

# Developing a Leadership Identity: A Grounded Theory

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*This grounded theory study on developing a leadership identity revealed a 6-stage developmental process. The thirteen diverse students in this study described their leadership identity as moving from a leader-centric view to one that embraced leadership as a collaborative, relational process. Developing a leadership identity was connected to the categories of developmental influences, developing self, group influences, students' changing view of self with others, and students' broadening view of leadership. A conceptual model illustrating the grounded theory of developing a leadership identity is presented.*

Burns (1978) observed that despite the large volume of scholarship on the topic, leadership is not well understood. Recent attempts to classify and make meaning of the evolution of leadership have been generally successful at organizing theories of leadership into conceptual families (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2003; Rost, 1993). Numerous books and articles focus on leadership theory, behaviors, effective practices, or on particular populations (e.g., women, youth, ethnic groups), specific settings (e.g., civic leadership, business leadership, church leadership), and diverse outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, effectiveness, social responsibility). Despite the broad scope of this literature, there is little scholarship about how leadership develops or how a leadership identity develops over time.

## The Scholarship of Leadership

Rost (1993) concluded that most of what has been labeled leadership in the past was essentially good management. Leadership theories that rely on traits, behaviors, and situations to explain leadership worked well in an industrial era when the predominant goals of leadership were production and efficiency. However, Rost and other scholars (Allen & Cherrey, 2000; Bennis, 1989; Heifetz, 1994; Wheatley, 1999) noted that society has shifted to a knowledge-based, networked world. Rapid advancements in technology, increasing globalization, complexity, and interconnectedness reveal the new postindustrial paradigm of a networked world and call for “new ways of leading, relating, learning, and influencing change” (Allen & Cherrey, p. 1; Rost). Many of these “new ways of leading” include components of principle-centered leadership such as collaboration, ethical action, moral purposes, and leaders who transform followers into leaders themselves (Burns, 1978; Covey, 1992; Rost).

The principles involved in postindustrial leadership support a values-centered approach (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Matusak, 1997) and have influenced new pedagogical leadership models. Scholars who have developed models largely designed for college student leadership development

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such as the Eisenhower/UCLA ensemble social change model (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996) assert that collaboration among individuals, groups, and communities is essential for social change to occur. Similarly, the relational leadership model (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998) defines leadership as “a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good” (p. 21). This relational leadership model includes elements of inclusiveness, empowerment, ethics, purposefulness, and process orientation. Many leadership educators agree that college students are best informed by learning a postindustrial, relational-values approach to leadership (Higher Education Research Institute; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). Although scholarship exists that describes these leadership approaches, none offers a theoretical model of how this kind of relational leadership develops.

Most leadership development scholarship focuses on skill-building or short-term interventions such as retreats or courses, rather than on the process of how leadership capacity or leadership identity is created or changes over time. Although there were conceptual models of leadership development (Brungart, 1996; Velsor & Drath, 2004) at the time of this study there was no known research on how leadership identity was formed. Understanding the process of creating a leadership identity is central to designing leadership programs and teaching leadership. The purpose of this study was to understand the processes a person experiences in creating a leadership identity.

## METHOD

Because the purpose of the study was to understand how a leadership identity develops, a grounded theory methodology was chosen. The intent of a grounded theory is to generate

or discover a theory or abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation grounded in the experience and perceptions of the participants (Brown, Stevens, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The grounded theory in this study reflects the developmental experience of college student participants who had been observed working effectively with others toward shared purposes, that is, who had demonstrated relational leadership (Komives et al., 1998).

## Procedures

*Sampling.* The study employed the purposeful sampling procedures of intensity sampling to identify “intensity-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely” (Patton, 2002, p. 243). Nominators in professional positions that afforded them the opportunity to observe students interacting in group settings at a large mid-Atlantic research university were invited to nominate students who were exemplars of relational leadership.

*Participants.* From the pool of possible participants, we invited 13 students who exhibited the theoretical dimensions of relational leadership to participate in the study. Eight of the participants were White, 1 was Asian American, 3 were African American, and 1 student was African who immigrated to the United States as a child. Eight of the participants were men and 5 were women. There were 2 sophomores, 9 fourth- or fifth-year seniors, and 2 recent graduates. Two participants identified themselves as gay men; others identified themselves as heterosexual or did not identify their sexual orientation. The group was religiously diverse including Muslim, Bahá’í, Jewish, and Christian students, as well as those without active religious affiliations. There was a range of majors from chemistry to speech communications. Students used their

own first name or chose their own pseudonym.

*In-Depth Interviews.* Each student participated in a series of three interviews with the same interviewer. A research team of five White women conducted the research. A structured interview protocol was designed to ensure continuity across interviewers. After participants gave written informed consent, interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Through constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the research team modified questions to explore emergent issues. Researchers maintained field notes during each interview.

The three interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours each. This “three-interview series” followed Seidman’s (1991) model focusing on life history, followed by a detailed exploration of the experience, and lastly focusing on “reflection on the meaning” (p. 12). The first interview used a life narrative method (Bruner, 1987; Riessman, 1993) and asked the student to start back in elementary school and reflect on “how you have become the person you are now.” This question allowed for the broadest possible story to emerge so researchers could connect various experiences to the emergence of leadership identity. The purpose of the second interview was to identify the students’ experiences working with others and to explore their experiences with leadership. The third interview explored how the students’ view of leadership changed over time and what influenced that changing view.

*Trustworthiness.* The research team ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with multiple procedures. Participants reviewed and responded to transcripts of their interviews (i.e., member checking). Research team members served as peer debriefers for the process. The

team sought feedback on the evolving theory and interpretations of the data from diverse colleagues to understand its meaning. Concepts were identified in the data and were examined across the stages of the evolving model. The detail in coding and analysis confirmed saturation in the central category and categories of the theory. Grounded theory does not seek to be generalizable and the degree to which it is transferable is sought through the participant “voices” and the thick descriptions reflected in this study.

## Data Analysis

We used open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze the data. During open coding, each transcript was analyzed in sentences or groups of sentences reflecting single ideas. These units were given a code to reflect that idea or concept (Strauss & Corbin). The open coding identified 5,922 items that were combined through axial coding into 245 abstract concepts. In selective coding the concepts were ultimately organized into one central category or “what the research is all about” (p. 146), in this case, leadership identity along with five categories: (a) essential developmental influences; (b) developing self; (c) group influences; (d) changing view of self with others; and (e) broadening view of leadership. Properties—also known as attributes of a category—were identified for each of these categories. Strauss and Corbin clarified that “whereas properties are the general or specific characteristics or attributes of a category, dimensions represent the location of a property along a continuum or range” (p. 117). Through constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Strauss & Corbin), each participant’s response was compared and connected to others as categories, properties, and dimensions emerged.

## FINDINGS AND EMERGING THEORY

The experiences and reflections of these students revealed the dynamic process of developing a leadership identity. Students had different experiences, came to new awareness of themselves in a leadership context at different ages, identified a variety of ways these experiences and context had an impact on them, yet they engaged with the process in similar ways leading to credibility in the emergent theory. The theory emerged as the relationships between the concepts combined into an integrated framework that explained the phenomenon of leadership identity (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The categories interact to create a leadership identity as the central category that developed over six identity stages. Developing self interacted with group influences to shape the student's changing view of self with others. This changing view of self in relation to others shaped the student's broadening view of what leadership is and created a leadership identity. Illustrative quotations from the participants are included in each of the categories to tell the story of this theory.

### Developmental Influences

The essential developmental influences that fostered the development of a leadership identity included adult influences, peer influences, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning. Each of these four properties has dimension, which means they change across the stages of the central category. For example, how adults influenced newer leaders was a different process than with experienced leaders, and meaningful involvement began with an individual joining a variety of organizations but progressed to more in-depth, responsible experiences with one or two core groups.

*Adult Influences.* Adults played different roles in influencing student movement through the leadership identity development stages. In the family, adults were very important in building confidence and being an early building block of support. Angela noted, "My family is really what built a lot of my character." Adults created safe spaces in classes and organizations where students learned to communicate and relate to peers. On the importance of his scoutmaster, James noted with relief, "When we had moved houses, we didn't move troops" so he still had access to the same scout master who affirmed him. Students explicitly noted the role of schoolteachers and the encouragement found in the continuity of those teachers across grades in school.

In the early stages of their leadership identity, adults were particularly influential as role models. James said,

Through all this you need that person you look up to, that role model, that figure that you aspire to be like or to be. Doesn't have to be a real person, people usually see qualities of what they aspire to be in different people, I guess like a hero. . . And [when I was little] I wanted to be like Superman and smart like Batman and be in touch with people like Star Trek characters.

Adults were the first to recognize the students' leadership potential. Ed recalled times when he was encouraged to take leadership roles in groups: "[adults said] 'Oh, you'd be good at that', or 'I really think you should apply for that.'" In the early stages, adults affirmed and sponsored students. They often prompted students initially to get involved in organizations and helped them set high expectations for themselves. Joey observed: "Positive reinforcement . . . gave me the drive to get more involved in things."

Eventually there was less need for this external affirmation and the students became self-directed. Ed saw that shift in his motivation and said, "I'm going to go ahead and do this. I'm going to feel confident in the things I've done in the past, because I don't want to rely on others to force me forward."

Later, adults continued as models and became actively engaged mentors. Jayme described watching adults as intentional modeling: "I'm going to learn from other people's experience, and I'll at least get some information before I jump in there." Students of color, especially, benefited from the presence of an active adult mentor. Students of color were often apprenticed to an adult and worked in intensive and intentional ways as an assistant or protégé to that adult. Jayme became the "protégé" of Miss [Smith]—a highly involved woman at her church. This woman "adopted" her and took her everywhere including on business and church trips. Jayme observed adult conversation, manners, and how conflicts were resolved. She drew on those experiences when she subsequently became the assistant to the dance teacher in her high school and often chose her own behaviors by asking herself, "What would Miss [Smith] do?"

In college, adults continued as models and mentors, but also become meaning-makers and even evolved into friends. Ed described how he often thought things through with his advisor: "We would always talk after any experience. I would go right to [my advisor] and like, 'Okay, this is what happened, and I'm trying to figure it out.'" Adults were a meaningful part of each stage of developing students' leadership identity. The dimensions of adult influences ranged from being affirmers, models, and sponsors in the early stages to being mentors and ultimately to being meaning makers and colleagues or friends.

*Peer Influences.* Same-aged peers served as

friends and older peers served as role models in early leadership identity stages. Joey emulated an older student who was an officer in his college LGBT group and observed: "That's kind of cool . . . I could do that." Modeling peers served as a motivator for involvement as well as a model of leadership. Jimmy admired the SGA president:

[She] was one of the first people . . . like my role model, like she was . . . this perfect leader. That's what I'm going to strive to be, because, you know she takes this group of uninvolved kids, and she makes them do so much for the campus. She's so great at like organizing. She's fighting for the students. Like, she has this love. . . very selfless like promotion for students in general.

Numerous students cited older peers as the reason they got involved or interested in an organization in college. These peers served as sponsors and took the student to initial meetings of a group or encouraged them to join or to run for an office. Peers served as sources of affirmation and support. For Corey, this peer affirmation was important. He initially described his preference to be an active member of a group and not the positional leader until he was turned to by peers to be the formal leader:

[I] started to realize that in fact that's how I was viewed by my peers. I felt like, okay, well, if my peers have put faith in me, faith in the fact that they truly believe that I'm a leader, then I kind of need to take it on. I wasn't pressured into it, but I felt like it would be best, that maybe I do have something to offer, so I started to embrace it more.

Engaging with peers gained depth and meaning as leadership identity developed. With more group experience, peers served as followers, teammates, and ultimately as

collaborators and peer meaning-makers.

*Meaningful Involvement.* Involvement experiences were the training ground where leadership identity evolved. These experiences helped clarify personal values and interests, and helped students experience diverse peers, learn about self, and develop new skills. Early involvements were a way to make friends. Reflecting on his membership on the high school swim team, Joey described his motivation: “It wasn’t the athletics event. It was the camaraderie.” As they transitioned into new schools and the university, they sought social integration through involvement in sports, band, theater, or service as a source of new friends. Later meaningful involvements showed more complex motivations. Jimmy reported that “SGA was the first kind of goal-oriented group for me . . . I felt like I was working towards something.” Other involvements developed values and personal skills. Jayme learned new skills through service: “I’ve gotten used to just listening like just hearing them talk about their lives.”

Team-based involvements such as sports, theater, and band taught students to do their personal best while concurrently supporting others. From playing sports, Corey said, “I learned it is not just about me” and “your individual achievement helps the team. It doesn’t help you shine or stand out, and don’t ever put yourself on that pedestal.” Marie learned in band that “I’m not trying to beat someone else, but like we’re trying to sound good together.” Some learned the importance of support from older teammates who established a positive group climate. Ed described his swim team experience as always being “on our feet cheering for each other,” and “we cheered more for the kids that were struggling.”

*Reflective Learning.* Structured opportunities for critical reflection, such as journal-

ing and meaningful conversations with others, allowed students to uncover their passions, integrity, and commitment to continual self-assessment and learning. This reflection was initially with a parent or sibling; participants described dinner table conversations, family meetings, and the listening ear of close-age siblings. Over time, they began to process their experiences with other adults and peers. Some students preferred journaling and began to share those journals with others.

Experiences in which students intentionally learned about leadership, such as trainings, retreats, or classes, provided them with new language and ideas that aided their development. Students used this new leadership language to assess themselves and differentiate experiences. Ed talks about the power of his first undergraduate leadership classes: “We talked about having some kind of lens or framework, or even the language to describe [leadership], it changes not only the way I think about it, but it changes the way I act as a leader in ways that I don’t understand . . . in unconscious ways.” Becky clearly saw:

It’s a combination of the experiences I’ve had, the classes and the theories I’ve learned. I don’t think alone any of it would have influenced me as it has. It has really made it spin together to really understand it, because I could come out of class one day and take something that I learned and really implement it in my experience, but because having experienced it I can also talk about it theory-wise. So I think it’s definitely that combination.

Even being a participant in this study supported reflection. Jimmy said, “Now, I feel like having gone through this research study like definitely. . .my interactions are more genuine.” As depicted in Figure 1, these developmental influences were the environ-

mental context in which leadership identity developed.

### Developing Self

The category of developing self contains properties with dimensions of personal growth that changed throughout the development of leadership identity. The properties in this category are deepening self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, applying new skills, and expanding motivations.

*Deepening Self-Awareness.* In the early stages of developing their leadership identity, students recalled a highly vague and diffuse sense of self. Attributions from adults, family, and peers helped them identify aspects of themselves that were strengths and aspects that needed attention. Over time they were able to label aspects of their personal identity on their own. For example, Becky said, “I just

happen to be a very outspoken, share-my-opinion-kind of person.” Joey claimed, “I’m more of an interpersonal person.”

When asked about their personal identities, students of color identified race as a critical factor. James, an African American student, said, “[the] biggest thing is race”; another African American student, Ray, described how he was motivated to present “a positive image of a Black male,” although he tried “not to think about [race] too much.” Sammy, an Asian American student, discussed his many identities including the influence of race, ethnicity, and being male, and had come to see them as assets of diversity that he brought to a group. Both gay students felt being male was an asset to their leadership; however, Donald worried that sexual orientation could be a barrier to leadership based on what others might have thought of him.

Gender was a factor in how some ap-

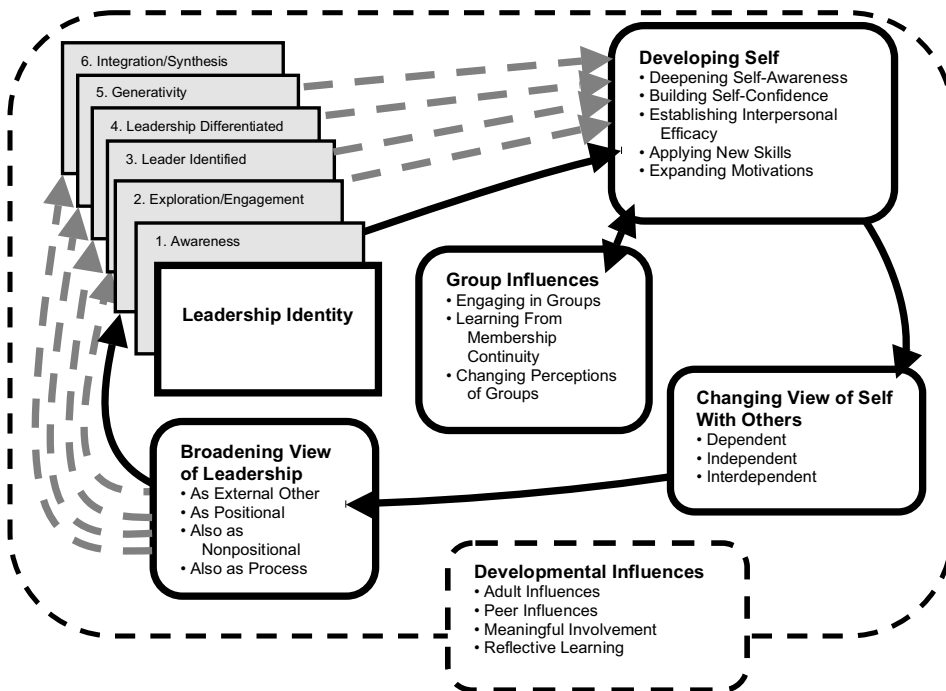


FIGURE 1. Developing a Leadership Identity: Illustrating the Cycle

proached leadership. After being denied membership in a group based upon her gender, Jayme noted, “I decided that I am not going to let anything, anything at all, push me down.” Christine became more activist in her youth after completing altar server training in her church only to be denied the opportunity to become an altar “boy.” Angela acknowledged that she didn’t ever think, “I can’t do [something] because I’m a woman,” but acknowledged that “[you] have to succeed to the best of your ability to show that you’re not inferior.”

The awareness of majority aspects of the students’ identities was largely taken for granted. For example, most of the White students did not identify race until asked about it. Donald, a White male, reflected what many White men in the study shared that: “Race and gender does sort of make it easier. . . . People sort of expect you to take on a leadership role.” Angela did not think about how being White and heterosexual helped her, although in reflection, said that it probably did. Ed, however, felt truly transformed and enlightened when he “started to understand my own privilege . . . as a White able-bodied male.” Those in later stages of developing their leadership identity were generally more complex in their awareness of their multiple identities.

Other aspects of self-awareness were the development of personal values and a sense of personal integrity that became more important over time. James shared that: “The first time I heard the word *integrity* was my Dad saying it; and he was like, ‘You know when it comes to integrity it is the most important thing because if everything is gone that is all you have.’”

*Building Self-Confidence.* Most students described feeling special in their families and with other adults. Even when they went

through periods of self-doubt and low esteem, they knew they mattered to someone. They sought the support and approval of adults in the early stages of their leadership identity development. For example, James commented, “I always wanted the coach’s approval.” Building their confidence supported developing a positive self-concept, a sense of themselves. Sammy knew when that happened and shared that: “Things started rolling and I was in a groove. . . I knew what needed to get done.” Confidence came with meaningful experience. James said “I can do this because I have done similar things to it.” Confidence also came with being able to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Jayme said, “I’m not perfect, but I have something to bring.”

As their confidence built, they were willing to take risks to get more involved and were empowered to take on more active group roles. Jayme reflected, “Eleventh grade was when I started letting myself be open and do what I wanted to do and not think about what other people say.” Over time, their growing sense of self-awareness let them take on unpopular issues, stand up for their values, and not need peer affirmation. Ed described antihomophobia programs he did on his residence hall floor as a heterosexual resident assistant, knowing it was the right thing to do so “the alienation doesn’t matter as much.”

Once they acknowledged that they were leaders or had leadership potential, they began to incorporate that identity into their sense of self. Corey noted: “Sophomore year in college is when I really started to believe and really identify with being a leader—others had been saying it” and Jimmy noticed that “people showed respect. . . [I] started to think of [my]self this way.”

*Establishing Interpersonal Efficacy.* Participants had numerous experiences that contributed to their efficacy in working with

other people. Most students described how they learned to make new friends in the normal transitions from elementary school to middle or junior high school, high school, and on to college. Sammy and Joey, who moved often as children, saw the value of those transitions. Sammy said: "I get to know people a lot quicker because I socialize with everybody."

Students noted how important it was that they learned to relate to and communicate with people different from themselves. They developed an appreciation of diverse points of view and valued different perspectives. Ray observed: "I've just been really exposed to a broad range of viewpoints and that's kind of helped me to mature and helped me to be a better person in interacting with people too." Ed came to the realization that he first had to understand himself well before he could

learn to deal with people who are different from me and have different ideals from what I have, I need to understand more what I represent and what I think. So the more work I do about what I value and what biases I have already that I've been culturally or socially conditioned to have, the better.

Students who felt different or who worked closely with people different from themselves (such as Becky, Ed, and Donald who worked weekly with youth with severe disabilities), later came to value that difference and credit it with the importance of empathy and their commitment to involving others who may be marginalized in groups. According to Becky, "All my work with people with special needs has really opened my eyes to an entirely different world of respect." Donald observed: "I think that [being gay] does make me more sensitive towards other people and what . . . their needs are in a group situation."

Students recognized that working with others on shared tasks required new inter-

personal skills. Ray noted that in leadership: "The trickiest thing was asking one of your peers to do something." When he was in an early leadership position, Sammy described his own struggle with delegation when he stated, "I mean there are certainly times in my life when I feel that . . . I can't trust other people and that I'm going to have to do it myself." With the acceptance of interdependence, developing trust in others became essential. Being a cochair and practicing shared leadership, Becky observed: "I guess it all developed in one big chunk that I started to go through the process of really learning how to build relationships with other people, to help influence them to be a part of the group, and to make the changes [together]." She reflected, "I've gained trust in other people . . . I just took a few years to figure that out."

Each student valued being a self-proclaimed "people-person." They developed an early appreciation of harmonious relationships with others. Few of the participants liked conflict and each had learned to be mediators. Jimmy, for example, described himself as a "smoother" and Joey saw himself as "the connector, the bridge builder." Marie observed:

I'm just a big believer . . . in the power of personal relationships . . . it's one thing to work with someone in a group or with a campus committee or whatever but if you can get to know that person and they can get to know you outside of that professional or academic experience and have a social bond on top of everything else I think that that personal relationship when you take that into the academic/professional scenario will lead to maybe bigger and better results.

*Applying New Skills.* Participants worked to develop new skills as they developed their leadership identity. When they first started joining groups, they were conscious they were

learning how to work with other people and knew this required new skills. They found developmental opportunities in many experiences; for example, Jimmy spoke about his high school play experience. “The play was the first time I learned how to completely interact with other people.” When first serving as positional leaders, they practiced more directive leadership styles and approaches, all with the goal of getting tasks accomplished. Practical skills dominated that stage of their leadership identity. Donald noted he was “a good time framer, practical, an organizer,” and Becky developed her public speaking skills. Practicing included learning difficult tasks such as delegation, member motivation, and member recognition.

When they became aware of interdependence, they came to need new skills such as trusting others, and being open to diverse ideas and perspectives. They recognized the need to develop team-building skills and learned how to work alongside others toward common purposes. Becky asserted: “If the group is working together, there needs to be a common set of values, so everyone is working toward the same goal and everyone has the same ideas.” Key to the facilitator role was learning to listen actively to others. They knew listening was a learned skill. Jimmy reflected on his awareness of how he was developing this skill with the support of his advisor:

Sometimes I think I don't realize what I say or what I do can offend other people . . . like . . . for me coming from like a White male background. So working with [an advisor] has really put a spin like I see myself acting differently. Then it comes out in more like not talking, but more listening.

*Expanding Motivations.* Students' indiscriminant early interests to get involved included personal motivations such as making

friends or doing interesting things. Goals were refined as they narrowed their focus to joining or remaining in groups that meant something to them. As they developed personally and gained more experience, they sought a deep sense of commitment to something and knew that passion would be a strong motivation to action. James observed, “I like [having a] passion about things, [but] I didn't know what I was passionate about.” Jayme observed that “Every single person needs something bigger than just their everyday life, because then it makes things all worthwhile.” As participants' commitments to a change or a passion emerged, they took on a catalyst or a change agent role.

### Group Influences

The category of developing self interacted with the category of group influences (see the double arrow in Figure 1). The category of group influences includes the properties of engaging in groups, learning from membership continuity, and changing perceptions of groups.

*Engaging in Groups.* Students often sought groups for a “sense of place.” Ed captured many students' early childhood group experiences when he said, “I had feelings of being an outsider.” They sought to find organizations that fit their developing self-image. James observed that “Working at scout camp made me feel like I could do anything.”

Students sought a sense of belonging in groups. Donald's college church group was even called “The Welcoming Place.” These core groups included identity-based groups such as LGBT organizations or the Black Student Union. As he became more purposeful in his membership, Joey observed he sometimes felt

the weight of the world on your shoulders  
 . . . you feel like you're alone and there's

points where you feel like you need to have a safe space where there's people like you that can identify with you, who are experiencing the same struggle and have the same objectives.

Participants were also becoming increasingly clear about the conditions under which they would participate in groups and the role of groups in their development. They were developing convictions and narrowing their interests. Donald dropped out of scouts when he feared being "outed" as gay because the group was hostile toward gay students. Ed described dropping out of a sports club because "the more that I learned about myself and who I wanted to be, and what I wanted to do, it just didn't align with kind of their priorities." He shared the painful story of being at dinner with several members of that group who were telling insensitive jokes so he just got up and walked away and never went back to practice again. In reflection, he told us that he wished he had the capacity to tell them why he was upset but he did not know how to say those things then.

Many kinds of group experiences were critical. Experiences with group projects such as class projects contributed to trust and relationship building when successful and resulted in resentment toward others when not successful. Ed described a bad group experience in a class: "It was a dismal experience. I hated it, and I think some students really hated it since they are the ones that ended up taking on most of the work." Most shared Christine's comment that "[class] group projects are terrible." Conversely, Ray eventually came to learn a lot in group settings: "Everyone has different concerns in the groups that I work with, so that's kind of opened my mind . . . I've been able to understand where people are coming from a lot better."

We were fascinated by the relationship of

a strong group culture to the individual's view of themselves and how that culture influenced developing a leadership identity. Becky described being the chair of a senior honor society committee going into her first meeting with a highly structured agenda and a set of ideas about how the task should be accomplished. The group slowed the process down by affirming that they were all leaders with good ideas and wanted to build a vision together of how the committee should approach its task. The group pulled Becky back from being too directive and supported her in practicing shared leadership. Becky reflected that she actually was very relieved. In a similar way, Jayme described her experience in her work with the local African immigrant community. The group continually reminded her that she and others were there to serve the group, not stand out as leaders themselves. Jayme observed:

It keeps you grounded, because they'll easily call you out . . . So you don't get too cocky. It doesn't make you think . . ."I'm a leader." They're quick to tell you, . . . "What are you doing? A leader is the one who serves the community. Are you serving us?"

*Learning From Membership Continuity.* To gain more time and energy to invest in organizations they cared about, students started to narrow down their numerous organizational involvements to a few that were more meaningful. They went deep into these organizations. Corey chose to stay highly involved in his fraternity and reflected on this experience: "[It] . . . just changed my entire life." Students who were committed to a group or organization over time readily gained relational skills such as dealing with conflict, handling transition issues, and sustaining organizations. They increasingly became aware

of their responsibility for the development of younger group members. They assumed responsibility and took on positional leadership roles and active member roles. Students often maintained their membership in other groups, while retaining a primary group as their main source of identification; a concept that Marie called her “core group.” They eventually became wise senior members and continued their support of their core groups even when less active in the group’s leadership. Some sports team experiences were particularly powerful developmental environments, which offered opportunities to develop group spirit, encouraged bonding and morale, and were sustained over time. On some teams, they learned to work with people they might not even like but had to learn to function together. That continuity of being known provided a core group—a safe space—to try on roles and practice processes.

Students’ interaction with others in groups influenced their own self-awareness as well as shaped how they viewed groups and their role with others in groups. Angela, for example, had been used to doing things by herself in most groups but as tasks became more complex in one of her high school organizations, she came to realize she had to depend on others in the group to accomplish their goals. She had learned that working along with others was more productive than working alone. Subsequently, in her first year of college, she was one of several vice presidents of her residence hall association. When the president abruptly resigned, the group of vice presidents decided to share the role as copresidents until a new president was elected some months later.

*Changing Perceptions of Groups.* Students initially viewed groups as just collections of friends or people they knew. As they began to realize those groups had purposes and objectives, this collection of people began to be

seen as an organization with structure and roles. Eventually they saw that those organizations were entities to develop. Becky saw this as a new responsibility in her developing leadership identity: “I really try to . . . make it a better organization . . . [and make] simple changes that maybe in the long run would affect the organization.” Organizations were also viewed as communities of people working together. Becky observed that the feeling of “community is necessary to do anything.” As they developed in their leadership identity, they had a new sense of how their group was linked to other organizations in a system, and they became interested in how the system worked. Students became aware of those who worked in other groups on campus-wide or community-wide issues, and of those who functioned well in coalitions. These systems views led them to see the contributions of diverse roles of stakeholders in those systems and the complexity of different groups within a system. By gaining a systems-view, Ray even gained a new view of administrators: “Working with administrators [I’m] now . . . able to see where they’re coming from. . . . I’m a little bit more open-minded about sometimes why they can’t get things done.”

### Changing View of Self With Others

Developing self interacted with group influences to effect how participants changed their view of themselves in relation to other people. In the early stages of engaging in groups, they were *dependent* on others. Even when developing personal efficacy to accomplish their goals, they depended on adults and older peers for sponsorship, affirmation, and support. As students began to be involved in leadership contexts and take on member or leader roles, they engaged in groups from one of two primary pathways: *independent* or *dependent*. On the independent path, students aspired to

be the positional leader or had a strong motivation to change something in a group or organization of which they were a part. Others continued to be dependent and preferred to be members or followers in groups. Corey said, "I didn't want to lead, but be part of a team that did." Many functioned on both pathways and clearly saw that they had different roles (independent leader or dependent follower). Whether students entered groups from an independent or dependent position, they shared a leader-centric view of leadership, believing only positional leaders did leadership. Donald said it succinctly, "Leadership is what the leader does." The key transition to a more differentiated view of leadership was facilitated by the awareness that group participants were interdependent with each other. The students continued a consciousness of the interdependence of themselves with others across the final stages of their leadership identity. They believed that leadership came from anywhere in the group and worked to develop their own and their peers' capacity for leadership.

### Broadening View of Leadership

Students' changing view of themselves with others influenced their broadening view of leadership and their personal definitions of leadership. The final category concerned participants' construction of leadership and the mental models that framed that construct. In the early stages of leadership identity, the construction of leadership was not yet a personal identity. The initial view of leader was an external adult and it broadened to include an older peer. That view could be stated as: "I am *not* a leader." Leadership then became leader-centric with the belief that a positional leader does leadership. Jayme said,

When I was a girl, I thought leadership was the person who could boss everyone around, and make them do what they wanted to do. Because you saw all the people around you, those in charge were like, "Do this, do that, do this, do that."

That individual leader takes on responsibility, organizes tasks, and gets things done. Taking on a position meant one was the leader. In their independent or dependent approaches to leadership, students acknowledged they were the leader in some contexts and also knew there were other contexts in which they were not the leader, they were "just" a member or follower. As students recognized they could not do everything themselves as positional leaders and that they valued the diversity of talents and perspectives brought by group members to accomplish goals, they began to engage with others in more meaningful, interdependent ways. This led to differentiation in the concept of leadership acknowledging that leadership could come from those in nonpositional roles (i.e., members) and increasingly was seen as a process among people in the group. Leaders were people facilitating the groups' progress from anywhere in the organization.

A leadership identity had become a more stable part of self. This led to the view represented by stating: "I can be *a* leader even when not being *the* leader." Evidence for this transition can be seen in Marie commenting: "There is a difference between having a position and being a leader," and in Ed's philosophy that "leadership is more of a fluid thing, it wasn't just rested in one person." From viewing leadership as a process comes the awareness that people can learn to engage in leadership. Sammy summed it up: "You know, everyone has leadership qualities, and everyone can be a leader in some avenue." Ultimately leadership became an integrated part of self-concept.

## Leadership Identity

The central category of this grounded theory was leadership identity and it developed in six stages. Each stage ended with a transition, which signaled leaving that stage and beginning the next stage. The process of developing a leadership identity was informed by the interaction of developing self through group influences that changed one's view of self with others and broadened the view of leadership in the context of the supports of the developmental influences. These stages are briefly described with student voices as illustrations.

*Awareness.* The first stage was the early recognition that leaders existed. As children, participants were particularly aware of parent figures and of national, historic, or charismatic leaders. Angela said, "I always thought of my mom as a huge leader just because in times of hardship she always was the one that pulled through and seemed to pull everything together, and I think that's a leadership quality." This view of leadership was external to the self and participants did not personally identify as a leader or even differentiate group roles. Becky said, "I would say that my lower school and middle school parts of my life, I was not a leader. I wasn't much, I wasn't really a follower, I was kind of just there."

*Exploration/Engagement.* The second stage was a time of intentional involvement, experiencing groups, and taking on responsibilities, though not generally in a positional leadership role. They often engaged in a myriad of organizations and activities such as swim teams, church bible study groups, dance, Boy Scouts, student council, and community service, usually for the friendships involved. They liked to belong to groups but their involvement was often unfocused. Ray observed, "I always wanted to be doing things," but, "I wasn't ready for a huge role yet." This was a significant skill development stage, when

they were seeking to learn anything they could from their participation in groups, including observing adult and peer models of leadership.

*Leader Identified.* In this third stage, all participants perceived that groups were comprised of leaders and followers and believed the leaders did leadership—that leaders were responsible for group outcomes. In this leader-centric stage, one was a leader only if one held a leadership position; indeed, one was *the* leader. When Marie became a positional leader as captain of the swim team her junior year in high school, she said to herself, "You are a leader now." Donald saw the responsibility of a leader as "you get a job, and you've got more work than everybody else to make sure everything happened." Students became intentional about their group roles in this stage. Some participants intentionally chose a member role when they joined groups; for example, Christine would "be a member first to see what something is about." As followers, these students might be very active and engaged in the goals of their group, but they still looked to the leader as the person who should be in charge.

*Leadership Differentiated.* In Stage 4, students differentiated leadership beyond the role of the positional leader and recognized that anyone in the group could do leadership and became aware that leadership was also a process between and among people. Students entered this stage with a new awareness that people in organizations were highly interdependent and that leadership was happening all around them. If they were in a positional leadership role, there was a commitment to engage in a way that invited participation and shared responsibility. They began to view this positional leader role as a facilitator, community builder, and shaper of the group's culture. James realized, "We were actually working together as a group, not under me."

When they were in a member role (i.e., a nonpositional role), there was an awareness of their own influence and the responsibility of every member to engage in leadership together to support the group's goals. James observed, "I like the fact that I can be a leader without a title because I think those are the best types of leaders to have." They affirmed their commitment to the groups' responsibility for its goals—as a "we" thing and not the individual leader doing it all. [Note: The complexity of the data in Stages 3 and 4 led us to identify two phases in each of these stages. An *emerging phase* clarified the ways the student "tried on" the identity early in the stage and the *immersion phase* was the practicing or living with that identity. These phases are discussed further in Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005).

*Generativity.* In Stage 5, students became actively committed to larger purposes and to the groups and individuals who sustained them. Students entered this stage and sought to articulate a personal passion for what they did. These passions were explicitly connected to the beliefs and values they identified as important in their lives. Describing her experience in residence hall government, Angela felt rewarded to realize that future "freshmen. . . [were] getting something better because of something we did." Service was seen as a form of leadership activism, a way of making a difference and working toward change. Exploring their interdependence further, they began to accept responsibility for developing others and for regenerating or sustaining organizations. They made a commitment to sponsor, support, mentor and develop others. They recognized that younger group members were in a developmental place that they themselves had experienced. Jimmy saw his responsibility from "having a peer mentor and now turning around and being a

peer mentor." They sought to enhance the leadership capacity of newer members so they too could be part of the leadership process, largely to create a leadership pipeline for their groups. Anticipating his graduation, Sammy worked for continuity in the organization so the "person coming after me feels comfortable and can do just as well . . . as I did. . . . My approach to leadership now would have to be a kind of mentoring people."

*Integration/Synthesis.* Stage 6 was a time of continual, active engagement with leadership as a daily process—as a part of self identity. They were increasing in internal confidence and were striving for congruence and integrity. Ed described this as:

A conscious shift . . . I feel that I can take ownership and the strengths that I have and the value that I bring to a group of people and have confidence in myself that I can do the things that I could set out to do.

This stage was signaled by many students in the study, but not fully evident in all of them. Those in or approaching this stage were confident that they could work effectively with other people in diverse contexts whether they were the positional leader or as an active group member. Even if they did not own the title of leader, they did have a confident identity of a person who does leadership. They understood organizational complexity and practiced systemic thinking. They were comfortable with contextual uncertainty knowing that because they had internalized leadership into their self-concept they could adapt and contribute to a new, unknown context. Ultimately, they echoed Joey's observation that "I see leadership now as an everyday thing."

### A Conceptual Model of the Integration of Categories

The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates

a cycle of how students engaged in the categories that in turn influenced the development of their leadership identity and how that developed over time. One category, *developmental influences*, defined the supports in the environmental context in which the development of leadership identity was occurring.

As students developed themselves through deepening their self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, learning to apply new skills, and expanding their motivations, they changed their perceptions of groups and their role in groups. Similarly, engaging in groups and feedback from group members informed the development of themselves as individuals. This interaction between *developing self* and *group influences* shaped an individual's awareness of who they were in relation to others. Depending on their stage of leadership identity, students saw themselves as dependent on others, independent from others, or interdependent with those around them. Their *changing view of self with others* had a direct bearing on their *broadening view of leadership*. Those who viewed themselves as dependent on others saw leadership as something external to them or as a position someone else held. Those who viewed themselves as independent from others assumed positional leader roles and perceived that the leader does leadership. Those who saw their interdependence with those around them viewed leadership as a relational process and leaders as anyone in the group who was contributing to that process.

An individual's broadening view of leadership has properties that develop through the six stages of the core category, *leadership identity*. Students remained in a stage of leadership identity for varying lengths of time. Either dissonance with the stage they were in or a new view of themselves and how they related to others in groups eventually led them

to a new view of leadership. This new view of leadership signaled a transition to a new stage. These transitions between stages of leadership identity marked a shift in thinking, a very gradual process of letting go of old ways of thinking and acting, and trying on new ways of being. In the new, more complex stage, students repeated the cycle that supported their transition to the next stage of leadership identity. This could be envisioned as a helix where one returns to a category such as *developing self* with a higher level of complexity.

Each student's story across the stages of developing their leadership identity was unique, yet was reflected in this grounded theory. Even those who did not evidence all six stages are represented in the theory. Donald, for example, was a sophomore in the study who saw himself as the positional leader in most groups he was in. Concurrently, he eloquently described the issues he was wrestling with as he tried to be a good team member for a major group research project in his honors class and knew that his next developmental step was to learn to trust classmates more and be an active leader as a member of the team. His story described his identity in Stage 3, *leader identified*, and he was beginning a transition toward Stage 4.

We observed that leadership identity is the cumulative confidence in one's ability to intentionally engage with others to accomplish group objectives. Further, a relational leadership identity appears to be a sense of self as one who believes that groups are comprised of interdependent members who do leadership together. This theory is further applied in a leadership identity model (LID) that integrates these categories (Komives, et al., 2005).

## Summary of Results

This grounded theory demonstrated that leadership identity develops through six stages

moving from awareness to integration/synthesis. The process within each stage engaged developing self with group influences, which in turn influenced the changing view of self with others from dependence to interdependence and shaped the broadening view of leadership, shifting from an external view of leadership to leadership as a process. Developmental influences facilitated this identity development.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

After developing an awareness of leadership, the students in this study described their shifting leadership identity as moving from a hierarchical, leader-centric view to one that embraced leadership as a collaborative, relational process. Participants' recognition that they function in an interdependent world was an essential part of having a *leadership differentiated* leadership identity. Students in the *generativity* and *integration/synthesis* stages recognized the systemic nature of leadership. The components of this leadership identity theory connect to the observations of many leadership scholars. Margaret Wheatley (1999) described the zeitgeist of the end of the 21st century as an "awareness that we participate in a world of exquisite interconnectedness. We are learning to see systems rather than isolated parts and players" (p. 158). Allen and Cherrey (2000) stated that "new ways of leading require the ability to think systemically. One cannot make sense of relationships and connections by looking at a small part of the system" (p. 84).

This leadership identity theory affirms Wielkiewicz's (2000) operationalization of Allen, Stelzner, and Wielkiewicz's (1998) ecology of leadership model. Wielkiewicz measured two orthogonal dimensions called hierarchical thinking and systemic thinking.

Both dimensions were clearly present in the leadership identity stages. Hierarchical thinking was the view of leadership held in *leader identified* and systemic thinking emerged in *leadership differentiated*. This theory extended Wielkiewicz's work by indicating that these appear to be developmental dimensions and that one experiences hierarchical thinking before one develops systemic thinking.

Some leadership scholarship (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988) asserted the role of key events and critical incidents in the development of leadership. In McCall et al.'s research, they found key events to include challenging assignments, bosses (good and bad), and hardships as the broad categories that impacted leadership growth. We found that the developmental process for these students does include key events but it is more grounded in the psychosocial dimensions of developing their interdependence, establishing healthy interpersonal relationships, and forging a confident sense of self (Baxter-Magolda, 2001; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kegan, 1994).

The students in this study had multiple social identities and factors in *developing self* were central to developing a leadership identity. In research about the multiple identities of college students, Jones (1997) found that students' most salient identity was the one identified with a minority status. On the other hand, students did not usually speak about identities associated with a privileged status; this silence indicated a limitation in their development of the identity associated with a privileged status. This finding is consistent with the development of leadership identity; race, for example, was most salient for the students of color in the study. The leadership identity of women, men who were gay, and students of color connected to those aspects of themselves and led them to view

leadership contexts differently, particularly when they anticipated attributions made about them based on those personal dimensions. In organizational settings, they were committed to including all members so that no one would feel excluded or marginalized.

The students in this study had a leadership identity that developed over time. Erikson (1968) asserted that people discover, more than create, their identities, and they do it within a social context. Each person discovers and uncovers their identity through a continual process of observation and reflection. "Identity development is the process of becoming more complex in one's personal and social identities" (McEwen, 2003, p. 205). Identity is often viewed as a global sense of self but it can also refer to a particular dimension of one's identity (McEwen), such as a professional identity, an athlete identity, or as it did in this study, a leadership identity.

### Limitations and Implications

This theory has direct implications in both advising individual students and in designing programs to develop the leadership efficacy of students in an organizational context. In this study we identified a number of meaningful factors that work together to facilitate the development of a leadership identity. Komives et al. (2005) described a model integrating the categories with the developmental stages and expanding on practice implications.

It must also be recognized that for this study we examined the identity development process for students who were selected because they exhibited a relational leadership approach to others. Although relational leadership is a broad postindustrial approach, the process for identity development might be different for those who espouse other specific leadership philosophies such as servant leadership. Further, the study reflects the developmental

process for students who were involved in organizations that may not be the same for those with little formal group involvement. In addition, more participants of color would have allowed for more saturation in diverse experiences. Although diverse perspectives were incorporated, a more diverse research team might have analyzed the data differently. The transferability of the study is influenced by the methodology, particularly related to the small number of participants from one campus.

The possibilities of research on a new theory such as this one are numerous. For example, more research is needed on environmental interventions that facilitate the key transition from Stage 3 (independence) to the Stage 4 interdependent levels of consciousness (Kegan, 1994). The theory should be tested with students who do not hold extensive organizational involvements as did the students in this study to see if this theory is transferable to the development of their leadership identity; and if so, what the conditions are that facilitate it in non-organizational settings. Further research is needed with those for whom leader-centric approaches are not part of their cultural values in particular, to explore if they experience Stages 3 and 4 differently. As a potential life span model, more research is needed to determine how postcollege adults experience the *integration/synthesis* stage of leadership identity and whether there are additional stages not reflected in this theory. Leadership identity development could also be explored with noncollege adults. In addition, more research is needed to see if groups or organizations function in ways parallel to the core category and what influences those organizational practices; for example, are group leadership practices dependent on the positional leader's style? Do group structures shape the

approaches used?

The students in this study shared their stories of how they experienced themselves in groups engaging with others that revealed how their leadership identity developed. The theory has implications for working with individuals as they develop their leadership identity and for groups as they learn to work more effectively to enhance the leadership efficacy of group members.

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