Emerging Scholars

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**Navigating Cultures, Engaging in the Process: International Graduate Students' Leadership Process**

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**Abstract**

*This emerging scholar piece explores how international graduate students in leadership roles within campus organizations at a U.S. higher education institution conceptualize their understanding of the leadership process based on their cultural backgrounds and experiences. International graduate students are often left out or are an afterthought within leadership education and leadership program design. If leadership programs wish to be more culturally relevant, then international graduate students, their experiences within higher education, and how they experience leadership needs to be examined. Using the culturally relevant leadership learning model as a framework, this narrative inquiry will investigate how international graduate students holding leadership positions in campus organizations have engaged with leadership both in their home countries and at U.S. higher education institutions.*

**Keywords:** international graduate students, international higher education, international students, leadership education

**Introduction**

Leadership is viewed as a major goal, learning outcome, and selling point of United States higher education (Chunoo & Osteen, 2016), but how do students who are not from the United States view leadership and are they even included within the idea of campus leadership? Are international graduate students supported or encouraged to hold leadership or officer positions within registered student organizations or student government? International graduate students and their interactions with U.S. based leadership education styles have been overlooked by leadership education despite their predominance and important positions within U.S. higher education institutions. Of the one million international students in the U.S., 44% are graduate students (Institute of International Education, 2023). International graduate students and post-docs help strengthen research within U.S. institutions and have helped to maintain U.S. academic dominance (Cantwell, 2021). While very little research has been done to connect international graduate students to leadership education, research has been done on international student barriers to engagement and belonging on U.S. campuses (Glass, 2012; Mwangi, 2016; Mwangi et al., 2019; Quaye & Harper, 2014). While being engaged with the campus environment and involved in leadership programs has shown benefits for international students (Glass, 2012; Glass & Westmont, 2014), in order to get these benefits from campus leadership and engagement, international students must first be able to access leadership opportunities and chances to become engaged on college and university campuses. Previous research has found barriers to campus engagement that include a focus on academics, a discouraging campus culture/environment, and language barriers (Cecil & Hu, 2021). Institutions help to reinforce these barriers and deficit views of international students which block the new perspectives, skills, and a more global understanding of knowledge international students bring to institutions and student organizations (Le & Gardner, 2010; Liu, 2021). The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how international graduate students holding leadership positions' past experiences with leadership in their upbringing or undergraduate studies have influenced their views of leadership. It also investigates international students' own understanding of the leadership process within U.S. higher education institutions. With a better understanding of how international students may view the leadership process, leadership education can work to be more accessible and culturally relevant. For international students, having an understanding of leadership and leadership positions within the U.S. can help them better navigate the global workplace which can be based on U.S. working and hierarchical standards (Wang et al., 2024). This study explores the research question: How do international graduate students in leadership roles conceptualize the leadership process?

**Literature Review**

**Who are International Graduate Students?**

International graduate students reached an all-time high enrollment in the United States during the 2022-23 academic year that showcases a post-COVID trend of more international students pursing graduate studies in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2023). Despite benefits international graduate students bring to U.S. institutions, research often takes a deficit view by focusing on the challenges and struggles faced by international students that can be 'fixed' through assimilation (Agostinelli, 2021; Mittelmeier et al., 2023). When it comes to international student identity, this has been looked at through cultural, social, and negotiating lenses, but has not been investigated through a leadership lens (Tavares, 2021). My study works to fill the gaps in how international graduate students view their own identities as leaders and their roles within the leadership process.

**The Benefits and the Barriers**

U.S. higher education campuses can be unwelcoming to international students and there can be difficulty for international students to have a sense of belonging on campus due to causes such a neo-racism and microaggressions (Lee, 2007; Quaye & Harper, 2014; Yao, 2018). However, for those who are able to make connections on campus, for example through faculty interactions, they have a higher sense of belonging and feel included and supported by professors (Glass et al., 2015). In spite of systemic barriers (Cecil & Hu, 2021), one study found that "(c)ultural events, leadership programs, and community service enhanced a sense of belongingness, buffered the effects of racism, and provided a secure base for the exploration of cross-cultural relationships" (Glass & Westmont, 2014, p. 106). Leadership and engagement opportunities through curricular and co-curricular methods such as holding leadership positions can help to bridge cultural gaps and create opportunities for international students widen their social networks (Glass & Gesing, 2018; Glass & Westmont, 2014). A study on Chinese international students holding leadership positions in Canada found that these positions helped them with their language development and sense of belonging on campus, echoing past research on the benefits of leadership, but the study did not investigate how or if they viewed themselves as leaders or their pathway to getting a leadership position (Zhu & Smith, 2024).

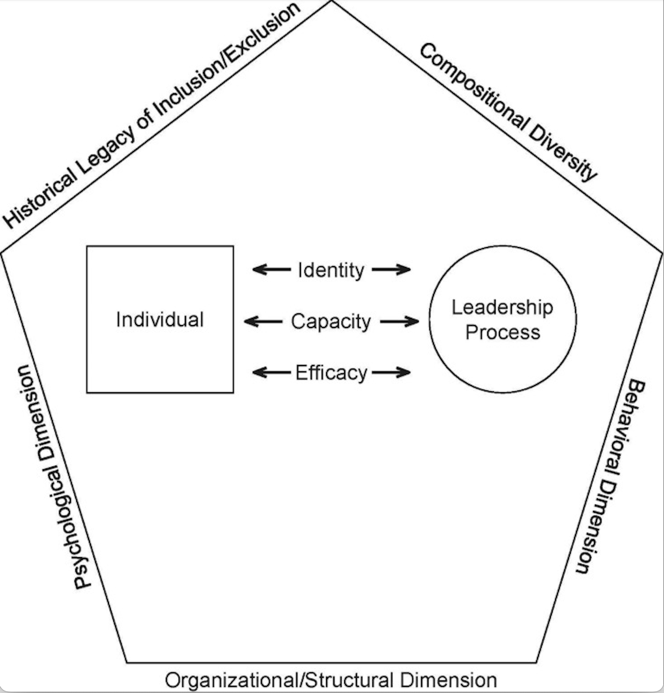
**Leadership Education**

With leadership programs and campus engagement being connected to benefits such as a more positive view of campus environments and sense of belonging (Glass, 2012; Glass & Westmont, 2014), what exactly is leadership? Leadership is a social construct that is not based on one concrete definition that can vary depending on the cultural context (Crevani et al., 2010; Rosch et al., 2023). Leadership is based on the idea of how society defines what it means, and this can vary depending on the combined and agreed upon views of researchers and professionals. For leadership educators within Western-based higher education, one accepted definition of leadership is "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (Yukl, 2006, p. 8). Leadership has a history of being based on white, male colonialist ideology, but more recent research has called for more critical examination and dismantling of these ideas in order to make room for more international and culturally inclusive perspectives (Dugan, 2017; Liu, 2021; Roberts & Yamanaka, 2023). While research has been done on student leadership identities through the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model, this has mostly focused on domestic students and the model does not fully examine outside factors such as racism or systemic barriers that play a part in how leadership is viewed or accessed by international graduate students (Bitton et al., 2023; Komives et al., 2005).

**Theoretical Framework**

**Figure 1**

The Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning Model (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016).

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The Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning (CRLL) model is grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy by Ladson Billings which highlighted how experiences and skills of students of color end up being treated as a deficit rather than an asset within classroom settings (1992, 1995). The CRLL model was primarily created to examine how racism, sexism, religious oppression, genderism, and classism can advantage or disadvantage students (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016) and is a way to better contextualize the factors of how leadership is learned. The core of the model looks at how identity, capacity, and efficacy work to facilitate how individuals interact with the leadership process. This is then impacted by five domains: (a) historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, (b) compositional diversity, (c) organizational/ structural dimension, (d) psychological dimension, and (e) behavioral dimension that help to form the campus environment (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). These influencing factors on campus environment can impact how students develop and learn leadership (IBID). This model can be applied to international graduate students and how they engage in the leadership process while attending higher education institutions in the United States. By understanding the culturally relevant factors facing international students as they make meaning of the leadership process and leadership learning, this study can provide better understanding of why international students may or may not identify or engage with leadership.

**Methodology**

This study uses qualitative narrative inquiry which investigates "the stories people tell about their lives and co-construct a narrative analysis of those stories" (Ary et al., 2018, p. 15). Narratives can allow for people to learn through stories and can be the best way of showcasing the understood experiences of other people (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The context of this study will be Southeastern University (SU), a large, public, predominately white research institution in the southeastern United States. The institution has around 2,500 total international students from 130 different countries and of that number, approximately 78% of those students are graduate students. The sampling frame will be international graduate students holding officer positions within recognized student organizations or student government at Southeastern University. It is important to acknowledge that this sampling frame is limiting since leadership can also be shown through academics or professional organizations. The data collection process for this project will be conducted through two different one-on-one semi-structured interviews through Zoom in the early fall semester. These interviews will use an interview protocol created based on the culturally relevant leadership learning model. The interviews are expected to take between 45 minutes to one hour. Within narrative inquiry, it is important that I acknowledge my own experiences as they related to the topic of study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I am a white woman working in higher education who is a natural born U.S. citizen. I have worked within the field of international education for over a decade and have worked within the field of leadership education for over three years. While I have not been an international student within the United States, I have been an international student overseas and I have worked closely with international students within the U.S. for many years. I want to use my privileges as a U.S. citizen to combat the deficit-based prejudices international students face within U.S. higher education systems. Once data has been collected, I will use the analysis software NVivo to conduct multiple rounds of thematic analysis based on a mix of inductive and deductive coding (Miles et al., 2019).

**Implications and Conclusions**

International students are a diverse and dynamic population within U.S. higher education, but their experiences are often homogenized and taken from a deficit perspective. This study will work to fill in literature gaps concerning international graduate students' understanding of leadership and the leadership process. Leadership research often fails to include international student views and perspectives or treats these views as a side note while international education has focused on issues such as sense of belonging and engagement. Neo-racism and systemic barriers can play a part in making it harder for international students to have a sense of belonging on campus and grow their own social and cultural capital (Lee, 2007). However, campus climate can be adjusted and leadership education can help to facilitate this process through social engagement across campus. Preliminary research related to this study suggests that international graduate students holding leadership positions may view themselves as advocates rather than leaders due to their cultural backgrounds (Arminio et al., 2000; Lozano, 2015) and I hope to investigate this cultural view further within the study's interviews.

While leadership has traditionally been viewed as something based on white, male, westernized ideas, modern leadership research views leadership as a collaborative process that can improve sense of belonging within participants and help to promote a more positive environment (Dugan, 2017; Glass & Westmont, 2014). The focus of this study works to center international graduate students and their views of leadership and the leadership process. By using a narrative inquiry of international graduate students in leadership positions within student organizations, I plan to examine how international graduate students relate to leadership. This study hopes to explore how international graduate students navigate all of these factors in order to make meaning of their own leadership identities. It will also work to create a foundation to make leadership education more open and accessible for international students.

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