shepherd (2009) identified the alignment between military academies' curricula and LID stages. Broadly, endorsement from peers predicted students' LID, especially for racially minoritized students at military academies (Shepherd & Horner, 2010). Beatty (2014) examined elite liberal arts colleges' influence on LID among students of color and demonstrated how resisting and responding to racism and microaggressions constituted a significant task in students' leadership development.

Given how oppressive systems structure normative expectations about leaders and leadership, students with minoritized identities must simultaneously contend with and resist oppressive forces while exploring and committing to social and leader identities (e.g., Suarez, 2015). Institutional contexts shape how power manifests and empowers or disempowers students' LID. Thus, we consider how institutional contexts shape leadership identity possibilities by centering MSIs.

Higher education scholarship documents how MSIs facilitate leadership development through activism, collective and generative approaches, organizational involvement, and meaningful relationships that validate students' ways of knowing and leading. We offer a brief history of each MSI and then highlight select examples of how LID manifests in these contexts. These examples are not exhaustive and should not be viewed as unique to one MSI type.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

HBCUs are institutions founded before 1964 to serve Black communities in the United States (Albritton, 2012). Established primarily in the South to avoid integrating white land-grant institutions, the second Morrill Act of 1890 provided meager funding for many public HBCUs (Albritton, 2012). In their founding, development, and persistence, HBCUs created racially affirming educational institutions for Black students. In addition to enrolling and graduating a disproportionately high percentage of Black students, HBCUs employ greater numbers of Black staff and faculty, celebrate the legacies and histories of Black people and the African diaspora, and invest in Black communities (Albritton, 2012).

Beyond mitigating racism and anti-Blackness often present at PWIs, scholars have documented the benefits of attending HBCUs like their supportive and empowering social

and academic environments, family-like atmosphere, and positive self-concept (Gasman & Hilton, 2012; Johnson, 2017). Further, scholars have noted how HBCUs facilitate LID through activism, collective leadership, community engagement, Black Greek Letter Organizations, and the royal court—a student government association branch (Lee-Johnson, 2019; Molock, 2019; Patton et al., 2011). In short, “Nowhere is [HBCUs’ greatness] more apparent than when considering the overlap of leader(ship) development and institutional fit for HBCU attendees” (Hotchkins, 2021, p. 68). To illustrate this, we highlight how HBCUs’ student government association’s (SGA) royal courts facilitate LID.

While you are likely to find SGAs on most 4-year college campuses, many HBCUs offer an additional branch: The royal court. The royal court features highly coveted student leadership roles: University Queen and King. Elected Queens and Kings possess considerable influence and have expansive responsibilities. They have direct access to and support from, the institution’s president and cabinet members. These elected student leaders are tasked with recruitment and community engagement; they are the institution’s “faces.” These roles tend to be idolized by prospective students, which increases the college’s appeal and HBCUs’ desirability.

Lee-Johnson (2019) explored elected women student leaders’ experiences as Campus Queen and SGA president, affirming the positive influence HBCUs have on student leadership development. The study revealed the benefits (e.g., peer role modeling, community engagement) and challenges (e.g., navigating respectability politics, subscribing to “superwoman” tropes, gender norms, and stereotypes) that frequently shaped women’s leadership at HBCUs. The challenges reveal how systemic barriers manifest, even in HBCUs’ culturally affirming environments, like those of PWIs (see Domingue, 2015) for women and other minoritized groups engaging in leadership. These barriers make LID markedly harder for these groups.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Colleges with at least 25% Latinx enrollment and Pell grant eligibility qualify for federal HSI designation. HSIs account for 17% of US postsecondary institutions while enrolling 75% of Latinx undergraduates (Excelencia in Education, 2020). Scholars assert HSIs must move from simply enrolling to affirming and serving Latinx students’ cultural and linguistic needs alongside student success commitments (Garcia, 2019). Leadership development is one avenue for Latinx-servingness (Venegas, 2021), often enacted through organizational involvement and relationships grounded in generativity and communal leadership approaches. HSIs spur LID by empowering Latinx students to value and share their cultural practices (Batchelder, 2021). We highlight the impact generative and communal leadership practice at HSIs has on LID.

Onorato and Musoba (2015) explored 11 Hispanic women’s LID at an HSI. Student organizations were a valuable space for Hispanic women to practice generativity while exploring tensions with “leader” labels. Students generally progressed through LID stages in ways that uniquely reflected the interwoven nature of their racial, ethnic, and gender identities. The HSI environment partially buffered discrimination, empowering Hispanic women’s leadership development.

Haber-Curran and Tapia-Fuselier (2020) examined 16 Latina students’ leadership approaches at an HSI. Latina student leaders practiced non-hierarchical leadership while seeking to contribute to their communities positively. Additionally, students’ families, campus relationships, and cultural capital enhanced their leadership development. HSI

contexts provided affirming opportunities for Hispanic women and Latinas to practice and develop leadership identities rooted in generativity.

Garcia and colleagues' (2017) mixed-methods examination of Latino men across HPWI and HSI contexts confirmed the importance of context on LID. Greek letter and ethnic student organizations, internships, athletics, meaningful relationships, and racial/cultural workshops significantly influenced Latinos' leadership development. Ethnic student organizations were less influential in HPWI contexts, yet, engagement with other Latinx people is vital for student success and LID. Collectively, scholarship confirms the importance of affirming contexts (e.g., Latinx-serving HSIs, identity-affirming organizations) for disrupting racist stereotypes and countering whitewashed leadership pedagogies (Suarez, 2015).

Tribal Colleges and Universities

TCUs were founded and chartered by their respective tribal governments and represent Indigenous nations' self-determination and sovereignty (Lomawaima, 1999). Indigenous students account for 86% of TCUs enrollment (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021), and TCU leadership development efforts serve tribal communities' needs (Youngbull, 2021). Indigenous students at non-Native colleges and universities (NNCUs) must strategically search for experiences that incorporate and validate their knowledge and perspectives (Minthorn, 2014). TCUs nurture Indigenous ways of knowing, living, and leading by weaving together tribal knowledge and language to affirm tribal, cultural, and leadership identities (Youngbull, 2021). At TCUs, leadership educators are formal instructors, elders, community members, and peers. These leadership development efforts benefit students and tribal nations.

However, scholars often ignore TCUs and Indigenous students. Thus, little scholarship has centered on Indigenous students' LID broadly or at TCUs. Minthorn (2014) recognized many leadership models neglect Indigenous students' perspectives. Through a qualitative study with 21 Indigenous student leaders in Native organizations at five NNCUs, Minthorn identified three leadership perspectives: Commitment, community, and collaboration. These perspectives balance individual and collective leadership needs and reflect many aspects of generativity within the LID model. Additionally, Garland (2010) argued that colleges must conceptualize involvement beyond campus involvement (e.g., student organizations) and engage Indigenous students as agentic co-creators of meaningful leadership and involvement experiences.

Further, Minthorn and colleagues' (2013) traced the influence of the Oklahoma Native American Students in Higher Education (ONASHE) conference on Native students' leadership development. The conference environment mimicked TCUs because it was designed for and by Native communities. ONASHE has facilitated Native leadership development by reinforcing tribal values and connecting students to role models. Culturally relevant LID approaches center leadership as an individual and collective process by validating Native students' cultural and tribal identities and epistemologies and fostering relationships.

Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving-Institutions

Many HPWIs gained AANAPISI designation by enrolling at least 10% of students who identify as Asian American or Native American Pacific Islander and at least 50% low-income

students (Nguyen et al., 2020). AANAPISIs award nearly half of the associates and a quarter of the bachelor's degrees earned by AAPI students (Nguyen et al., 2020). AANAPISIs serve incredibly diverse student bodies; the AAPI umbrella encompasses nearly 300 languages and 48 ethnic groups with varied educational, familial, and class experiences (Gogue et al., 2021). However, dominant leadership perspectives often ignore AAPI communities' collective leadership practices that focus on shared goals (Liang et al., 2002). AANAPISIs' community-centered and culturally affirming practices support student success and leadership development.

Broadly, scholars urge practitioners to center AAPI students' racial and ethnic identities, cultural values, lived experiences, and families in leadership interventions (Gogue et al., 2021). Canlas (2020) discovered when leadership development activities were directed toward activism and social justice issues (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement), Asian American students, particularly at community colleges, deepened their leadership development. Experiences focused on alliance building, self-care, teaching and learning, and community care reflected AAPI communities' leadership perspectives and practices (Canlas, 2020). Further, leadership efforts focused on socially responsible leadership, social change, and racial justice positively influenced Asian American students' LID (Manzano et al., 2017). By centering students' cultures and identities in explorations of leadership, activism, and systems, these studies illustrate how AANAPISIs facilitate leadership development and reimagine leadership, prototypes, paradigms, and the "story most often told."

Collectively, the research summarized in this article illustrates how MSIs facilitate LID through a myriad of practices that center culture, identity, relationships, and power. MSIs are exemplary environments for leadership development because of their unapologetic and enduring commitments to nurturing and developing historically minoritized communities. Further, MSIs buffer students from harmful stereotypes and racism as they engage in leadership. By valuing MSIs' efforts, leadership scholar-practitioners can reimagine traditional, normatively white leadership prototypes and paradigms.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM MSIs

To reimagine LID, we offer lessons learned from MSIs to inform leadership education practice in and beyond higher education. While HPWIs do not share MSIs' missions, MSIs demonstrate the critical need for welcoming culturally responsive and congruent learning environments that elevate diverse ways of knowing, leading, and engaging. Next, we offer examples of how leadership educators across institutional contexts can support minoritized students by drawing from MSI's impactful work. We highlight the importance of validating divergent leadership practices and challenging bias and systemic racism.

Higher education must reimagine leadership opportunities and developmental approaches to support all students. Leader and leadership development manifests differently across contexts and plays a pivotal role in individual and community outcomes. Acknowledging and celebrating the diverse ways students affect change on campus and off is important. Educators should recognize activism, community engagement, and collective leadership practices as valid sources of leadership development. Leadership activities centered on culture, language, and family-divergent forms of capital—are critical for facilitating LID and learning environments that support and affirm students' identities.

Minoritized groups are underrepresented in leadership opportunities for multiple reasons (e.g., incongruence with leadership prototypes, stereotype threat, imposter phenomenon), including the effects of systemic racism and bias. For example, the model

minority myth is a stereotype about AAPI individuals regarding a belief in their superiority and aptitude in relation to other racially minoritized groups (Sy et al., 2010). This bias shapes others' perceptions of this group, can negatively influence one's self-perception, and can lead to individual and systemic racism and discrimination in perceptions of leadership (Sy et al., 2010). The correlation made between race and success metrics like academic achievement, mobility, and leadership, is problematic and must be challenged. It is important to critique how oppressive systems reinforce generalizations.

Interrogating leadership education's culture of exclusion

Leadership scholar-practitioners should interrogate who is empowered to confer and claim leadership educator and education labels. Leadership educator professional legitimacy often functions as a property of whiteness, invalidating practitioners and practices that deviate from dominant and white norms (Irwin, 2021). We urge leadership scholar-practitioners to identify and disrupt exclusionary practices and learn from MSIs.

Planners of leadership conferences—such as the meetings of the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE), International Leadership Association (ILA), and Leadership Educator's Institute (LEI), among others—can examine how conference themes normalize whiteness, white people, and/or white-serving institutions. Planners can interrogate what leadership theories are spotlighted as worthy of engagement and what speakers and presenters are featured. Further, do most presenters and attendees come from HPWIs and/or 4-year institutions? These efforts are vital for addressing exclusion in the leadership education community (Teig & Dilworth, 2022).

Limited inclusion of culturally rich and affirming spaces has contributed to normative white standards in leadership research and practice. In addition to valuing the rich practices highlighted in this chapter, we urge scholar-practitioners to value and consider how LID is facilitated in cultural centers and identity-based organizations. Launched largely from students of color's labor and advocacy, cultural centers affirm people of color's humanity, facilitate community, and offer counter-narratives to practices that protect whiteness in HPWI contexts (López, 2015). Efforts to disrupt whiteness in leadership education practice would benefit from valuing, but not appropriating, the expertise of practitioners and contexts with demonstrated commitments to affirming people of color.

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