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# Creating Identity Development Spaces for Leaders in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

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The current research study seeks to explore leaders' processes of identity making within a higher education context as well as identify salient features of a higher education context that can best support leadership development. It is framed with the premise that cultivating one's professional identity as a leader is a developmental process that is integrally connected to the sociocultural context. Different organizational contexts vary in terms of the nature and scope of what they can offer leaders as they shape their professional identities. The participants were seven higher education administrators, ranging from assistant deans to deans, from four public midwestern universities. A grounded theory methodological approach was used through individual interviews with each participant to explore the following two research questions: 1) What are the core elements that higher education leaders consider to be central to their senses of leadership identity? and 2) What do higher education leaders believe are the qualities of an organizational context that stimulate and support identity work and professional development related to leadership? The study's findings revealed that supporting and advocating for others, keeping core values and identity at the center of one's work, and embracing vulnerability were key themes in the interviews. Implications for the professional development and training of leaders in higher education are discussed.

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Identity is the lens through which individuals develop an understanding of themselves and the world. It is a valuable tool to help us make sense of the people with whom we interact, the many contexts in which we participate, and society at large. It represents the pinnacle of an individual's values, experiences, and perceptions of self (Baltes & Carstensen, 1991). As Wenger (2010) so fittingly states,

Identity is a trajectory. Over time, it reflects our journeying within some communities as well as transitions across communities. It incorporates the past and the future into the experience of the present. Over time it accumulates memories, competencies, key formative events, stories, and relationships to people and places. It also provides directions, aspirations, and projected images of oneself that guide the shaping of the trajectory going forward (p. 5).

Identity, which impacts how we feel, think, and act (van Knippenberg et al., 2004), is an essential foundation for all individuals and is also a core element in understanding leadership. The development of leadership identity has critical implications for leadership development, as who we think we are determines what we do and how we do it (Zheng et al., 2015). Successful leadership development is grounded in identity work that focuses on central questions such as “who am I as a leader?” and “what does effective leadership look like for me?” (Clapp-Smith et al., 2019). An identity-based approach to leadership acknowledges each individual’s distinctive understandings and assumptions about leadership (Hammond et al., 2017), their specific personal and professional experiences (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), and their unique processes of meaning making within and across many contexts, such as home, work, and community. It also recognizes the fact that identity work is an ongoing process, and that identities are not innate, essential, or static. It is through our interactions with others that we ultimately define ourselves (Kapasi et al., 2016).

In essence, viewing leadership through the lens of identity allows us to understand how the “whole person” evolves as a leader. Just as identity making is a lifelong, developmental process, one’s sense of leadership identity is dynamic and generates an explicit leadership development narrative. How does “identity work” actually occur in an organizational context? In the current and past literature, researchers draw upon multiple theoretical perspectives about why, when, and how individuals might engage in identity work (Caza et al., 2018). From a cognitive perspective, identity work focuses on developing a sense of meaning through a close examination and analysis of one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. In a case study involving the Gucci family’s pivotal work in the fashion industry, Petriglieri and Stein (2012) concluded that identity work involves both conscious and unconscious processes of meaning making, and those who are in desired leadership roles may engage in an unconscious projection of unwanted aspects of themselves onto others, leading to the bolstering of a conscious self-view that is aligned with one’s perceived role expectations. A discursive perspective advances the notion that traditional contextual discourses such as conversation and narratives are important contexts for identity work. Costas and Karreman (2016) found that consultants at two large, globally operating management consultancy firms used specific language to illustrate a “bored identity” towards their professional work. They expressed their sense of boredom through the use of specific words and phrases that describe an “arrested identity founded on unfulfilled expectations and the sense of stagnation” (p. 62). A physical perspective implies that one’s own physical appearance or surroundings can signal certain identity attributes. In a study involving police officers, Courpasson and Monties (2017) identified connections between how police officers used their bodies for identity work by focusing on specific attributes such as fitness, intimidation, cleanliness, and toughness in their professional self-construction.

Some researchers (Haynes et al., 2014; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Westenholz, 2006) have acknowledged that individuals engage in identity work at critical transition points during their careers and that it is essential for us to not only study how this work unfolds, but where it actually happens. Within a business school context, Westenholz (2006) discusses the notion of “meaning arenas” which serve as space where individuals negotiate emerging identities. Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) also examine the case of business schools and introduce the concept of “identity workspaces” or physical or psychological environments where individuals can reflect, experiment, and develop with little risk of harming themselves, physically or psychologically, in an organizational context. Haynes et al. (2014) build upon the notion of identity workspaces by examining how they assist and encourage transitions at mid-career. They study the context of a management research fellowship and conceptualize the identity workspace as a “liminal zone in which to experiment with provisional selves” (p. 379).

Through the current study, I aspired to uncover the core professional qualities that higher education administrators hold central to their senses of leadership identity and the myriad ways that their organizational contexts have supported or hindered their paths towards becoming effective leaders while they uphold the professional qualities that they value. Different organizational contexts vary in terms of the nature and scope of what they can offer leaders as they shape their professional identities. Some higher education institutions might play a facilitative role, while others might be more authoritarian in their approach. Some might even hinder leaders’ identity work in subtle and sometimes overt ways. For the purposes of this study, an ideal organizational space for identity meaning making is a context in which an individual can develop a coherent yet adaptable sense of self as well as accompanying skills that best suit their leadership identity and potential. A supportive identity space is one in which a leader not only feels at ease to behave in ways consistent with their core values but also has the ability to help further the vision and mission of their academic unit or institution, ultimately leading to the joint growth and progress of both the individual and the institution. Creating a safe space for leader meaning making thus becomes a necessity for motivation and progress, rather than just an added advantage.

This study holds central the notion that identity is a sociocultural construct, as how we see ourselves shapes our lives and is also situated within and across our participation in various contexts over the course of our personal and professional lives (Vignoles et al., 2016). It also supports the notion that identity is an important analytical lens (Gee et al., 2001) for researchers to explore the different ways in which organizational contexts can optimally support leadership development. Most would agree that it is a challenge to consider how, and to what extent, identity work can be supported in a higher education context. Leaders negotiate between multiple roles on a daily basis. Each of these roles includes specific duties and responsibilities. Coping with multiple roles can lead to role conflict and time management challenges that contribute to daily anxiety and stress. There needs to be some intentionality and prioritization in creating spaces within higher education where leaders can engage in meaning making related to identity construction (Weick, 1995) as well as have the ability to “try on” new identity skills and expectations.

The current research study contributes to the existing literature by using a sociocultural approach to studying leadership identity in an organizational context. This particular approach is based on the notion that human beings can only be studied or understood only as a part of

society and culture and not in isolation. Society and culture shape cognition, and that personal beliefs and values play a significant role in shaping a leader's identity and professional reality. This approach to leadership identity affords a dynamic, co-constructed, and relational view of how leadership identity and organizational contexts intersect, inform, and impact one another. This approach also emphasizes the notion that cultivating one's professional identity as a leader is a developmental process that is integrally connected to context, whether it be in relationship to others or the broader societal context.

## Methods

### **Methodological Approach**

This research study employed a "grounded theory" (GT) approach to qualitative research. This methodological approach holds significance because it (a) offers clear and sequenced procedures for conducting qualitative research; (b) details actual strategies for managing the analytic phases of inquiry; (c) provides an integrative structure for data collection and analysis; (d) advocates for a conceptual analysis of qualitative data; and (e) upholds that qualitative research involves scientific inquiry (Temple University Libraries, 2022, Retrieved on 2/1/2022, <https://guides.temple.edu/groundedtheory>). This approach is particularly fitting as leader identity development is a dynamic process that involves change over time.

### **Data Collection**

GT studies are generally focused on social processes or actions; they ask about *what happens* and *how people interact* (Sbaraini et al., 2011). Research questions are generally open ended. The two research questions for this study were as follows:

R1: What are the core elements that higher education leaders consider to be central to their senses of leadership identity?

R2: What do higher education leaders believe are the qualities of an organizational context that stimulate and support identity work and professional development related to leadership?

GT studies often involve purposive sampling, where researchers might select participants from a particular population to answer their research questions. This method of sampling provides the initial data that the researcher analyzes. In addition, all required human subjects' protocols for exempt research projects were followed. This process included providing the necessary documentation for conducting a second phase of this study in Germany in the near future.

The participants of this study were seven higher education administrators from Education units in four public midwestern universities. The group included assistant deans, associate deans, and deans in academic units which had teacher education as a primary area of focus. Five of the participants were Caucasian men and two were women (with one of the two being a woman of color). The range of dean level experience across the sample was less than one year – nine years. All of the participants were members of a state-wide dean's organization of which the researcher was also a member as a fellow associate dean. An email invitation to participate in the study was sent to all 27 members of this organization. Seven out of 27 responded that

they were willing to participate. All seven were chosen to participate. A one hour-long virtual interview was conducted via Zoom with each participant. Five out of ten interview questions pertained directly to the first research question (i.e., professional qualities related to leadership identity), and five of the interview questions focused directly on the second research question (i.e., features of a higher education context which support or hinder leadership identity work). Detailed, handwritten notes were taken over the course of each interview. All interviews were transcribed by Zoom. Interview transcripts were edited for accuracy, and identifiable information was removed. They were also checked against the recordings and the researcher's notes.

## Data Analysis

Constant comparative analysis is a commonly used analytical process in GT for the purpose of coding and development of thematic categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initial codes were developed based on a preliminary thematic analysis and then eventually collapsed into a broader categorization scheme. More focused codes were generated after a selected set of central codes were applied to all of the study's data. While initial coding identified a vast variety of themes, the more focused codes reflected the "fine tuning" inherent in the overall process of data analysis and captured new foundational themes that could be central in the development of a grounded theory. Table 1 and Table 2 show the process by which initial topics were developed into codes and subsequently into themes for each research question. These themes were validated by a peer who was an Education dean involved in the same state-wide organization but was not a participant in the study. It should be noted that data collection related to a second, similar research study involving a cross cultural comparison between American and German higher education leaders will occur in the near future and should help build a more robust and complete theoretical framework that we can use to understand what features of a higher education context are necessary for meaningful identity work to occur.

**Table 1**

*Codes and Final Themes for Research Question 1*

Initial topics mentioned in interviews	Codes	Final list of themes (derived from codes)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teams with different talents</li> <li>- Generating vision with others</li> <li>- Intentional relationship building</li> <li>- "Feminist" approach to people</li> <li>- Supporting dreams of colleagues</li> <li>- Being a voice for others</li> <li>- Being an advocate</li> <li>- Modeling for others</li> <li>- Being humble in service of others</li> <li>- Being a "pseudo therapist"</li> <li>- Being respectful to colleagues</li> </ul>	Advocacy and relationship building	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Supporting and advocating for others</li> <li>2. Keeping core values and identities at the center</li> <li>3. Embracing vulnerability</li> </ol>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The change you hope to support</li> <li>- Being consistent with values and boundaries</li> <li>- Being conscious of core values and identity</li> <li>- Being deliberate</li> <li>- Personal values and identity vs. institution's values and identity</li> <li>- One's leadership mission</li> <li>- Friendships</li> <li>- Being a first-generation college graduate</li> </ul>	Personal values	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leading with integrity</li> <li>- Losing credibility</li> <li>- Having people feel comfortable around you</li> <li>- Expressing identity in a low trust environment</li> </ul>	Integrity and trust	

- Bringing your “whole self” to work - “Moving down” from being an academic to a human being	Being human	
- Power dynamics - Critical race theory - “White male ways” - “Old boys’ network” - Privilege	Member of dominant culture (being a white male)	
- Being open with employees about your shortcomings - You don’t know everything - Having grace and space to make mistakes - Taking risks - Being around unfamiliar people - Tolerance for failure - Supportive supervisor - Having courage - Having difficult conversations - Being a good listener	Vulnerability	

**Table 2***Codes and Final Themes for Research Question 2*

Initial topics mentioned in interviews	Codes	Final list of themes (derived from codes)
- Assumptions from others about leadership potential - Professional development - Need for personal wellness - Asking for help - Pressures facing female leaders	Leader support	1. Providing institutional support and mentorship to individuals with leadership potential 2. Allowing leaders time and space to reflect on themselves and their organization 3. Engaging leaders with tools and resources to navigate unexpected crises
- Building in time between meetings - Contemplation - Being more creative - Boundaries - Space for curiosity - Being playful and relaxed - Being emotionally available to others - Need for deep reflection - Time for organizing - Waiting to resolve problems	Time and space	
- Difficulties - Skills to manage treacherous situations - Multiple crises and uncertainty - Being a mouthpiece	Challenge	

## Findings

**R1: What are the core elements that higher education leaders consider to be central to their senses of leadership identity?**

### **Supporting and Advocating for Others**

The notion of being accountable for the well-being of others was a prevalent overarching theme in relation to the first research question. Participant A, a male interim dean, acknowledged that his team was comprised of a variety of individuals with different abilities, strengths and talents. As he stated, “I always value distributed leadership. I value the multiple voices and try to create spaces so that those voices have time and reasons to interact in environments that feel academically safe.” Participant E, a male dean, built upon this sentiment by sharing that his “mission in life is to connect people with each other and support their dreams, which is easier

to do in a leadership role because you see the big picture.” As part of the advocacy role in being a leader, both Participant G (male associate dean) and Participant A (male interim dean) talked about the need to “be a voice” for “those you don’t have it” or are “quieter and need an advocate in higher education.”

Keeping relationships at the center of one’s leadership was emphasized by Participant F, who as a male associate dean, stated that he preferred what he referred to as a more “feminist” or relational approach to people. This theme was also supported by a female assistant dean (Participant C) who insisted that it was essential to build effective relationships with others in order to garner their support. She felt that being a leader was similar to being a “pseudo therapist”, making sure to address the needs of others in the spirit of cooperation and the psychological health of the organization. She also believed that her gender identity as a female leader allowed her to be a “better and bigger advocate for other women.”

Having gratitude and respect for others was another theme that emerged in leader’s roles as supporters and advocates of their colleagues. Participant B, a male associate dean, talked about the importance of “bringing about the greater good” and made several references to what he considered to be “respectful ways to lead.” Participant D, a female interim dean, discussed how she was positively impacted in her role as an advocate:

An important quality is seeing the value in what people bring to you and be humble enough to accept what they are bringing you because it is going to make you a better person in the quality of knowing that you are in service to someone or something else.

Building upon this notion of recognizing others’ strengths and contributions, Participant F said that he really wanted people around him to know when they were doing something well. “Be specific,” he emphasized, “and send that goodness out into the world. We gain so much from being kind to each other.” As a demonstration of gratitude towards others, both he and Participant E sent weekly messages to different faculty and staff thanking them for what they did well and for their specific contributions to the larger cause.

### **Keeping Core Values and Identities at the Center**

Being in touch with one’s core values and identity, while fulfilling one’s personal mission and institution’s mission, was a prevalent theme in the study. As Participant G stated,

As you aspire to pursue leadership opportunities ask yourself why you are doing this. If it’s for monetary gain, don’t do it. If it’s for prestige, there isn’t any. If it’s for power, that’s a foolish proposition and it’s also not true. Think about the change you hope to support, the ideals you hope to uphold, and what the beliefs are that drive you to say yes.

Alignment between one’s own core values as well as those of one’s institution was brought up multiple times during the interviews. Participant E talked about how one should try not to define oneself by one’s position, as one’s personal mission should transcend one’s actual position. As he stated,

For any leader, if you find yourself in a position that’s in conflict with your core values, you have to be prepared to walk away from it. I would urge people to be conscious of

that, that if your institution moves in ways that are inconsistent with your identity and values or if your identity and values evolve in such a way that they're inconsistent with your institution you must be able to walk away from it.

Part of being in touch with one's core values and identity involved "being human" at work while leading with a sense of integrity and trust. Participant B emphasized that "leading with integrity is important because there's no quicker way to lose credibility than when people you know start giving other's reasons to question your integrity." Building trust, however, is not always a straightforward process. As Participant D, a woman of color stated,

They're not used to seeing someone who looks like me...who is in a world that to them is so out of the ordinary...I'm constantly trying to figure out how do I convince folks who are not comfortable with me to be comfortable.

Race continued to emerge as a theme amongst white male participants as well. Participant A openly acknowledged that he felt he was treated more positively because of his race:

When I go to conferences...I like to go to some of these old hotel...not everybody can just walk in these...yet if I dress like this and walk in I can almost guarantee you in just a moment someone's going to say, "Excuse me sir, is there anything I can get you, or help you with? vs. "what are you doing here?" and following me around.

He continued to share that he was conscious of his race as a leader in meetings with others at work:

A lot of people are talking about how we need to more with critical race theory. I'm well aware that some people are going to look at me and say "well, white male, are you interested in this or are you going to continue on with your "white male ways?"

Participant F talked about how he was in the minority as a white male teacher in the P-12 system previously but that many higher education deans were white and male. He said, "I know that I am a white male, and this brings with it a certain amount of privilege...I am really trying to pay attention to historically marginalized groups to make sure people have voice."

### **Embracing Vulnerability**

Multiple participants referred to how being a leader was a powerful yet vulnerable position. Participant B said that as a leader, "don't be afraid to admit what you don't know and be aware of the fact that you don't know everything." As Participant D added to this sentiment,

You have to be vulnerable. You have to be willing to jump off a cliff with your people. They have to know what drives you crazy, which means you have to be open with them so they know where you fall short. They have to know that their expertise is there and it's around you so that you can make better decisions...that you cannot make decisions without your team, so you have to be vulnerable and demonstrate that you need your team.

In order for one to be able to express vulnerability, she added that one must have a "supervisor who gives you space to fail." Participant E agreed with a similar need for support: "If I'm going



to be an effective leader and be able to express my identity that implies that people need to give me a certain amount of grace and space to do it wrong.” In general, having the courage to take risks and be out of one’s comfort zone were prevalent themes amongst the study’s participants.

***R2: What do higher education leaders believe are the qualities of a workplace context that stimulate and support identity work and professional development related to leadership?***

### **Providing Institutional Support and Mentorship to Individuals with Leadership Potential**

In the interviews, participants brought up multiple ways that higher education institutions could provide support to individuals who demonstrated leadership potential. Three of the participants (Participants E, C, and G) mentioned that others in their lives had, for various reasons, made assumptions that they would go into leadership before they entered academia and told them that they had potential. As Participant E stated, “People assumed that I had an interest in being in leadership positions; it was a weird way to grow up. And I suspect that part of it is being a white male.” Participant C mentioned that she kept being considered for professional opportunities that she would not have entered on her own had it not been for senior administrators who saw her potential. She emphasized, however, the unique challenges that female leaders face in higher education and that they must be fully supported in all aspects of their professional role in order to reach their full potential: “Women want to do their all and do really well in those [leadership] positions and they tend not to put prioritize the effort to get to full [professor].” Participant G said that others assumed that he would go into leadership, but that if one shows such potential, one must be supported to develop a “solid foundation of personal wellness” in order to face the challenges inherent in such a role. One must also be able to receive help or release if needed. He mentioned that he had recently taken his first week off in 27 months.

### **Allowing Leaders Time and Space to Reflect on Themselves and their Organization**

In the study, the majority of participants voiced the desire for more time and space in their daily professional lives as leaders. As Participant A stated, “Deep reflection is necessary for leaders. I also don’t see an ongoing program to develop leadership. How are we building leadership, particularly with diverse faculty?” Participant F added to this sentiment, saying that “most problems can wait to be resolved after you have had time and space to think about it.” He talked about the need to build in time between meetings in order to cultivate creativity and curiosity. As he stated, “I became a leader because I was curious and because everything is a classroom to me.” Participant G added to this sentiment by saying:

I want to be able to turn to these five books and journals that are sitting over here and just think about something rather than just be totally immersed in the realities of the day-to-day...and be emotionally available in a way that only reflection time will, I think, allow.

Lastly, Participant E made links between the need for space to reflect and one’s ability to solidify one’s sense of leadership identity: “If you are going to develop your identity you need some time to back away. Having a certain amount of contemplation space is hard to get as a

leader.” Hence, participants were overwhelmingly in favor of better boundaries that allowed them time to reflect and refresh.

### **Equipping Leaders with Tools and Resources to Navigate Unexpected Crises**

Participants spoke to the challenges and pressures that they experienced during times of unexpected crisis. As Participant C stated, “It’s easy to be a leader on an easy day and it is so much harder to be a leader when you have multiple crises and uncertainty.” Participant G echoed this same sentiment when he said, “It is so easy to be a leader when it is good and so much more difficult when it isn’t.” Some participants, such as Participant D, felt that their previous experiences had prepared them for these challenges: “My life skills of being able to navigate not only the sometimes treacherous aspects of higher ed but navigating the treacherous roads of life before I went off to college...it is those skills that helped me think about being able to make a difference.” On the other hand, Participant B said he felt quite ill equipped to be “external facing and be the mouthpiece for a unit.” He felt that higher education institutions could do a better job of preparing aspiring leaders to prepare for this role.

### **Implications for Professional Development of Higher Education Leaders**

This study contributes to the research literature on leadership and identity work as it brings to light areas of professional development and focus which would be of great benefit to a group of novice and seasoned higher education leaders. With the increase in employee resignations during the COVID 19 pandemic, more than ever, there is a pronounced need for higher education institutions to support leaders in intentional and strategic ways. Furthermore, with the stresses associated with the pandemic, we must consider a “people first” approach to providing leadership training and professional development, acknowledging the exhausting toll of leading through uncertainty and change and validating the need for a human approach to crisis leadership.

This study has several limitations which illustrate the need for additional future research. Although 27 individuals were invited to participate in the study, only seven agreed to be involved. However, the seven individuals who agreed to participate in the study represented a fairly vast range of time spent in the role of a higher education administrator, so the findings reflect a diverse array of perspectives that could be attributed, at least in part, to the length of professional experience in a dean level leadership role. Future research could further investigate the rationale for some individuals’ lack of participation in order to exclude the possibility of sample bias. It must also be noted that qualitative research studies are generally geared towards developing unique impressions and interpretations of events as opposed to being focused on generalizing findings. In formulating and testing a grounded theory approach, however, one must conscientiously investigate the extent to which the development of the grounded theory can be applied to other cases. Another limitation, which could pose a threat to validity, is the fact that the researcher was an associate dean and member of the same state-wide organization as the study’s participants. The possibility of the researcher’s presence influencing interview responses as well as subjectivity in the process of data analysis could lead to unintentional researcher bias. Hence, the researcher employed the assistance of another dean in a similar

professional role to review the nuances involved in the process of data analysis (but who did not participate in the research study) for validity purposes.

Despite these limitations, however, this study provides valuable insight about leadership identity in an organizational context. The sections that follow describe implications related to the study's findings, suggest next steps for professional development, and speak to the gradual emergence of a grounded theory informed by a sociocultural approach to leadership identity in an organizational context.

### ***Integrating a DEI Perspective into Leadership Development***

Since higher education institutions cannot be separated from the culture and society they are a part of, it is essential that leaders receive training on the complexity of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) related issues and develop the skills and knowledge needed to think about diversity, equity, and inclusion in a variety of different ways. They must learn to proactively reflect upon their own identities and build an organizational culture that supports progress and development on key DEI outcomes. Ultimately, we must not only aspire towards creating inclusive environments for individuals across all levels of an organization but also cultivate a proactive stance that acknowledges the multifaceted histories and experiences of different groups while simultaneously setting the tone and for meaningful progress. The voice of the leadership is critical in achieving this ambitious, yet realistic outcome.

The vast majority of participants in the current study were white males, and each one of them individually acknowledged the impact that being a white male dean had on their leadership trajectory and/or experiences interacting with other individuals at the institutional level. In a best-case scenario, this acute sense of self-awareness would lead to more open communication and more preemptive goal and strategy setting in the DEI domain. We cannot assume, however, that this would happen in all scenarios like these. Developing an organizational culture that authentically acknowledges and embraces DEI efforts involves moving well beyond checking off “the right boxes” and providing culturally based trainings that may suggest a “one size fits all” approach. It involves critically examining existing hiring practices and working actively towards broadening the typical profile of higher education leaders while accounting for the vast array of organizational contexts that exist from a sociocultural perspective. It also entails a closer examination of existing support structures and mentorship practices in order to personalize our approach to leadership development and address individuals' diverse needs more authentically. As Participant D stated early on in her interview, “Leadership might struggle to support some. They [the “old boys’ network”, in her words] are the ones to decide who gets the attention and who is supported...and it may be that this leadership has not supported someone that does not look like them or has a different identity.” It is apparent from comments such as these that higher education must work harder towards providing equitable access with institutionalized DEI policies and practices and equity-minded approaches in their leadership. A genuine commitment to DEI work will make a true difference in the lives of higher education administrators, faculty, staff, and students alike. Furthermore, leaders who are able to lead in authentic ways are likely to bring about more positive change and enhanced productivity in their organizational context (Khalil & Siddiqui, 2019).

### ***Making Leadership Development Opportunities Open to Interested Individuals***

In the spirit of fostering an inclusive culture, higher education institutions should encourage opportunities for leadership preparation and exploration for those individuals who are interested in learning more about prospective leadership roles. Some individuals might be readily identified as having administrative talent, as Participants C, E, and G had described in their respective interviews, while others might simply benefit from exposure and experiences that allow them to explore their skills and interests. The process of developing core leadership competencies and familiarizing oneself with the leadership landscape can occur on a small scale. For instance, it might involve being encouraged to take a leadership role on a particular university committee or coordinating an academic program. As a next step, it could involve informally shadowing an administrator or talking to a group of leaders to learn the concrete details of what they do in their respective roles. From the interviews, it was readily apparent that the day-to-day professional obligations and challenges of a higher education administrator are not always clearly visible to others. The emotional labor that is involved with this seemingly “invisible workload” is even less frequently witnessed in the virtual contexts in which many leaders have been functioning on and off for the last two years.

Current higher education administrators can take a proactive role in learning about faculty members’ professional interests. They might first identify faculty who either display a deep, vested interest in the overall well-being of their units or demonstrate leadership potential in some other manner. Next, they might take a personal approach by asking them about their professional goals and aspirations for the future in order to gauge whether they have an interest in pursuing leadership. They might also prioritize mentorship or professional development opportunities in order to build a pathway for these individuals into the realm of leadership. If faculty eventually have the experience of taking on leadership roles, they are also probably more likely to shed any stereotypical or negative views of administration that they might have and work towards changing perceptions of administrators in their respective organizations.

### ***Learning How to Manage Crises from a Personal and Professional Perspective***

Now, more than ever, leaders in higher education need to be provided with professional development opportunities that equip them with the knowledge and skills to effectively manage crises. From a personal standpoint, developing and maintaining a sustainable self-care practice is integral as it helps build a sense of resilience, facilitates healthier coping mechanisms, and can help one harmonize one’s life in a way that serves oneself and others best. By modeling the importance of self-care, leaders enable others to see that they have permission to take care of themselves as well. If one does not continue to take care of oneself on an ongoing basis, one can find oneself in a vicious cycle of personal sacrifice that could be detrimental. Taking the time to identify what Ben-Shahar and Ridgway (2017) refer to as “restorative” and “depletive” practices is essential when managing the stresses associated with a leadership position. If the leader’s professional circumstances become untenable, they should be able to request the support that is needed to maintain their health while also being successful in their role. Overall, self-care is an even more challenging concept to practice for women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community because of prevailing social constructs of how typically

marginalized groups have been judged in the workplace context in comparison to their white, male heterosexual counterparts (Collins & Whitney, 2021).

From a professional standpoint, leaders could benefit from support in cultivating their professional orientation towards uncertainty and change. Flexibility and adaptability are essential ways of being for leaders. They must be able to make the necessary adjustments to their leadership approach and be able to candidly critique their previous ways of being in order to gauge whether a new approach is necessary. This is particularly important when a crisis threatens to disrupt normal operations (Bennett et al., 2016; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). In addition, openly acknowledging possible feelings of vulnerability while simultaneously working collaboratively with other leaders to manage the challenging aspects of potentially catastrophic crises can lead to an overall stronger sense of organizational resilience (Gichuhi, 2021). A professional development model which focuses on both the internal (i.e., self-awareness and self-care) and external (i.e., team building, collaboration) aspects of leading acknowledges the relationship between internal and external processes, instilling leaders with the emotional capacity to withstand extraordinary professional circumstances without sacrificing themselves.

### **Supporting Reflective Spaces for Leaders**

Just as higher education leaders need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to manage crises, they must also be provided with opportunities to reflect, regroup, and restore their sense of inner calm during professionally challenging times. In the current pandemic context, in particular, many leaders in higher education have been subjected to a fatiguing sense of workplace endurance while operating within a hybrid workplace. Moving at a slightly slower and more reflective pace can help strengthen one's physical and mental presence while also supporting one's readiness to take on new challenges and make a positive impact on others. All participants in this study spoke to the need for deep reflection as leaders. By being more deliberate about boundaries and building in time and space between meetings, leaders are more likely to cultivate a more relaxed and energetic leadership workforce. Most importantly, this time and space is likely to lead to a healthier sense of psychological well-being which could contribute to higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviors, in turn impacting the overall effectiveness of the workplace context (Alshahrani & Iqbal, 2021). The value of protecting leaders' space and time must be embraced and supported, both in action and words, by senior higher education administrators.

This study contributes to the existing literature on leadership identity work in higher education contexts as it acknowledges the necessity to study issues of leadership identity in context and also provides valuable insight into the areas of professional development and training that could benefit higher education leaders as they develop their sense of leadership identity. It is important to note, however, that the vast majority of the participants in this study were white men in senior administrative roles. There were only two female participants, and of the two, one was a woman of color. Future research should include a larger, more diverse group of participants and could also extend beyond the United States to include cross cultural comparative analyses between leaders in different nations. Broadening the scope of participants would likely deepen our understanding of what leadership identity looks like and how its development could be more effectively supported in a higher education context. Furthermore, future research could focus on similar research questions within the context of other

sociocultural contexts (such as different organizational settings and/or countries that espouse a different worldview) in order to better understand unique attributes and/or themes of commonality relative to each setting in order to identify supportive mechanisms for leadership identity development.

In this study, we aimed to inductively build a grounded theory that brings to light the qualities of organizational contexts which best support the development of leadership identity. Through our analysis of the findings, we were able to conclude that the development of leadership identity is a dynamic process that is firmly grounded in context. The emerging grounding theory that is developing as a result of this study provides a snapshot of how a complex interplay between internal (i.e., self-driven) and external (i.e., contextually driven) factors play an essential role in the manifestation, experience, and enactment of leadership identity. Furthermore, it accentuates the essential role of support – in the form of new tools, space, and mentorship – that higher education institutions must provide in support of leadership identity growth and development. Future research could build upon this emerging grounded theory by including a larger sample of participants from a variety of organizational and global settings in order to provide us with a more complete understanding of how leadership identity develops in an organizational context from a sociocultural research lens.

## **Conclusion**

A defined sense of leadership identity, one which is authentic and sensitive to the needs of both the leader and the higher education institution of which they are a part, can enable a leader to focus and embark upon the challenges that they will encounter in the future. It is likely that some leaders will have clearer conceptions of self on some dimensions over others, but from a sociocultural perspective, the ways in which they reflect upon, internalize, and enact leadership in light of many relationships and contexts is critical to how they function and how they grow as professionals. Furthermore, there is an “irreducible ambiguity” that is endemic in leadership, in that leaders are often held in the tension between their own notions of self and their vulnerability to the opinion of the people that they serve (Sinclair & Bryman, 2011). Being intentional about the creation of identity spaces for meaning making can help leaders be more present, self-observant, and connected to the needs of others around them. Building, maintaining, and projecting an effective leadership persona is not only key to one’s longevity in the role but also central to motivating and supporting leaders’ personal and professional journeys as they advance further in their career paths.

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