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LGBT Student Leaders and Queer Activists: Identities of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Identified College Student Leaders and Activists

Kristen A. Renn

This qualitative study provided evidence of common patterns of involvement, leadership, and identity among 15 students leading lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) campus groups. Participants were 7 men, 5 women, and 3 female-to-male transgender students; one first-year, 4 sophomores, 4 juniors, and 6 seniors; and 8 White, 2 Black, one biracial, one international, 2 Latino/a, and one White Jewish students. Within the overall pattern of involvement, an involvement-identity cycle occurred in which increased leadership led to increased public LGBT identity and a merged gender/sexual orientation and leadership identity. Evidence also supported the classification of students into three distinct identities: LGBT Leader, LGBT Activist, and Queer Activist. I present implications for scholars and educators working with LGBT and other students leading in identity-based contexts.

A relative explosion of research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adolescents and college students in recent years provides a growing literature about the identities and experiences of LGBT students (e.g., Abes & Jones, 2004; Bilodeau, 2005; Dilley, 2005; Evans & Broido, 1999; Fassinger, 1998; Rhoads, 1998; Stevens, 2004; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003). A longer established body of research on student involvement provides evidence that leaders of campus organizations experience positive outcomes related to leadership development (e.g., Astin, 1993; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000). The intersection of these fields—LGBT student leadership—

provides a window into student leadership in identity-based groups and raises the question of whether and how students merge gender and sexual orientation identities with leadership identities to understand themselves as leaders of and for the LGBT community.

Although some authors have addressed the need to attend to LGBT student leaders and the leadership cycles of LGBT student organizations (e.g., Mallory, 1998; Outcault, 1998; Sanlo, 2002), the topic of LGBT student leadership has received scant empirical attention to date. An exception is Porter's (1998a) work comparing gay and lesbian college students' leadership self-efficacy in gay and lesbian contexts to their leadership self-efficacy in non-LGB-specific contexts. Renn and Bilodeau (2005a, 2005b) have also contributed to understanding the identity and leadership development of LGBT student leaders, and this article is an extension of that work. Readers should note that Brent Bilodeau granted me permission to use our mutually collected data for this article; however, the analyses and conclusions presented are my own, and though they may be congruent with his understanding of the data, they are not meant to represent his views.

Stage models of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979, 1984; Fassinger, 1998) posit an identity trajectory from private sense of self as nonheterosexual to public recognition, immersion in the identity, and integration of the lesbian or gay identity into one's larger sense of identity.

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These models do not, however, address the diversity of identities that may occur within the categories of gay, lesbian, or bisexual. To adherents of stage models it may appear that leaders of LGBT student organizations display the markers of an “immersion” or “identity pride” stage (Cass, 1979, 1984) and this claim may be true; but observations of LGBT student leaders (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005b) reveal an array of identities *within* this group that complicates such an apparently monolithic approach. Observations of these differences led to the research questions for this study:

1. What variations exist among the gender and sexual orientation and leadership identities of students who lead LGBT campus groups?
2. In what ways if any do gender and sexual orientation and leadership identities interact for these students?

Theoretical Frameworks: LGBT Identities and Student Leadership

LGBT Identities. Scholars recently have focused increasing attention on the topic of LGBT identity in youth and college students. Mostly qualitative in approach and based on small, single-campus samples, this research has produced a body of knowledge about how young people come to understand themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or less often studied, transgender people.

To be clear, *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* describe sexual orientations; *transgender* relates to gender identity. These are different psychosocial constructs. Because lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are increasingly considered together as one campus community, I do so here in spite of my concern that doing so masks the important differences between sexuality and gender identity. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) provided an overview and synthesis of sexual orientation and gender identity

development models, and I highlight here those that are most applicable to understanding LGBT identities in college students.

The majority of LGBT identity theories presuppose a somewhat narrow conception of what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. A number of sexual orientation identity development models (e.g., Cass, 1979, 1984; Fassinger, 1991; Fox, 1995; Klein, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1988, 1990) posit a fairly orderly developmental process leading to an identifiable lesbian, gay, or bisexual self-concept. These theories are useful for understanding how people come to have identities that are recognized on campus as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; the models are theoretically sound and practical for use in higher education practice and policy making. What they lack, however, is the ability to differentiate among the many ways that students identify themselves within the categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Definitions that include more nuanced conceptions of LGBT identity arise from theories that incorporate individual meaning-making and intercategory variation. D’Augelli’s (1994) life span model of sexual orientation identity development accounts for social contexts and individual variations in six identity processes (e.g., developing a personal LBG identity, developing an LGB social identity, and entering an LGB community). This developmental model opens up the definition of what it means to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual to include a range of personal expression and comfort.

Abes and Jones (2004) examined lesbian college students’ meaning-making capacity. Important findings include the ways that students understood their lesbian identities in the context of multiple dimensions of identity (race, ethnicity, gender, faith, etc.) and the ways that cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development were integrated in their

understandings of self. Abes and Jones presented not an identity development model per se, but an application of developmental theory (specifically Kegan's, 1982, 1994) to understanding psychosocial identities in context and in interaction with one another.

Dilley's (2005) historical study of "non-heterosexual male collegiate identities" provides perhaps the best model for understanding identities across a range of individually held nonheterosexual self-concepts, albeit only those held by men. Dilley interviewed 57 men who attended college between 1945 and 1999, and developed an historical typology of six identity types. The first type, *homosexual*, occurred until the late 1960s and is not applicable to students in the 21st century. Three more (*closeted*, *"normal,"* and *parallel*) are not applicable to the study of leaders of LGBT student organizations, because they represent identities that are not made public in ways that are necessary for a student to take up leadership within an LGBT group. The remaining two categories describe identity types that might occur in leaders of LGBT groups:

Gay—publicly acknowledged/announced feelings/attractions; often involved within institutional systems to create change. Publicly socialized with other non-heterosexuals. (Late 1960s to present)

Queer—very publicly deployed identity, in opposition to normative ("straight") culture; often tried to change mores and social systems (Late 1980s to present). (Dilley, 2005, p. 62)

Women might have identified in different or additional ways, but for the purposes of studying the complexity of self-understandings within the category of LGBT, Dilley's typology provides a way to differentiate between "gay" students, who are more aligned with normative structures of gay versus straight, and "Queer" students, who align themselves in opposition

to normative structures and, often, the very notion of binary definitions of sexuality such as gay and straight. "Whereas gay students sought to become part of campus culture by striving for a 'seat at the table,' queer students often questioned those normative processes and were more apt to want to knock over the table" (P. Dilley, personal communication, September 19, 2006). A gay student might seek representation for LGBT students in student government, whereas a queer student might question (or protest) a student government structure that "approved" representation of some groups and not others. A strength of the Dilley typology is that it draws attention to, and provides definitions for, different types of LGBT identities that in most developmental models are not recognized as distinct.

Student Leadership Identity. Literature on college student leadership development (e.g., Higher Education Research Institute, 1996; Komives, Lucas, & McMahan, 1998; Komives, Casper, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006), while revealing a recognition of diversity among leaders and leadership contexts, has been focused on particular kinds of desirable developmental outcomes. The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (HERI) and the Relational Leadership Model (Komives et al., 1998) feature non-hierarchical leadership styles and a focus on leadership for social justice as hallmarks of a well-developed student leader. Derived from a grounded theory study of undergraduate leaders and reflecting the values of the social change and relational leadership models, the leadership identity development (LID) model (Komives et al., 2005; Komives et al., 2006) proposed six stages through which leaders move as they establish a personal and social identity that incorporates "an awareness that [one] can make a difference and can work effectively with others to accomplish change"

(Komives, Casper, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2003, p. 1). Valued outcomes in this developmental model include leaders who have an “active commitment to a personal passion; accepting responsibility for the development of others, team learning, and sustaining organizations” (Stage 5: Generativity), who continue “self-development and lifelong learning, striving for congruence and internal confidence,” and who see “organizational complexity across contexts” (Stage 6: Internalization/Synthesis; Komives et al., 2006, p. 405).

Arguably the most critical developmental achievement delineated in the LID is a subject-object shift (see Kegan, 1982, 1994) that occurs between the model’s Stage 3 (Leader Identified) and Stage 4 (Leadership Differentiated). This shift from view of self and others as leaders in positional roles to a view of leadership that does not depend on formal leadership positions marks a substantial developmental milestone for student leaders. In Stages 1, 2, and 3, they see leadership as something that is done by people holding certain kinds of positions; in Stages 4, 5, and 6 they see that leadership can happen anywhere in an organization, they can be participatory leaders, and they have responsibility for the success of the group whether or not they hold a formal leadership role. Their focus shifts from “getting things done” and “managing others” in Stage 3 (Komives et al., 2006, p. 404) to a more transformative approach that seeks to empower others through shared process. Komives et al. (2005) held this subject-object shift as a highly valued outcome of student leadership identity development, and although stage models can be criticized for the ways that they value some outcomes over others, it is hard to argue against the value of increased cognitive complexity among college student leaders.

LGBT Student Leadership. Scholars and higher education professionals—especially

those working in the field of LGBT campus resources—have pointed out challenges facing LGBT student leaders and the student affairs professionals who support them (see Mallory, 1998; Outcault, 1998; Porter, 1998b; Sanlo, 2002). This work is largely nonempirical, based on observations and experience working with LGBT students. Mallory provided an overview of LGBT student organizations from 1967 to 1998. Porter (1998b) discussed designing leadership development programs for LGBT students. Outcault addressed the life-cycle of LGBT student organizations, using his experience at UCLA to point out five common obstacles for these organizations: lack of common purpose, underdeveloped leadership skills, burnout, lack of continuity, and communication and confidentiality. Sanlo highlighted programs at her institution (also UCLA) designed to help student leaders overcome these obstacles. Missing from these accounts, however, is data from student leaders themselves.

Porter (1998a) studied the development of leadership self-efficacy (“a person’s *feelings or confidence* to engage in leadership behaviors,” p. 9) among gay and lesbian leaders of LGBT and non-LGBT student organizations. He found that gay men were less confident than were lesbian women that they could engage in leadership behaviors in groups including heterosexual students as compared to groups that were gay and lesbian in composition. Leadership self-efficacy may be an underlying trait of students who are able to move through the LID’s six stages, though such a claim would require evidence not yet available.

Renn and Bilodeau (2005a, 2005b) studied LGBT students leading in LGBT contexts. Using D’Augelli’s (1994) life span model of sexual orientation identity development we found that students leading in LGBT contexts experienced multiple stimuli to identity development. Leadership roles prompted

students to come out more broadly on campus, to make connections in the LGBT community, and in some cases to come out more to self and family (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005b). Using the LID model, we found that leading in LGBT contexts promoted leadership identity development, including for some students achievement of the critical subject-object shift between understanding leadership as positional and understanding it in a more transformative fashion (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005a). It seems that leading an LGBT student organization promotes both sexual orientation identity and leadership identity development, lending empirical support to observations of earlier authors (e.g., Outcault, 1998; Sanlo, 2002). In the current analysis I delve more deeply into the nexus of LGBT and leadership identities.

What remains unclear after reviewing literature on LGBT identity, leadership identity, and LGBT student leaders is to what extent students experience these identities as interactive. Do they understand them as separate but related identities (“I am gay. I am a leader. I lead gay students.”) as Renn and Ozaki (2005) found for student leaders in other identity-based contexts? Or do they merge these identities into a unified sense of self as gay leader? If there are merged LGBT and leadership identities, is there an understanding of a “gay leader” self-concept that could be useful to higher education professionals in designing leadership education programs for LGBT leaders?

METHOD

Given the exploratory nature of the original (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005a, 2005b) study we chose a grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which guided sampling and data collection. We selected a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of 15 LGBT-identified student leaders and activists from three

institutions in the Midwest and conducted open-ended interviews about leadership and LGBT identity. Grounded theory was also ideally suited for data analysis for the current article, where existing theories of identity fail to explain observed phenomena (Strauss & Corbin).

Sites and Participants

Students from three campuses participated in this study. “Research University” is a public research institution of over 40,000 students, with a well-developed LGBT student support infrastructure consisting of an LGBT campus resource office, LGBT caucuses in the residence halls, and a number of LGBT student groups. “Regional University” is a primarily commuter institution, where fewer than 4,000 of the school’s 25,000 students live on campus. An LGBT campus resource office provides support to individual students, a youth education theater group, and an LGBT student organization that had struggled in vitality and membership. “Liberal Arts College” enrolls about 1,200 students through a highly selective admissions process. A distinctive curriculum that requires students to participate in sustained experiential education draws 80% of the student body off campus for one or more terms, leading to a high turnover rate among leaders of student organizations, including the Gay/Lesbian/Bi Support Organization.

Students were identified as potential participants by the professional LGBT campus resource coordinators on the two university campuses and by the adviser to the LGBT student organization at the liberal arts college. I contacted students by email to invite them to join the study. Eight students from Research University, 5 from Regional University, and 2 from Liberal Arts College participated. Some students held positional leadership roles (e.g., chair, coordinator, facilitator, committee chair), and others were nominated based on

their involvement as nonpositional leaders (e.g., the student who organized a collective political action in a consensus-based coalition). Participants included 7 men, 5 women, and 3 female-to-male transgender students. Please note that throughout this article, when discussing the transgender students, I use pronouns that match the students' gender identities at the time of data collection; for a definition of transgender identity and some implications for student identities, see Bilodeau and Renn (2005). Participants ranged from first-year students (1) to one "sixth-year senior," with 10 juniors and seniors at the time of the interviews, and included in-state (11), out-of-state (3), and international (1) students. Nine White, 2 Black, one biracial, and 2 Latina/o students participated in the study; although I did not inquire about religion or spirituality, one student identified herself as Jewish, 2 as Catholic, and 2 as "former Christians." Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) for this diverse sample provided a rich data set for the examination of LGBT leadership and identity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews followed an open-ended protocol that focused on involvement in campus and community LGBT activities, other (non-LGBT specific) campus and community leadership and involvement, and identities related to sexual orientation and gender. Questions included, for example, "Tell me/us about what kinds of LGBT activities you do on campus," "What non-LGBT activities are you involved in?" and "Tell me/us about your identity as a [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer] person at [your institution]." I conducted early interviews jointly with my co-researcher, and subsequent interviews were conducted with only one of us present. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes.

Interview transcripts comprise the data for this article.

Data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For earlier publications (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005a, 2005b), analyses included a priori coding schemes to explore LGBT identity development (D'Augelli, 1994) and leadership development as framed by the LID model (Komives, Casper, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2003). For this article, I conducted a fresh, grounded theory analysis, with no guiding theories or a priori coding schemes. I began with a line-by-line open coding of interview transcripts, then developed axial codes related to involvement in LGBT student groups, sexual orientation identity, and leadership identity. I coded selectively for experiences leading LGBT student groups and what I call a merged or fused identity of "LGBT/queer leader," resulting in three clusters that I describe later. To bolster trustworthiness and credibility of conclusions, which are key criteria in assessing the quality of qualitative research (Patton, 2002), I consulted with a colleague experienced in qualitative research and in working with LGBT college student leaders regarding my coding and analyses. The collaborative nature of study design and data collection further supports my claim to credibility, as personal biases were revealed and challenged—if not fully neutralized—through that process.

Limitations

Although the study design is sound, it is not without limitations. A larger sample from more institutions could provide additional insight into the experiences of LGBT students from other regions and additional institutional types, and a time-series or longitudinal design would allow for more depth of developmental analysis. Findings and implications should be read with these limitations in mind.

FINDINGS

A common pattern emerged from the students' experiences: They entered LGBT campus involvement, took on leadership positions, and as they increased their level of involvement also increased the degree to which they were out (e.g., known to be LGB and/or T) on campus and elsewhere. Within this pattern there were variations in the mechanisms that prompted and supported entrée into LGBT groups and involvement in leadership roles, as well as variations in the nature of the LGBT identities held. These variations hold analytic and practical interest as potential levers for understanding student identities, identity politics, and educational policy in relation to LGBT campus concerns.

Identities Operating Within the System of Involvement

The overall pattern—involvement in an LGBT student group developing into leadership and

a mutually reinforcing cycle of increased leadership leading to increased outness—was consistent across the sample. The pattern consisted of a prompt to involvement, joining or forming an LGBT student group, and becoming a group leader, with a simultaneous cycle of increased involvement (as a member and then leader and/or activist) promoting more widespread knowledge of a student's LGBT/queer identity and vice-versa. Many but not all students also experienced LGBT student leadership as a springboard for exploring other social justice issues and activism. And many students described ways that their involvement interacted with their academic lives and career aspirations. Along this developmental path was a cast of supporting characters including friends, resident advisers, student affairs professionals, faculty, parents, employers, and other adult role models, both LGBT and non-LGBT. Figure 1 depicts the system of involvement, leadership, and LGBT

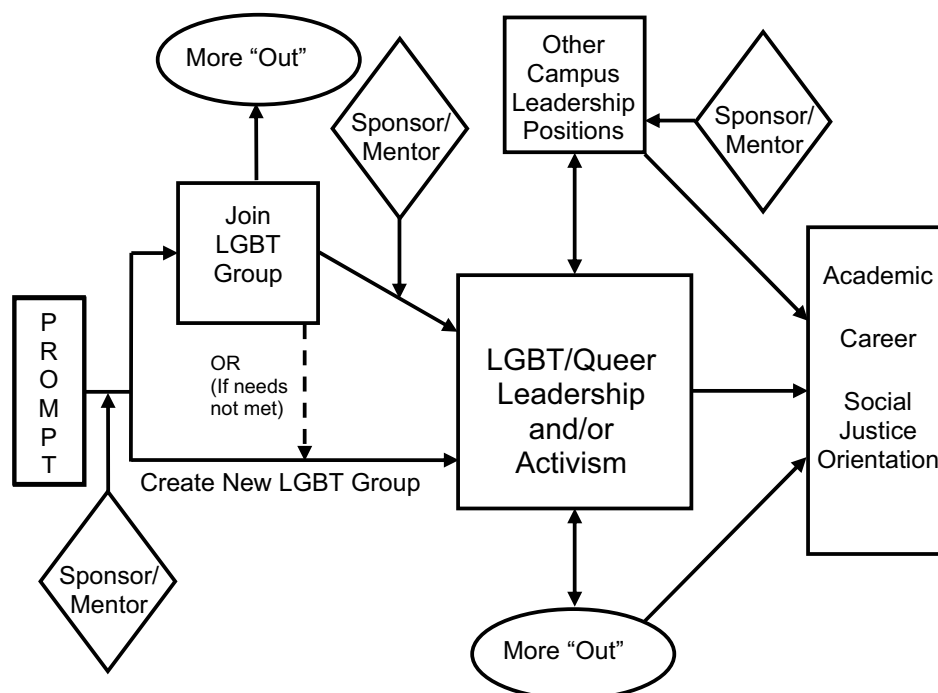


FIGURE 1. The Involvement and Identity System of LGBT Student Leaders

experience described by participants.

Point of Entry. A variety of circumstances prompted participants to enter LGBT student organizations. Examples include seeking social networks, wanting to explore identity, responding to a critical incident (of homophobia, policy, legislation), and seeking political voice on campus. Some students were prompted by internal development, others by external events, and some by a combination of the two, where an internal development could not be well served by existing external supports. In nearly all cases, students were sponsored or mentored into an organization by peers (often but not always LGBT student leaders), advisers, or professional LGBT resource center staff (at Research University and Regional University). LGBT activities during fall orientation were an entry point for some students, as were residence hall LGBT caucuses and LGBT groups affiliated with academic departments (in social work, for example).

From Participation In, to Leadership Of, an LGBT Group. There were two ways that students entered LGBT groups: they joined one or they started one. Their paths to leadership were somewhat different in each case. If one or more LGBT organizations existed on their campus, students sought them out. At Research University, residence hall LGBT caucuses were a point of entry and leadership development; at Regional University, students volunteered at the LGBT campus resource center. Students who had not been out before joining a group or who were exploring their identities through group membership reported feeling validated by participation, as did students who already identified as LGBT before joining or starting a group. Involvement in the student organizations thus supported identity development for students early in the coming out process and those with more experience with LGBT identities. At the same time, increased identity

development contributed to increased willingness to take on leadership and be visible on and off campus.

If students experienced a campus organization as unwelcoming or if there was no organization that seemed congruent with their identities, they created their own. For example, when some students of color experienced racism in the existing LGBT groups at Research University, they joined with LGBT international students to create a new organization. Students who created their own organizations were de facto leaders. The sponsorship and mentoring that occurred for other students in the context of existing groups typically occurred as these founders were creating new groups; faculty and staff advisers were key supports in this process.

The Involvement-Identification Cycle. No matter how participants came into leadership of LGBT student organizations, they entered what I have called the involvement-identification cycle, in which increased leadership promoted increased public identification as LGBT/queer, which in turn promoted increased leadership. A transgender student at Regional University described how her leadership position in an LGBT group brought increased visibility, which caused her to identify more strongly with her trans identity, which in turn prompted her to become involved in additional leadership on and off campus, perpetuating the involvement-identity cycle: "And then I was more out as trans, so I did more with the [LGBT] group, and more people knew me as trans, so like it fed on itself." This mutually reinforcing cycle existed across the sample.

Influences of LGBT Leadership Experience. Although interview questions focused on past and current leadership and identity issues, participants described ways that their involvement and identity influenced their academic lives, career aspirations, social justice orien-

tation, and other campus involvements. Five students noted negative consequences of involvement on academic lives (e.g., poor grades, dropping classes); 5 others noted positive consequences (e.g., increased motivation). Eight students described academic projects related to LGBT identity that they felt reinforced their campus involvement. Seven participants spontaneously described ways that leading LGBT groups had influenced career goals, including graduate school plans, community service, and political aspirations. Six students spoke of ways that LGBT activism connected them to other social justice issues, including peace activism, antiracism, and violence prevention. Leadership in an LGBT group sometimes led to invitations to serve in other leadership capacities, either as a representative of LGBT students (e.g., to student government or to an administrative advisory committee) or as a proven leader who could be counted on to do a good job in a new setting.

Summary of Model. The overall pattern of progression from joining or founding a group to increased leadership and increased LGBT identity held across the participants. Facilitated in many cases by peer sponsors or adult mentors, students moved into roles in which they developed leadership identity *and* LGBT identity. How those identities might interact—and how they might differ from person to person—is another question, and central to this article.

Identities Observed Within System: LGBT, Queer, Leader, and Activist

Participants described themselves using a variety of nonheterosexual terms (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer) and nontraditional gender terms (transgender, transman, genderqueer). They also described themselves as leaders and activists. Importantly, they frequently merged the two into identities such as gay leader or

trans activist. For several students, identity was not just as activist, but as queer activist or LGBT activist. They were not just leaders, but gay leaders. Based on experiences in LGBT student organizations and other leadership activities on campus, they came to see leadership or activism as inseparable from LGBT or queer identity, and queer identity as inseparable from an imperative to create change through leadership.

Patterns of LGBT/Queer Leadership and Activism. Based on open coding and theme development, I observed that participants merged their identities as leaders and as LGBT people in three predominant patterns based on variations in understanding themselves as leaders and as LGBT. After developing the patterns, and informed by Dilley's (2005) typology of nonheterosexual male collegiate identities, I created a rubric of identities. I expanded Dilley's definition of "gay" to include women, bisexual men, and transgender people, calling this category LGB(T) (there were no transgender students in my sample who actually fit this definition, though it is possible that others could); I retained his definition of Queer. Readers should note that some students who occasionally used the term "queer" in their self-descriptions more accurately fit Dilley's (2005) definition of Gay—translated by me to LGB(T)—identity, and some students who clearly fit Dilley's Queer identity type occasionally used the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The words that students used were less important to my determination of the identity patterns than how their attitudes and self-reported behaviors reflected an acceptance of LGB identities in opposition to heterosexuality (LGB[T]) or a challenge to categories and norms of sexual and gender identity (Queer).

Applying a queer-theory approach to leadership identity, I noted differences between students who wanted to work within systems

TABLE 1.
Patterns of LGBT/Queer
Leadership and Activism

	Positional	Transformational
LGB(T)	LGB(T) Student Leader	LGB(T) Activist
Queer	Queer Student Leader (not observed in study)	Queer Activist

Note. All study participants who identified as transgender (T) demonstrated characteristics of the Queer category rather than the LGB(T) category, though it is possible that other transgender students would not.

(Dilley's "seat at the table" leaders) and those who saw themselves challenging systems ("knock the table over" leaders). I called the first group "positional," reflecting their concern with leading from established roles in organizations and their lack of stated intention to work to change social structures; the second group I called "transformational," based on their expressed desire to transform structures of power and privilege. The positional leaders would seem to correspond to students in Komives et al.'s (2003) LID Levels 1 through 3, before they reach the important developmental milestone of recognizing leadership as not a position but a way of being. I call the identity held by the positional students "leader," because it accurately reflects their sense of self ("I am a leader.") and their approach to leadership ("I do the things that leaders do."). I called the identity of transformational leaders "activist" because this term captures both their sense of leadership as transformed beyond role-based activities and the degree of social change (transformation) sought by students who displayed this identity. Despite the existence of a body of research on student activists (see e.g., Rhoads, 1998; Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005),

researchers have not agreed upon a definition of *activist* in the literature; my designation of activists rests on their leadership identity (postpositional) and professed goals (transformation). Combining the LGBT/queer and leader/activist identities, the resulting rubric (Table 1) includes four proposed patterns of LGBT/queer leadership and activism: LGB(T) Student Leader, LGB(T) Activist, Queer Student Leader, and Queer Activist.

An important note about the difference between the LGBT and queer categories is that these are not developmental stages. As Dilley (2005) made clear, there are different ways of identifying as nonheterosexual. An LGBT or queer identity may develop over time (cf. Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D'Augelli, 1994) but an LGBT identity is not a developmental stage on the way to a queer identity, nor is a queer identity a less fully developed LGBT identity. Indeed, the very difference between LGBT and queer identities is a source of substantial tension in many communities and across generations (Cloud, 2005), but this tension is not necessarily the result of identity politics between *less developed* and *more fully* developed LGBT/queer people. The tension results from different orientations to social systems and sense of self in relation to the ability to act on those systems (Dilley, 2005).

The distinction between positional and transformational leaders, however, may be seen as developmental. The subject-object shift (see Kegan, 1982, 1994) that distinguishes earlier, position-dependent stages of leadership identity from the later, transformation-focused stages requires cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development (Komives et al., 2005). A positional leader cannot imagine leading in a system that has been deconstructed, because he or she does not see that leadership can exist other than in the positions that the system supports; a Transformational leader sees that leadership is not dependent on the

TABLE 2.
Participants' Identities Held in College
Prior to the Time of Interview
and at Time of Interview

	In College, Prior to Interview	At Time of Interview
LGB(T) Student Leader	10	5
LGB(T) Activist	2	3
Queer Student Leader	0	0
Queer Activist	3	7

existence of positional leadership roles and thus can imagine a social system that does not rely on those roles to create change. Although the study design was not longitudinal, I observed evidence of development on this axis in students' descriptions of their evolution as leaders or activists. Five students described their experiences in ways that illustrated movement from positional to transformational

leadership. Figure 2 depicts students' identities in three of the four patterns as they described them as emerging leaders/activists and at the time of the interviews.

Table 2 shows identities held by participants earlier in college and at the time of data collection.

LGB(T) Student Leader. The LGB(T) Student Leader subscribes to a fairly traditional, positional conception of leadership as something that leaders do, and publicly acknowledges LGB(T) identity. At the time of the interviews 5 students displayed characteristics of this pattern, and 5 more students described themselves and their experiences in ways that indicated an earlier characterization in this pattern. None of the 5 participants who fit this pattern at the time of the interview identified as transgender or bisexual. As leaders, these students worked within the established culture of registered student organizations at Research University and Liberal Arts College (none were from Regional University); their entry to the

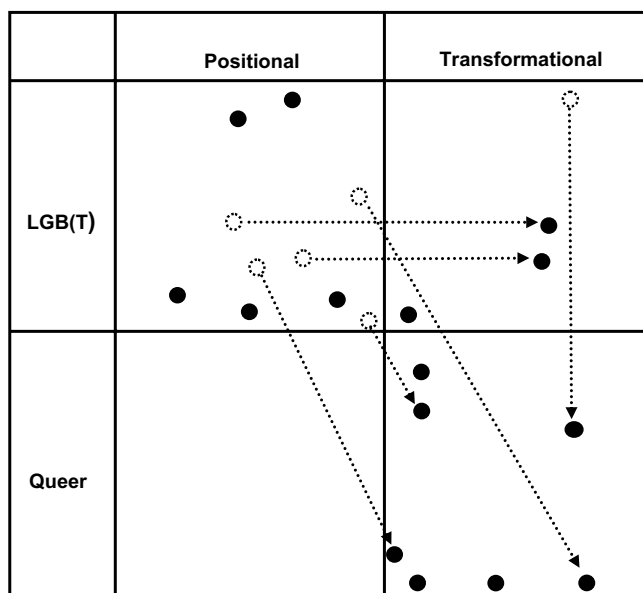


FIGURE 2. Location of Participants

Dashed circles and arrows indicate those participants who described moving from one identity to another.

system of LGBT involvement was through peer sponsorship or institutional events such as orientation week activity fairs. From there, students worked their way into formal leadership positions through a network of peer mentoring and staff advisers.

LGB(T) Student Leaders “got things done” within the context of formal leadership positions. When he first volunteered as a committee member to plan an LGBT student conference, Mike said “I didn’t really see myself as a student leader . . . because I was not one of the higher up people doing it.” Later, in a formal position with the residence hall association, he was able “to really get things done for gay issues” and on behalf of a campus movement to include gender identity in the university’s nondiscrimination policy.

LGB(T) Student Leaders also developed their public LGBT identities through involvement and leadership. Christopher said, “When I came [to Research University] I didn’t really expect to come out or anything like that, but as I became more involved I came out more.” He joined his residence hall LGBT group and moved into leadership in the campus organization for same-gender-loving students of color, where he was even more visible as a gay-identified Black man.

At Liberal Arts College, Benzer typified the LGB(T) Student Leader identity. He had clear ideas about what made for good leadership. Benzer was unhappy with the “very radical” and “activistic” direction that the campus LGBT organization had taken while he was studying abroad. He asked two friends “if they wanted to take over what was left of the club, even though it did have a leader at the time, we just thought that she wasn’t doing an adequate job.” Over the objections of the president (“It kind of turned out for the worst, I think she was taken aback by it . . . but we honestly just took over”), they created a “brand-new club” out of “the culmination of

many clear ideas” about what the organization should be. The three men divided responsibilities and set goals for the new organization, which by all accounts was very successful in terms of membership, visibility, and activities on campus.

Mike, Christopher, and Benzer typified the LGB(T) Student Leader. Although they sometimes used the word *queer* to describe themselves or LGBT issues, the ways that they deployed their identities closely matched Dille’s (2005) description of Gay students. They were firmly planted in an understanding of leadership as positional. And as LGB(T) Student Leaders they were quite effective in campus organizing and representing LGBT students.

LGB(T) Activist. LGB(T) Activists were those students whose sexual orientation identity was similar to the LGBT Student Leaders, but who had moved into a more transformational leadership approach that was not dependent on positional leadership. They viewed leadership as “an active commitment to a personal passion” located in positional and nonpositional roles (Komives et al., 2006, p. 405) and saw their role as facilitating the work of the group. Two students described early experiences in this pattern, and 3 students fit this pattern at the time of the interviews. A hallmark of students in this pattern at any point in their LGBT campus involvement was a commitment to activism—to changing the system not only for LGBT people, but for poor people, people of color, and immigrants—though they did not necessarily question or seek to deconstruct gender and sexual identity categories. Students understanding themselves as activists tended to be more experienced than those who viewed leadership as positional, and it was more common for them to have nonstudent adult mentors in the LGBT community on and off campus.

LGB(T) Activist identity incorporated a

commitment to transformational leadership beyond work on LGBT issues. Carrie reflected:

Being a leader has taught me a lot because of the way that all the issues are connected in. . . . I didn't really know what I was getting into and I didn't realize that progressive politics would be all the things that I already thought were related—it wasn't just gay rights, it wasn't just antiracist, it wasn't just antipoverty. They were all together and they were all related and that was really exciting for me. . . . I feel like I've gone up a level in being able to think about problems in the world and what part I want to play in the world.

Carrie's involvement increased from participation in a campus group dedicated to promoting healthy LGBT identity in youth to work with the campus LGBT resource office and in a civic campaign against an antigay ordinance. "Knocking on doors and sitting down with people to explain it wasn't okay to use elections to discriminate against people—that made me think about how sometimes the system just doesn't work if you're not already the majority," she said. "So I wondered why we keep using that system and if we should be fighting against it instead of working in it."

Jo self-identified as an activist: "For me being an activist is who I am and I can't not do it." She further illustrated the merged identities of LGBT and Activist:

I think my connection with the LGBT community is defined as activism. That's how I feel I fit into this community. I'm not part of the bar scene, I'm not part of the—I don't play softball (laughs), like all these other ways you can be involved don't really fit with me. My involvement is a political involvement, and that's how I feel connected with this community and that's where I get my visibility from, and that's where I feel that my identity is affirmed, through activism. . . . I think it is a large part of my LGBT identity. I don't think

my experience would be at all the same if I wasn't an activist.

The merged LGBT Activist identity created a sense of purpose and connection for Jo and Carrie and propelled them into meaningful leadership and activist roles.

Queer Student Leader. The Queer Student Leader was not represented among the participants, and I present it therefore as a hypothetical identity. It is not clear if the relative dearth of this identity type is a feature of the sample or indicates some general trend among LGBT students. Assuming that some undergraduate students might fit this category, I would describe Queer Student Leaders as subscribing to a positional understanding of leadership and having an orientation toward dismantling dichotomous views of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Whether one can move past dichotomous views of sexual orientation and/or gender identity yet still hold onto an essentialized concept of positional leaders is a question raised by the absence of students fitting this category and deserves more exploration.

Queer Activist. Queer Activists embraced a public gender and/or sexual identity in opposition to normative, straight culture and had moved away from a positional view of leadership to an approach that incorporated a commitment to changing social systems for the purpose of decentering power. Seven participants fit this identity at the time of the interview, though only 3 described themselves in ways fitting the criteria of Queer Activists throughout their college careers. They merged sexual orientation (LGB) and sometimes gender identities (T) with leadership identities into self-concepts they understood as Queer Activists; during the interviews, they spontaneously used the term Queer Activist to describe themselves.

In keeping with both the queer (Dilley,

2005) and postpositional, transformational leadership identities, these students demonstrated fluid understandings of sexual orientation, gender identity, and leadership. The three transgender participants were all Queer Activists and talked about ways that they saw sexual orientation and gender identity as nondichotomous categories. They and other Queer Activists discussed the interconnectedness of oppressions based on sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, illustrating a view of queer activism as including social justice in several arenas. Many participants held formal leadership positions at the time of the interviews, yet they described behaviors and activities that illustrated their ability to “lead from anywhere” (Komives et al., 2005) and to lead for the purpose of challenging social norms. Queer Activists described working on committees, conducting civil disobedience in campus buildings, doing “stuff that has to be done by somebody” (like hanging flyers or making phone calls), recruiting younger students to take up responsibility for student organizations, and working behind the scenes to ensure the success of an LGBT student conference, a theater production, or a protest rally. They did this work, as one said, “To get people to see that the ways we’ve constructed power and privilege—with so-called leaders and their so-called followers, so-called straight and gay—are f***ed up. Just f***ed up.”

Queer Activists differentiated involvement from activism. Describing a student group that was founded to address issues in the social work department at Regional University, Ellen said,

There’s a student group that’s more of a social group for queer students. We’re more an activist group. . . . We’re looking at ways to get people to see how social work can perpetuate the status quo or maybe become a way to change it. So we’re

looking at the curriculum and also the field of social work.

Activism also took the form of participating in campus protests, marches in Washington, DC, and local political action campaigns. And activism involved working toward social change rather than just socializing—not that the Queer Activist participants eschewed socializing, but they were not satisfied with that as the purpose for being involved.

A sense of urgency was common among the students in this category, noticeably more than among LGBT Leaders and LGBT Activists; being queer implied an obligation to take action. Ellen said, “I knew I wanted to be an activist when I came to college.” In response to a question about how her identity influenced her involvement, Skye said, “Well, as a queer person I find it’s important to get involved in queer activism, because if you don’t do it who will?” Reflecting on her response to hate crimes and an MTV special on the 1998 Matthew Shepard murder, Alix said:

I asked myself if I was willing to risk my life for activism, in order to make things easier for LGBT people. . . . So I had to sit down and really say, “Am I willing to die for this?” and I decided yes, that I was. So that was kind of a big step for me. That just really increased my involvement, when I became dedicated to becoming an activist.

Alix changed her major from child psychology to political science to prepare herself for “being an activist as a career.” Expressed commitment to pursuing a career involving activism was common among Queer Activists, less common among LGBT Activists, and not present among LGBT Leaders.

Movement From One Category to Another. This study was not longitudinal, so any conclusions that students moved from one category to another over their time as leaders

of LGBT student organizations must be made tentatively. Yet the stories of 6 participants seemed to indicate that they had held a clear identity in another category prior to the one that they held at the time of the interview. Figure 2 indicates these shifts, and it is interesting to note that none of the students moved to a less complex understanding of leadership identity (i.e., from Activist to Student Leader) or from a more fluid queer identity to an LGBT identity.

An example of a student who moved from LGBT to queer identity was Kevin, who came to college having already participated in a number of leadership activities. He was involved in social justice political activities and made connections to his passion for creating “a more just society for youth, people of color, and people in poverty.” When Kevin came out as gay in college, he got involved in LGBT campus activism and in community activism. He came to understand that his gay identity was part of a larger picture of socially constructed gender and sexual identities and no longer felt comfortable only “working to get gays and lesbians accepted by society.” He said,

We have to change how everyone understands the range of sexual identities and gender identities and it's not enough to just get the White gay men who wear business suits accepted. And even maybe looking beyond those categories, too, to see how it's more than just gay and straight, men and women, Black and White, you know?

Kevin credited his involvement in campus and off-campus activism, including his church, with promoting this new sense of identity as a Queer Activist.

Other students' sense of leadership and/or LGBT identity were made more complex as a result of their involvement, propelling them from one identity category to another. Jordan moved beyond a rigid definition of sexual

identity (gay, bi, straight) to understand and challenge the ways that social systems construct categories for the purposes of maintaining dominance of the heterosexual norm. At the same time, he moved from a positional definition of leadership (“I liked being in charge because then my ideas were the ones that got done.”) to a relational perspective (“And then it didn't matter if I was *the chair* or not, because I knew that I could work with other people to do more than I could do alone.”). He attributed these changes in perspective to the involvement-identity cycle described earlier:

The more I did, the more I learned about who I was, and then the more I wanted to do to change the way gender and sexuality get constructed, so the more I tried as an activist to get those changes to happen.

Again, these interpretations must be considered tentative because of the research design, but there does seem to be something interesting going on in students' reflections on their changing selves in the context of leading LGBT student organizations.

The three categories I observed among participants—LGBT Student Leader, LGBT Activist, and Queer Activist—represent different identities held by students who lead LGBT campus groups. Students may use varying terminology for their identities, but the categories seem to represent robust differences in how students understand themselves and the work they do in LGBT contexts. Students in the three categories were effective in “getting things done” on campus, and students in all categories faced challenges and obstacles. No category seemed definitively better or desirable. Within the patterns of involvement and increasing leadership activity depicted in Figure 1, students experience a cycle of leadership and LGBT/queer identity development that may lead to at least these

three different merged LGBT/queer leader/activist identities.

DISCUSSION

I analyzed the study data to answer the research questions:

1. What variations exist among the gender and sexual orientation and leadership identities of students who lead LGBT campus groups?
2. In what ways if any do gender and sexual orientation and leadership identities interact for these students?

My analysis yielded findings that hold potential significance for educational researchers and higher education professionals. Understanding how students come to be involved in LGBT leadership and then how identities vary among leaders also provides a starting point for considering other important questions related to LGBT students, to leaders of LGBT student groups, and to leaders of other identity-based groups as well. Five implications seem of particular importance.

First, the overall pattern of involvement in LGBT organizations, from a prompt to get involved to achieving a leadership position, reflects the pattern of students in other identity-based organizations (e.g., those based on gender, race, or ethnicity), but connects leadership and identity in ways not always observed in other identity-based student groups (Renn & Ozaki, 2005). The function of the involvement-identity cycle for LGBT students depends on factors related to increased visibility as LGBT and increased sense of responsibility for leadership or activism. The role of campus media was noted by several students (“I was in the paper as president of [an LGBT group] and so I was out all over campus.”) in this dynamic, as were interactions that participants had as representatives of the LGBT community with college or university

administrators (“At the meeting, I was there for the [LGBT group], so there was no way they didn’t know I was gay.”). Advisers to LGBT student leaders could leverage this effect for the developmental and educational benefit of students by addressing the likelihood of increased exposure with students new to public LGBT roles, by working with campus media and with colleagues to understand their roles in LGBT students’ development, and by creating opportunities for experienced LGBT leaders on campus or in the community to discuss the stresses and benefits of increased exposure. An excellent example of such an initiative is the University of Maryland’s leadership development course offering that specifically addresses leadership in LGBT communities (Slack, Casper, Kim, Weaver, & Yamin, 2005).

There may be other ways to maximize the potential benefits of the involvement-identity cycle. For example, taking into account Abes and Jones’ (2004) description of students’ meaning making around integrating multiple identities, advisers could work with students to explore the complexities of leading in diverse LGBT communities and the challenges of understanding personal identities while representing other students whose identities may be different. Furthermore, using LGBT identity as a hook to motivate student involvement could provide a point of connection and an entry into involvement for students who might not think of themselves as leaders. Participants frequently cited the institutional structures through which they became involved (activities fairs, meetings in residence halls, open houses at LGBT resource centers, etc.), and the power of these ordinary activities to promote student engagement in identity-based groups should not be underestimated.

A second implication lies in the role of adult and peer mentors and advisers. Figure 1 illustrates the places in the pattern of involve-

ment where participants noted the influence of sponsors and mentors. Komives et al. (2005) also noted the importance of sponsors and mentors. Getting students into LGBT groups was a major function of advisers and mentors, particularly of peers. Then there were roles for peers and other mentors as students moved into leadership roles. A faculty adviser's encouragement to run for office or a peer's sponsorship for becoming committee chair had a marked impact on the experiences and persistence of participants in LGBT student contexts. An implication of this finding is that advisers should be educated about the potential for their role to exceed that of paperwork signatory or occasional visitor to group meetings; making sure that advisers understand the potential that their guidance and mentoring can have for student development is the role of student affairs professionals.

A third implication lies in the identity differences among students who lead LGBT student groups. There is no one way to be an LGBT student leader. Programs and policies designed for LGBT leaders must acknowledge the range of identities held by LGBT and/or queer leaders and activists. LGBT students, too, must understand that they might hold different self-concepts from those of their peers, and that these differences may lead to conflicts. Imagine the executive board of an LGBT student alliance that contains one or two students from each of the LGBT Student Leader, LGBT Activist, and Queer Activist identities. Now imagine that group trying to decide how to respond to an incident on campus, invite a speaker to campus for LGBT Pride Week, or meet with administrators about a proposed change in university policy. Advisers and mentors who can discuss these differences frankly with students may be able to shape interventions to help student leaders cope with the identity-driven conflicts they may face.

A fourth implication relates to the ways that identities of participants shaped their behaviors, priorities, and, ultimately, student organizations. What student leaders considered valuable, whether it was political or social, focused on LGBT issues or broader social justice concerns, influenced how they led and who participated in their groups. Just as Benzer felt left out of the radical group, which he then "took over," at Liberal Arts College, Carrie and others at Regional University thought a more politicized organization was needed in addition to the social group already in place. Jordan founded an organization for same-gender-loving students of color at Research University whose needs were not met in the mainstream (i.e., White) LGBT student groups. How these students saw themselves as LGBT or queer people and as leaders or activists for social change influenced where they chose to spend their energy and how they chose to lead. To be clear, I do not place a value judgment on their different priorities; I believe that campuses need social, political, and educational activities related to a number of historically marginalized identity groups. But not every student wants to participate in every type of activity, and LGBT campus groups have a history of cycling through student leaders depending on politics, identities, and local events (see Outcault, 1998). Attention to how leaders' identities influence the climate and activities of student organizations is the responsibility of both student leaders and their advisers. Intervention by advisers and student affairs professionals may be necessary to maintain LGBT spaces on campus that can meet a range of student identities and needs.

A fifth implication lies in the ways that leading an LGBT student group influenced many students' academic lives and career aspirations. Some students changed majors to align academic work with changing LGBT/queer identities. Some students integrated

LGBT issues into their academic lives—as in the case of Ellen, who started a student group to deal with LGBT issues in her major, social work. Other students reported substantial challenges to their academic progress when they became unable to balance co-curricular and academic responsibilities. This challenge is not unique to LGBT student leaders, but serves as a reminder of the need for student activities advisers to consider the whole student, not just his or her performance as a student leader. The influence of LGBT leadership experiences on students' career aspirations was striking and demonstrated the power of cocurricular involvement to change not only college experiences but potentially postcollege experiences as well.

Finally, additional research on identity-based student leaders and on LGBT leaders is in order. Questions for future research include:

1. Why do outcomes in leadership and LGBT or queer identity differ among students?
2. What is the role of multiple identities in shaping LGBT or queer and leader or activist identities?
3. Are there any students who would fit the Queer Student Leader category, holding Queer identities but more positional leadership concepts?
4. What, specifically, can educators do to maximize the educational and

developmental potential of the involvement-identity cycle?

Quantitative measures of identity and cognitive development could be useful in answering these questions, as might cultural analyses of age cohort effects on LGBT/queer identity. Knowing what becomes of campus leaders and activists once they graduate could also provide insight to leadership educators and LGBT student advisers.

As scholars and educators seek to provide empirical support for the best practices literature about LGBT student leaders (e.g., Sanlo, 2002), it will be important to learn from studies such as this one and to ask questions both more specific and more broad about LGBT leadership. Multicampus studies begin to build a base for understanding student experiences, and the inclusion of diverse samples will remain critical for expanding the literature on LGBT student leaders. Finally, connecting this research to other studies of identity-based leaders will provide a broader base for enhancing programs that aim to develop leaders for a diverse democracy in which lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people will have the skills, knowledge, experience, and inclination to take up leadership—and activism—for social change.

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