

LGBT Leadership Development: Uniting LGBT and Leadership Scholarship to Determine Best Practices

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Although a growing body of scholarship describes the developmental experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students and the popular subject of campus leadership continues to gain depth, there is little research telling us about the intersection of these two identities: the LGBT student leader. The existing research reveals that there is a variety of LGBT student leader types, each with their own set of values, preferred leadership contexts, and working styles. Using the current literature as a base-point for practice, I put forth a series of recommendations and best practices so that student affairs professionals can better engage the diverse identities and subgroups that make up the LGBT student leader community.

As innovative, purposeful, and effective practitioners, we are compelled to use the current research to guide our work with students. But what do we do when the literature fails to address our area of work or does not provide the practical piece that is crucial to implementing new ideas? Far too often we improvise, make assumptions about student needs, and let our best intentions lead the way. Our busy lives keep us from reading between the lines of current research to find the answers we are looking for.

Research considering the development of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) student leaders is relatively new to the field of student affairs. Researchers brave enough to explore this uncharted territory admit that there are still many avenues to explore, however, an analysis of the existing body of knowledge will be useful in compiling a set of practices that best meet the developmental needs of LGBT student leaders. To that end, I will build a set of practices based on the literature in hopes that administrators will begin to offer a variety of services that are intentionally designed to meet the specific needs of this diverse group of students.

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Theoretical Frameworks

There is a modest body of scholarship on LGBT college students. Prior to the mid-1990s, articles were sparse and those published simply validated LGBT students' place in the higher education setting (Lark, 1998). Today, the increasing diversity within the LGBT umbrella leaves much to be explored. A longer established body of research on student involvement tells us that students engaged in the university system experience positive outcomes related to leadership development (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000). LGBT identity and leadership identity development are not mutually exclusive topics, and research on the intersection of these two subjects continues to add to our understanding of LGBT students on our campuses (e.g. Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Porter, 1998). The following three sections will cover the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks that pertain to LGBT student leaders.

LGBT Identity

Stage models of lesbian, gay, and bisexual¹ identity development are some of the oldest frameworks developed to help student affairs professionals better understand and serve their LGB students. The framework Cass (1979) presented, while one of the older theoretical constructs, is perhaps the most frequently cited stage model throughout the literature on LGB identity development. Sexual identity, according to this six-stage model, is a universal developmental process that takes place in a predetermined sequence. According to Cass, one begins with a private sense of self as non-heterosexual, then works towards public recognition, later immerses in the identity, and finally integrates that LGB identity into one's larger sense of self. Based on this model, LGB student leaders would fall within the later stages (stages four through six) wherein individuals begin to accept their LGB identity, come to take pride in that identity, and then synthesize their sexual identity into the larger context of self. While this framework may be dated, Cass' model continues to manifest in the development of LGB students at our contemporary institutions. The LGB identity development milestones, from which this framework was built, continue to shape student experiences.

More recent researchers have criticized the Cass model for its myopic approach and inability to account for the growing diversity within the LGB community (Renn, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2006). Savin-Williams argued that such stage models fail to address the various contexts that shape one's experience as a same-sex attracted individual. Other factors such as race, class, and family dynamics influence one's sexual and gender identity and make stage models, like the one Cass

¹ Earlier models did not address gender identity development or reflect on the experiences of transgender students.

has offered, obsolete. In lieu of these limited and dated models, Savin-Williams (2006) presented a more fluid way of looking at the development of same-sex attracted teens. He stated that “teenagers are increasingly redefining, reinterpreting, and renegotiating their sexuality such that possessing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity is practically meaningless” (p. 1). Savin-Williams suggested that sexual identity labels, just like stage models, are defunct and that soon enough same-sex attracted individuals will be so commonplace that binaries like gay or straight will no longer exist. To demonstrate the changing climate of our society, Savin-Williams noted that the age at which individuals first identify as gay appears to be considerably younger among today’s teens. These individuals are self-labeling at age 16, whereas individuals who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s self-labeled around age 21. Students are not coming out—which refers to the public declaration of one’s sexual and/or gender identity—in college, they are coming out in high school, and this shift should be reflected in the types of services our institutions offer. While it is unrealistic to believe that all students come to college already out and with their sexual and/or gender identities synthesized, the changing nature of LGBT students presented by Savin-Williams should be taken into account when preparing a set of best practices to harness the skills of LGBT student leaders.

Leadership Identity

The definition of leadership continues to mature with time. What once was an individual’s ability to demonstrate a set of traits or behaviors necessary to fill a position and direct a group of people is now understood to be a group process where individuals work together towards societal change (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006). The newer understanding of leadership, with its focus on social justice, ties directly to LGBT students’ advocacy work both on and off-campus, towards liberty and equality (Porter, 1998). In other words, a change-model of leadership better resembles the types of experiences, motivations, and outcomes one sees when working with LGBT student leaders.

The more recent literature on leadership, while recognizing the diversity among leaders and leadership contexts, focuses on desirable developmental outcomes (Renn, 2007). The leadership identity development (LID) model (Komives et al., 2006) is one of the more utilized frameworks with which researchers exploring LGBT leadership development work. LID is a six-stage model for identifying changes that take place as an individual comes to an increasingly complex understanding of leadership, community, and self in relation to others. Komives et al. (2006) and Renn & Bilodeau (2005) agreed that the most important developmental milestone in the LID model is a subject-object shift that occurs between stages three and four. At this point, one moves from a positional understanding of leadership to a more transformational one that is not dependent upon titles.

In stages four, five, and six, individuals see that leadership can happen anywhere; that they can be participatory leaders; and that they can have responsibility for the success of the group, whether or not they hold a formal leadership role. While researchers place value on the shift from positional to transformational leadership, it is more important for student affairs professionals offering LGBT services to cater to the developmental needs of both groups.

LGBT Student Leader Identity

Earlier work on LGBT student leadership simply attempts to tie together LGB and LGBT identity developmental models with leadership development models (Porter, 1998; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). For example, as students take on additional responsibility for an LGBT organization, the degree to which they are out on campus increases because they are working throughout campus on behalf of the LGBT organization. The flip side is also true, as involvement in the LGBT community increases leadership skills. The research of Renn & Bilodeau (2005) began to scratch the surface of inquiry by determining that leading in an LGBT context promotes sexual and/or gender identity development as well as leadership identity development. Renn (2007) explored this concept further and discovered an “involvement-identification cycle, in which increased leadership promoted increased public identification as LGBT/queer, which in turn promoted increased leadership” (p. 318). Additionally, involvement in an LGBT organization supported the development of students in terms of leadership and LGBT identity development regardless of their level of outness.

Renn (2007) has categorized LGBT student leaders in two ways. The first, derived from the Komives et al. (2006) LID model, breaks leaders into two groups: positional leaders and transformational leaders. Positional leaders are those that show characteristics of LID stages one through three, whereas transformational leaders demonstrate qualities reflective of stages four through six. The second way Renn grouped students is by classifying those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender as either LGB(T) or queer. The distinction here is that LGB(T) students are “more aligned with normative structures of gay versus straight” whereas queer students “align themselves in oppression to normative structures” (p. 313). LGB(T) students are those that work with the system in established roles to create positive change. Queer students, on the other hand, are those that challenge the system to encourage change. While researchers agree that a transformational leader demonstrates a more cognitively complex understanding of leadership, there is no value placement that distinguishes the LGB(T) leader from the queer leader. These two leadership styles are simply different styles, each of which are necessary and serve a purpose. In fact, Renn (2007) argued that without unique campus offerings for each group, LGBT student organizations might crumble to conflict between students who wish to push a more

LGB(T) agenda and those who are more queer-inclined. Having organizations and opportunities for both groups is important in serving all LGBT student leaders. Renn's work identified distinct subgroups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student leaders that require their own unique set of services, programs, and student organizations in order to fully engage them.

Limitations

The key limitation to most, if not all, of the literature on LGBT student leadership is that many of the findings have yet to be confirmed or contested by other research. At this point, LGBT student leadership is a niche subject that only a few scholars have explored. This leaves a seemingly vast and diverse subject area with a variety of unanswered questions left for a handful of researchers to uncover. As the topic becomes more popular and necessary to meet the needs of our LGBT students, the gaps in our knowledge will hopefully be filled and the current research will be confirmed, refined, or perhaps disputed.

To that end, the work of these few researchers fails to encapsulate the experience of all LGBT student leaders; the current research (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Renn, 2007; Porter, 1998) has focused on students participating in LGBT leadership activities (e.g. student organizations, advocacy, etc.). Their samples did not include student leaders who identify as LGBT but serve in non-LGBT leadership roles (e.g. student government, athletics, community service, etc.). Therefore, we do not know if the findings of Renn & Bilodeau (2005) and Renn (2007) apply to all LGBT student leaders. The degree to which a leader is out in his/her/hir position will have an impact on the validation of Renn's (2007) involvement-identification cycle. If, for example, a lesbian student senator prefers discretion when disclosing her sexual identity, she may not experience the positive identity development that coincides with the leadership development of LGBT student leaders cited by the research. However, if a student's sexuality is an open aspect of his/her/hir leadership identity, one could see how the current research on LGBT student leaders would apply. The subject of LGBT student leaders participating in non-LGBT leadership roles requires further exploration, but for the time being, it is important to know what specific student populations to which the current research applies.

Best Practices

It is safe to say that not all LGBT students participate or take advantage of the services universities offer them. Rather than dismiss this fact by attributing it to student indifference, institutions need to examine their services and determine if they are meeting the needs of the various subgroups that make up the LGBT leadership population. Some college students are dealing with issues

related to their sexuality while others, perhaps more than ever before, are coming to campus self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Engaging these distinct groups of LGBT students will require a variety of services and opportunities that meet the students where they are developmentally. Additionally, the different types of LGBT student leaders—LGB(T), queer, positional, and transformational, as outlined by Renn (2007)—require distinct services. Institutions that wish to maximize LGBT student leader engagement and participation will need to offer an array of services, programs, and student organizations. Three specific examples of these best practices are given below, and it is important to note that these recommendations are designed to complement one another. Think of them as a package, as opposed to stand-alone initiatives, designed to appeal to the different pockets of LGBT student leaders on our campuses.

Student Service: LGBT Peer Mentoring

It is unwise to assume that all LGBT students will be ready to attend an event sponsored by the campus LGBT center. To some, going to such an event would surely out them to the campus community. For students starting on their LGBT identity development journey, low-key, private, and perhaps confidential services are necessary. One program that can facilitate the dual developmental benefits of the involvement-identification cycle is peer mentoring. If done holistically, so that attention is paid to more than just LGBT identity development, those mentored can begin to simultaneously explore other aspects of identity, such as leadership identity. For mentees, the gains in self-confidence and comfort with one's sexuality will make participation in other, more public LGBT activities a possibility. For those students serving as mentors, developments in leadership and LGBT identity will manifest into serving the community in other capacities and disclosing their LGBT identity, which are key to Renn's (2007) cycle and will aid in the further development and identity synthesis for the mentors.

A mentoring program draws in a variety of the groups outlined in the LGBT leadership literature. Those who are more comfortable with their LGBT identity work with and support those who are less comfortable with their sexuality or gender. As for leadership types, this program would likely appeal to the LGB(T) students because it is an institutional service as opposed to a student run or initiated service that would likely be more appealing to the queer student leader. This program could be made to appeal to both transformational and positional leaders. Transformational leaders will see a non-hierarchical system designed to create positive community change and will hopefully want to participate. At the same time, giving mentors a title and positive reputation on campus will draw the positional LGB(T) student leader. The commitment to serving others that a peer mentoring service offers will potentially encourage the positional leader to further develop his/her/hir understanding of leadership and leave the experience

with a more transformational view of leadership.

Student Programs

Programming is an opportunity to direct students along their developmental path, however, programs must meet the students where they are developmentally to foster this growth. If the aforementioned mentoring program works to help students become more comfortable with their sexual and/or gender identity, programming can focus more deliberately on leadership within the LGBT community. An LGBT leadership retreat would be an excellent opportunity to develop students' leadership and LGBT identities. To ensure that the program not only serves those at the earlier stages of LID or LGBT identity development, established LGBT leaders and past attendees can help plan and coordinate the retreat and serve as facilitators. This model for an LGBT leadership retreat adds to the skill sets and experiences of the developed LGBT leaders while setting some foundational groundwork for the less developed LGBT leaders.

A leadership retreat intended specifically for LGBT students would appeal to a variety of the LGBT leadership subgroups. While this program would likely be too intense for students who are still addressing and defining their identity (e.g. Cass' stages one through three), it would offer a variety of opportunities to other pockets of the LGBT community. For participants, the retreat builds their developing understanding of leadership and will at least expose students to the types of activities, organizations, and services that they can take part in to be LGBT leaders on campus. At the same time, a retreat specific to the LGBT community will provide those who are looking for more interaction with other LGBT students a valuable experience. Students planning the retreat and facilitating sessions will further build upon their skill sets (e.g. communication, motivation, and working with a new group of people) and a variety of LGBT leaders will be open to participating. Positional and transformational leaders, as well as LGB(T) and queer students, will be drawn to the opportunity to talk about their work on campus.

Student Organizations

Offering a diverse group of student organizations is perhaps the most important component of a theory-based set of practices to encourage LGBT leadership on college campuses. Renn (2007), Porter (1998), Outcalt (1998), and Mallory (1998) all stressed the need for a variety of LGBT organizations (e.g. social, political, community service, educational, etc.) in order to meet the diverse interests within the LGBT community. These organizations need fair access to funds (Mallory, 1998) and the freedom to adapt to the dynamic student population (Outcalt, 1998). For students in the identity acceptance and identity pride stages of Cass'

(1979) model, participating in a “gay” organization may be very appealing. For others who are at the identity synthesis stage, which Savin-Williams (2005) has argued is a dramatically increasing ratio of students, organizations will need to offer more than a queer gathering place; they will have to appeal to other passions and forms of identity. Additionally, organizations will need to vary in structure with some being relatively hierarchical, reflecting the preference of positional leaders, and others being relatively flat, demonstrating a transformational leadership approach.

Organizations of different sizes, structures, missions, affiliations, and cultures will hopefully draw in the variety of leaders found within the LGBT community. Engaging students through participation in student organizations is a documented way to promote positive development in both leadership and LGBT identities (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). Student affairs professionals should also make the process of establishing a student organization well publicized, student friendly, and as clear as possible so that in the case that existing LGBT organizations do not appeal to students, they have the tools available to create a new organization that meets their needs.

Offering a variety of services, programs, and student organizations that build off of and complement one another will be crucial to developing LGBT leaders on our campuses. To ensure that students take advantage of these offerings, practitioners must be intentional about targeting students at different developmental points with initiatives that meet their specific wants and needs.

Future Research

Savin-Williams (2006) presented research that has provided the most pressing questions as the generational shift of LGBT students becomes more distinct. These students, who are coming out earlier, are further along their sexual and/or gender identity path than previous cohorts. This development will have an impact on the services student affairs professionals need to offer. If students are coming to college with their sexual and/or gender identities synthesized, we may see a decrease in student participation in LGBT-specific services, programs, and student organizations. As discussed earlier, these students may still benefit from Renn’s (2007) involvement-identification cycle but this topic has yet to be adequately addressed. We do not know what impact, if any, working in a non-LGBT leadership role has on LGBT development. It is crucial, therefore, for researchers to explore the development of LGBT students serving as leaders in non-LGBT capacities.

Conclusions

The diversity found within the literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

students speaks to the complex student population we are trying to understand. As society's views of same-sex attracted individuals change, so too will the experiences of our students who identify as LGBT. Scholars have an opportunity to not only add significant value and understanding to the field of higher education and student affairs, they can reshape how colleges and universities across the nation approach LGBT advocacy, development, and services. Their theory is crucial in establishing sound practice that fosters positive developmental outcomes. Many of the services discussed previously are offered on campuses throughout the country, however, those offering such services, programs, and student organizations must be more intentional in the types of students for which each of these leadership opportunities are intended. Many practitioners have been working aimlessly for years when it comes to LGBT leadership. It is time to refresh our practices and become more intentional in order to consolidate resources and serve our students to the best of our ability. In order to do this, we need to know the research and prepare a wide array of programs and opportunities that meet the diverse and distinct needs of our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender leaders.

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