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## The Intersection of Leadership Identity Development and Meaning-Making Experiences in College Students

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**The Intersection of Leadership Identity Development and Meaning-Making Experiences in  
College Students**

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Submitted in Partial fulfillment of  
University Honors Program Requirements  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

by

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## **Abstract**

The current study explored the intersection of meaning-making with leadership identity development through a narrative lens. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with six senior college students who participate in a leadership mentoring program. Results showed there are six themes of meaning-making experiences that influence leadership identity development: (a) Confidence, (b) Growth From Challenges, (c) Identity, (d) Influence by Others, (e) Influencing Others, and (f) Involvements. These findings encourage the practice of developing leadership development curricula based upon these themes to further develop leadership identity in students.

**Key Words:** Leadership, Identity Development, Meaning-Making

## **Introduction**

Meaning-making is a process that helps individuals to understand events and integrate these experiences and their understanding of them (McLean, 2005). The meaning-making process has been identified as an important part of leadership development, due to its influence on informing leaders' behaviors (Lord & Hall, 2005). The purpose of the current study is to explore how meaning-making influences the leadership identity development of college students and, more specifically, identify meaning-making experiences that shape individuals' leadership identity development. We hope this study will provide further insight into opportunities leadership educators can create for their students to develop their leader identity.

## **Literature Review**

The current study aims to understand the following phenomenon: how leadership identity development is connected to and impacted by meaning-making experiences as shared through narrative storytelling. The reviewed scholarship provides insight into the concept of leader(ship) identity development and explores how making meaning of experiences impacts leadership. Additionally, the literature will illustrate the impact of narrative storytelling on leadership and identity development.

## **Identity Development**

To understand the relationship between meaning-making experiences and leadership identity development, it is important to first understand the concept of identity development. As individuals reach late adolescence, the process of identity development emerges (McLean, 2005). Identity development is the exploration of the question "who am I?" (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). As an individual's identity becomes more apparent to them, their leadership skills become

more centered in their sense of self, eventually leading to an integration of self-concept and leadership skills (Lord & Hall, 2005).

**Leadership Identity Development.** To understand the process of identity development, Komives et al. (2005) conducted a study in which a diverse group of 13 college students participated in structured, in-depth interviews. The purpose of the study was to understand the developmental experiences of the participants in connection to their leadership abilities. The study resulted in the creation of a model of Leader(ship) Identity Development (Komives et al., 2006). Developing leadership identity is connected to five organizational categories: Developmental Influences, Developing Self, Group Influences, Changing View of Self With Others, and Broadening View of Leadership. Participant interviews revealed six stages of leadership identity development: (a) Awareness, (b) Exploration/Engagement, (c) Leader Identified, (d) Leadership Differentiated, (e) Generativity, and (f) Integration/Synthesis (Komives et al. 2005).

As a leader progresses through their identity development, they shift their leadership approach from a self-focus to an others-focus (Komives et al. 2005; Lord & Hall, 2005). This ability to lead from a strong foundation of identity awareness allows leaders to adapt their leadership to fit the context of the situation they are facing. Intermediate-level leaders are more equipped to incorporate multiple identities to inform their leadership. As a leader develops and integrates their identity with their leadership, their behaviors become less surface level and more deeply and internally driven (Lord & Hall, 2005).

### **Meaning-making**

To continue developing as a leader, it is important for leaders to be able to make meaning of events and use this knowledge to inform their behaviors (Lord & Hall, 2005). A part of the

meaning-making process is seeking to understand the human experience. The goal is to establish an understanding of the self and human experience as a whole (Gehrke, 2008). Meaning-making seeks to integrate insights about oneself and bolster these understandings (McLean, 2005).

Notably, critical reflection on experiences is a key characteristic of human development in late adolescence/early adulthood (Daloz & Parks, 2003), the population of focus in the current study. When individuals seek to make meaning of self-defining memories, it allows the memory to affect self-concept (Blagov & Singer, 2004). This reflection is a means of gaining insight into the impact of such events on the self and others (Thorne et al. 2004). Reflecting on self-defining events is an important part of the meaning-making process (Thorne et al. 2004).

**Meaning-making and Leadership Identity Development.** When leaders lack the ability to make meaning of events, they have lower levels of identity status development (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Reflective learning is one of the essential factors that influence the development of leader identity (Komives et al., 2005). Encouraging reflection and meaning-making is a critical part of leadership development, as this process helps students to better build self-awareness and confidence. (Odom et al., 2012). Both of these attributes are a part of the developing self category of the Leader(ship) Identity Development model (Komives et al. 2005).

### **Narrative Storytelling**

Narrative storytelling is an effective method to understand the relationship between identity development and meaning-making because narratives are a way of making sense of experiences and communicating an individual's identity both to themselves and others ( Auvinen et al. 2013; Kellas, 2017; McClean, 2005; Pasupathi, 2001). Personal narratives are a way of making meaning in our lives and serve to connect who we believe we are internally, to who we are in external settings (McAdams, 2008). Having meaningful conversations with others that

allow for reflection is a way for individuals to engage in meaning-making (Komives et al. 2005). It is important to note that by sharing these narratives with others, individuals' identities are impacted by either strengthening their understanding of the events or by shifting their perspective (Pasupathi, 2001). The sharing of narratives is a process of meaning-making in itself (McLean, 2005; Pasupathi 2001).

**Narrative Storytelling and Leadership Identity Development.** Through sharing their stories, leaders can express values and emotions, which form a part of the leader's identity and self-understanding (Auvinen et al. 2013). Sharing personal narratives impacts not only the individual telling the story but those who listen as well. The relationship that narrative storytelling has with those other than just the individual can be understood through the communicated narrative sense-making theory (CNSM), which underscores the importance of not only what is being communicated but also how it is communicated (Kellas, 2017). The act of storytelling contributes to the construction of one's identity (Kellas, 2017). The life story of a leader plays a critical role in illustrating and affirming the leader's self-concept. Followers can use knowledge of the leader's life story to infer traits and characteristics about the leader. This indirect knowledge about the leader can impact followers' perceptions and relations to the leader (Shamir et al. 2005). Among young adults, CNSM helps to create their identity, share this identity with others, and cope with life transition as a way of understanding and making meaning of their identity (McCain & Matkin, 2019).

While previous research has looked at the experiences that have shaped individuals holistically (Komives et. al. 2005), this study uses high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams, 2007) as a reference specifically for leadership identity development. A phenomenological study on leadership identity development through meaning-making

experiences using narrative methodology has not been conducted among college students. Further, the current study seeks to utilize a narrative perspective to explore events throughout the lifespan of the participants, rather than focusing exclusively on their time in college. We hope that understanding the high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams, 2007) of leadership identity development fosters the ability to better develop programming to enhance leadership identity development.

### **Methods**

The current phenomenological study explores the relationship between meaning-making and leader identity development among college students. The current study used the qualitative approach of phenomenology to answer the research question, “How is leader identity development connected to meaning-making?” Specifically, narrative storytelling was used to collect data on the meaning-making experiences that impacted the development of these student leaders.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a research approach that examines the lived experiences of individuals to find commonalities among their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The current study utilized transcendental phenomenology, a process in which each experience is considered individually, and the phenomenon describes the totality of the experiences, illustrating the source and significance of the experiences described (Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental phenomenology process focused on the phenomenon of leader(ship) identity development among college students who mentor through the method of narrative storytelling. Data was collected from participants who have experienced the phenomenon of leadership identity development.



## **Participants**

Participants in the current study were senior college students participating in a leadership mentoring program at a large, midwestern university. The leadership mentoring program pairs collegiate mentors with K-12 leadership mentees. College mentors go through an intensive application process where they are interviewed and scored based on identified leadership skills. College mentors then take a semester-long leadership course that focuses on developing skills such as active listening, empathy, values identification, vulnerability, and generativity. The mentors participate in weekly project meetings for the duration of their time in the program where they meet with other mentors and discuss their relationships with their mentees to receive feedback, support, and advice from other mentors. In addition to these project meetings, leadership retreats are offered two to three times a year to encourage continued development. Seniors were chosen to participate in the current study because they have had the most experience with the leadership mentoring program and more time to develop as leaders throughout their collegiate experience compared to their younger peers.

## **Data Collection**

Participants in the study were sent an email asking for participation in the research study. This link included a summary of the study, a consent form, and a link to the Leadership Self-Identity Measure (Hiller, 2005).

After completing the survey, participants were sent an email describing the interview process and asked to sign up to participate in the interview process. Additional follow-up emails were sent, reminding participants to sign up for interviews, to maximize participation. To gain a clear understanding of the phenomenon being studied, a narrative storytelling approach was used in the interviews. Participants in this study were interviewed using a semi-structured, open-

ended, narrative storytelling approach. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place virtually. The goal of the interview was to understand the high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams, 2007) that had an impact on their leader identity development. Participants were asked to consider events from childhood into emerging adulthood (Koenig Kellas, 2018). The interviews, once completed, were transcribed and checked for errors. To start, data was analyzed through open coding. Significant statements were then grouped into meaning units, which were grouped into themes to identify common meaning-making experiences that contribute to leadership identity development (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finding the common meaning-making experiences among participants illustrated the phenomenology of leadership identity development (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Validation**

To minimize researcher bias, researchers engaged in bracketing, a process where personal experiences are set aside to reduce bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This allowed for preconceived notions and biases to be documented and made aware of, so that researcher bias could be reduced as much as possible.

### **Results**

The current study examined the experiences of six senior college students participating in a leadership mentoring program. Participants were asked to identify the high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams, 2007) of their leadership identity development. The interviews were then transcribed and coded for statements indicating the phenomenon of leadership identity development. Through the coding process, 116 significant statements were identified. Based on similarities among the significant statements, the statements were then sorted into 19 meaning units. The meaning units were then grouped into six themes describing participants' leadership

identity development process. The six themes are: (a) Confidence, (b) Growth From Challenges, (c) Identity, (d) Influence by Others, (e) Influencing Others, and (f) Involvements (see Tables 1-6)

**Table 1**

*Meaning Units and Evidence for the intersection of meaning-making and leadership identity development*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Meaning Unit</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Point of Narrative</b>
Confidence	Developing Confidence	“Deciding I don't care what people think...was a big step in my leadership development.”	High Point
		“I wasn't super confident in myself as a leader, but I knew that I had the capabilities.”	Low Point
	Lack of Confidence	“[I thought] don't mess up...if you stay hidden...people can't laugh about you.”	Turning Point
		“I didn't feel that I was good enough to be a leader coming from a small town.”	Low Point
		“If you're not even confident in who you are as a person it's going to be hard to try to tell other people to follow you.”	Low Point

**Table 2**

*Meaning Units and Evidence for the intersection of meaning-making and leadership identity development*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Meaning Unit</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Point of Narrative</b>
Growth from Challenges	Learn from Mistakes	“[I] knew that there were other leaders in there that could lead just as well as me.”	High Point
		“As a leader, you are held to a higher standard than most others.”	Turning Point
	Overcoming Adversity	“That [rejection] was...a low point where I was like, oh, maybe I am not as good of a leader as high school made me feel.”	Low Point
		“Different instances of adversity that I've faced shaped my leadership skills and...pushed me.”	Turning Point

**Table 3***Meaning Units and Evidence for the intersection of meaning-making and leadership identity development*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Meaning Unit</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Point of Narrative</b>
Identity	Loss of Identity	“Coming from smaller rural high schools...then...you come to college...you're in a bigger pond with more fish, how do you figure out where your leadership identity lies?”	Turning Point
	Recognizing Skills and Values	“My strengths lie in adaptability and restorative...I'm very much...seek the negative in a problem... I thrive in those areas.”	High Point
	Rediscovering Identity	“I was going to have to go through this... redevelopment of who I was.”	Low Point
		“Understanding...what is true about you and the person you want to be...is difficult.”	Low Point
	Reflection	“It really makes me sit back and think about my actions, my words, and through having to think about that, I... ask for help...or dig back into my notes from [LEAD 111].”	High Point
	Self-Discovery	“I'm very bad at...processing feelings at times...talking about them.”	Low Point
“I finally said, I struggle with this and I really try my best. And so I've decided that my priorities are gonna be elsewhere and that was super empowering.”		Turning Point	

**Table 4***Meaning Units and Evidence for the intersection of meaning-making and leadership identity development*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Meaning Unit</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Point of Narrative</b>
Influenced by Others	Learn from Others	“Over time I got to see how the self-centered leadership approach affected other people around me in negative ways and how it just wasn't working out.”	High Point
		“I actually used people, maybe more like sounding boards...people that cared about me as a way to finally talk about things I was experiencing.”	Turning Point
	Needing Support	“Our coach...was...a very well respected man who was there...supporting us. And without him, I think it would've been a lot harder.”	High Point
		“I instantly had lost all my support... So I think that that was like a really dark time”	Low Point
	Recognized by Others	“I think a big turning point for me... was teachers, telling me I was a leader, cause growing up...I didn't...think of myself as a leader.”	Turning Point
	Recognizing Different Leadership Styles	“Realizing that leadership comes in more forms than having [a] title...I think that's something...a lot of students discover as they come to college.”	Turning Point
		“[I was] learning about all these leadership theories and realizing...leadership is so much more complex than I ever realized.”	Turning Point

**Table 5**

*Meaning Units and Evidence for the intersection of meaning-making and leadership identity development*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Meaning Unit</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Point of Narrative</b>
Influencing Others	Help Others Develop	“There's no greater learning experience than trying to teach somebody how to do something.”	High Point
		“I'm a senior who's now looking to the next thing...while I'm still here help other people...begin to learn the ropes and grow into those roles.”	Turning Point
	Power Dynamics in Relationships Shift	“In sixth grade...I feel like that's when you start...forming those friendships and...there starts to be leaders of the group.”	Turning Point
		“You feel like you're competing against somebody that you should be on the same team with on the same page with.”	Low Point
Uniting Others	“I have an ability to listen to people and to gather a group together and to complete a mission.”	High Point	

**Table 6***Meaning Units and Evidence for the intersection of meaning-making and leadership identity development*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Meaning Unit</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Point of Narrative</b>
Involvements	Formal Title	“Getting the title that I am a leader helps reinforce that I am a leader.”	Turning Point
		“All of these specific roles with these specific names were coming up... And so it really was a validating experience”	Turning Point
	Informal Leadership	“I don't necessarily have specific roles, but I am seen as a leader, which is really impactful for me.”	Turning Point
		“Up until that point, I didn't really understand what a leader was...But in those roles, I really saw how...a leader is someone who can say, I hear what you're saying, now let's do this together.”	High Point
Joining Extracurriculars		“Somebody may have a head position at student government or in a fraternity or in a sorority. It doesn't necessarily mean that their word is what goes.”	Low Point
		“I think starting to do sports and extracurriculars...that's when...those leadership qualities come out when you start to be parts of teams and stuff like that.”	N/A



## Confidence

As participants described their journey with leadership identity development, four of the six participants mentioned confidence as a key influencer in their development. There were two meaning units within the theme of confidence, lack of confidence and developing confidence. There were 14 total statements within the theme regarding confidence. Within the developing confidence meaning unit, there were four total statements; two statements were high points and two were low points. For statements about lacking confidence, ten statements were made; eight were low points, one was a high point, and one was a turning point. All participant names are pseudonyms. Brandon shared his experience regarding lack of confidence coming into college:

Before COVID, I was just kind of questioning who I was as a person and wasn't super happy with who I was. I found myself being a lot more negative, and I think it made it difficult to be a leader in every aspect. If you're not even confident in who you are as a person it's going to be hard to try to tell other people to follow you or in any aspect.

Regarding developing confidence, Maria shared,

I guess one high point was probably my junior year of high school. I decided to do girls' wrestling, which was very controversial in a small rural town...I think that was a big step in me finally deciding I don't care what people think. I do what I want to do to be happy...I think that was a big step in my leadership development.

In sum, lack of confidence in the participants was seen as an obstacle to developing their leadership identity. It most often occurred in low points and caused the participants to doubt their abilities as leaders. Development of confidence helped participants to recognize their abilities as leaders and believe they were both worthy and capable of leading others.

## **Growth From Challenges**

Another theme was growth from challenges. Five of the six participants shared experiences that incorporated growth from some sort of challenge they faced. There were two meaning units within the theme of growth from challenges: learning from mistakes and overcoming adversity. There were nine total statements within the theme of growth from challenges, five statements regarding learning from mistakes and four statements about overcoming adversity. Within the meaning unit of learning from mistakes, three statements were high points, one statement was a low point, and one statement was a turning point. Of the four statements regarding overcoming adversity, two were low points and two were turning points.

Two students shared about learning from mistakes. Jackson shared how being humbled helped him to change his ways. He stated, “It was my inability to check myself at the door and realize that I wasn't some sort of demi-God... [that experience] taught me that being introspective and looking back and not always thinking that you were right is a very good thing.” Similar to what Jackson shared, Chris described how learning from mistakes helped him to grow:

For the business club I was in, I was also president of my junior year... there was a conference that we went to and we got in trouble...And so, that made me question, I'm supposed to be this leader, yet my actions aren't really lining up with that. And [that led to] a lot of self reflect[ion] and reorganizing my ideas and thoughts.

Four of the six students shared stories about overcoming adversity. Maria shared her experience with overcoming adversity - in her case, rejection:

I applied for [campus leadership organization] and I didn't get it. And that was kind of one of the first times where I couldn't be a part of something. Being from a small school,

you can pretty much be a part of everything. That was kind of a low point where I was like, oh, maybe I am not as good of a leader as high school made me feel.

In sum, participants learning from mistakes led to a shift in perspective of the way they viewed leadership. This led to a change in behaviors when approaching leadership in the future.

Overcoming adversity also led to a shift in perspective in participants. This shift in perspective was both internal - how the participant viewed themselves - and external - how the participant viewed their environment and others.

### **Identity**

The third theme was identity. All six participants shared stories regarding their identity. Within this theme, there were five identified meaning units: loss of identity, recognizing skills and values, rediscovering identity, reflection, and self-discovery. There were 32 total statements regarding identity. Five statements covered loss of identity, five statements discussed recognizing skills and values, six statements touched on rediscovering identity, five statements covered reflection, and 11 statements were made regarding self-discovery. Within loss of identity, three statements were low points and two were turning points. In recognizing skills and values, all five statements were high points. With rediscovering identity, five came from low points and one was a turning point. Regarding reflection, two were high points, two were low points, and one was a turning point. In discussing self-discovery, two statements were high points, three were low points, and six were turning points.

Three students shared their experiences of feeling a loss of identity. Allison shared her experience transitioning from a small-town high school to a large university, saying:

Coming from a smaller rural high school is like achievement, achievement, achievement.

We have to do all of these things in order to keep our schools going because we're the

only people there, and so, then it's like when you come to college and maybe you're involved in less organizations or you don't have as many specific leadership titles because you're in a bigger pond with more fish, how do you figure out where your leadership identity lies?

Three other students touched on the second meaning unit within the identity theme: recognizing their skills and values. Lauren shared her experience leading her sorority amid the pandemic. She explained:

I mean as someone who...had to delegate conversations that were controversial, my faith and my personal beliefs and my personal values were really challenged. And so...trying to say those things are still important to me...versus... is there a time where I have to just forget about all of that and I have to be a neutral base?

Brandon explained that part of his development was recognizing the need to understand his skills and values. He shared, "I think I'm always trying to learn and get better because it was a part of me that I didn't really think about for a long time."

Four of the six students shared experiences that revolved around the meaning unit of rediscovering their identity. When discussing her experience after no longer holding an officer position in an organization, Allison explained, "It wasn't in a low point, but it was almost like rediscovering who I was as a leader." Brandon echoed Allison's experience, explaining, "Being able to process a lot of information as you grow up gets difficult and understanding what is true...about you and the person you want to be I think is difficult. And, for me, I figured that out through [low point]."

Reflection, another meaning unit within the Identity theme, was a significant component of development that five participants shared. Maria shared that she had learned about leadership

through the process of reflecting on where she is currently compared to where she used to be before her high point of leadership. Maria stated, "I think a leader really needs to be able to lead even if people disagree with you. And before [high point], I think I was at the point where I wanted everyone to be happy." Allison shared about reflection assignments assigned to her in a leadership course she took and how those impacted her ability to reflect and understand leadership. "As much as students may grumble about journals, that does provide consistent reflection over who you are and how you're interacting with others, and maybe how you're using those leadership capacities in your life," she shared.

The final meaning unit of the Identity theme was self-discovery. Five participants went through various experiences that helped them to better understand their personalities and behaviors. Lauren shared that she experienced a change when she decided to act in alignment with who she is:

I think I just realized, you know, there's gonna come a point where people's true sides come out. People's true colors come out. And I knew that I was always true to who I was and that I was unapologetically myself, whether that was being goofy or being weird with the band nerds. I really didn't care. And so I was like, you know what, it's finally my turn. I get to be who I wanna be.

In sum, loss of identity was a shared experience among participants that left them doubting their abilities to be leaders. It resulted in a questioning of who they are and how they are supposed to lead. Recognizing skills and values impacted the participants' leader identity by bringing awareness to their strengths and preferences when it comes to leading. Rediscovering identity allowed participants to identify who they are and how they fit into the world around them. This often occurred after a loss of identity and resulted in renewed confidence in their leadership

abilities. Reflection describes moments where participants took time to make meaning of and learn from experiences they had gone through. Self-discovery was a process in which participants took time to explore their preferences, personality type, habits, and behaviors. This helped them to make meaning of how these factors influence their leadership style and abilities.

### **Influenced by Others**

All six participants shared that there were people in their lives that influenced their leadership identity development. The meaning units identified within the Influenced by Others theme were learning from others, needing support, being recognized by others, and recognizing different leadership styles. There were 29 total statements regarding influence by others. There were 10 statements discussing learning from others, nine sharing about needing support, six discussing being recognized by others, and four that covered recognizing different leadership styles. Within the meaning unit learn from others, two statements were high points, one was a low point, and seven statements were turning points. In needing support, two statements were high points, six statements were low points, and one statement did not address a specific point in development. For the statements regarding being recognized by others, three were high points and three were turning points. In recognizing different leadership styles, two statements were high points and two were low points.

Two participants spoke extensively on learning from others, both through observation and interaction. Jackson shared, “Over time I got to see how the self-centered leadership approach affected other people around me in negative ways and how it just wasn't working out.” He shared how he often learned from others’ examples. Brandon took a different approach in learning from others, discussing how he learned from his interactions with the people in his life. He explained, “Just being able to talk with them and just have another individual at the same

time—I'm going to say on the same journey at the same point and having the same feelings... It just made it a lot easier and, I think, was a way to hold each other accountable.” Four students shared experiences of needing support from others. Notably, there were times when support was needed and not received and other times when support was given by others. Allison shared, “During the low point, I would say I relied pretty heavily on my parents and maybe I would say, upperclassmen in college, whether they were older girls in my sorority or in similar involvements during that low point.” Conversely, Lauren shared her experience transitioning into college, explaining, “I instantly had lost all my support. I was in a new place with new friends. So I think that that was a really dark time. And I don't talk about it enough, I don't think, looking back.”

Three participants shared the importance that being recognized by others had on their development. Chris said, “I think a big turning point for me, especially in middle school, was teachers telling me I was a leader, cause growing up, I don't know, elementary and middle school, I didn't necessarily think of myself as a leader.”

Another common experience was recognizing different leadership styles. Three students shared that this helped to shape their view of leadership. Allison stated:

So I switched my major to being ag leadership was taking [LEAD 222] and was learning about all these leadership theories and realizing wow like leadership is so much more complex than I ever realized. It's not just a title, leaders look different, learning about the silent leaders and the negative leaders and all of those different types of things.

In sum, learning from others gave participants a model that they then used to determine how they did or did not want to act as a leader. It was an opportunity to learn and grow from observation, rather than practice. Needing support impacted participants' development both positively and

negatively. When participants received the support from others that they needed, they shared feeling more capable of leadership. When support was not received, participants felt isolated and unworthy. Being recognized by others was a shared experience that participants identified as strengthening or even beginning their leadership identity development. They shared how this recognition allowed them to see themselves in a way they had not considered before, and this gave them the motivation to grow. Recognizing different leadership styles allowed participants to realize they did not have to fit into one mold to be seen as a leader, which was especially impactful for those who did not feel they fit the stereotypical leader role.

### **Influencing Others**

In addition to developing leadership identity due to the influence of others, all six participants identified feeling as though their leadership identity development was impacted due to opportunities to be the one to influence others. There were three meaning units identified within this theme: Helping others develop, shifting power dynamics in relationships, and uniting others. There were 11 total statements regarding influencing others. There were four statements about helping others develop, three statements discussing shifting power dynamics in relationships, and four statements regarding uniting others. Helping others develop included statements that contained two high points and two turning points. Shifting power dynamics in relationships contained statements regarding one low point and two turning points. The statements discussing uniting others had three high points and one turning point.

Four students discussed the importance of helping others to develop. Jackson shared, “There's no greater learning experience than trying to teach somebody how to do something.” Allison explained that she is looking to develop others as she transitions out of college, stating, “Coming into my senior year...I'm transitioning out and thinking I need to take a step back and



while I'm still here, help other people step into those roles and begin to learn the ropes and grow into those roles.”

Three participants noted the effect that shifting power dynamics in their relationships had on their development. Maria shared:

I feel like I really started developing my leadership identity in sixth grade... that's when you start to get to that age where you're forming those friendships and hanging out with friends and your parents aren't always involved and there starts to be leaders.

Uniting others through leadership was discussed by two participants as being an integral part of their development. Chris said:

It made me realize that leadership doesn't have to be a bunch of verbal, you know, words...A lot of it, you know, comes through actions. I specifically remember a high school football coach saying that pretty much exact same thing, and pointed to past senior football players who, you know, didn't say a ton, but when they did say something, it carried a lot of weight.

In sum, helping others to develop allowed participants to see their leadership in practice and learn about how their behaviors as leaders impact others. Power dynamics in relationships shifting was often cited as having been a lightbulb moment, where participants recognized, once again, the impact that they can have on others and how that impact can affect groups. Uniting others allowed participants to recognize how leadership differs among groups with differing personalities. This gave allowed participants to practice different leadership styles and learn how to be effective.

## **Involvements**

The final identified theme was involvements. Once again, all six participants shared experiences having to do with various involvements. The meaning units within this theme were having a formal title, informal leadership, and joining extracurriculars. Participants discussed the importance of involvements in 21 separate statements. There were eight statements regarding formal leadership titles, eight statements about informal leadership, and five statements discussing joining extracurriculars. Statements about formal leadership titles included four high points and four turning points. Informal leadership statements contained three high points, one low point, and four turning points. The statements discussing joining extracurriculars had three high points, one turning point, and one statement that did not address a specific point in development.

Serving as a leader with a formal title was identified as a key experience in three participants' narratives. Maria shared, "Getting the title that I am a leader kind of helps reinforce that I am a leader." Lauren added to this when she explained:

Senior year, I was voted volleyball team captain and I was president of FBLA and I was in student council and I was on the band leadership team and I made show choir captain...all of these specific roles with these specific names were coming up...it really was a validating experience.

In addition to holding formal titles, another critical experience was recognizing the importance of informal leadership. Five participants discussed this as impactful on their development. Allison addressed the impact of formal titles, saying:

Knowing that I serve as a leader, both in those formal capacities and informal capacities, and knowing that my interactions in casual settings are just as impactful as they are in

this formal 'wearing the name tag' leadership title and being able to balance that and serve in both of those ways has been a goal.

Joining extracurriculars also helped three participants in their journey through leadership identity development. Maria explained, "I think starting to do sports and extracurriculars, because that's when you really start to be...those leadership qualities come out when you start to be parts of teams." Brandon shared that his involvement in extracurriculars taught him valuable lessons, saying "I think it was being able to understand that there's a lot more to everything than just what the final product is."

In sum, having a formal title in an organization gave participants the belief that they were leaders. Where confidence had been lacking before, this experience often boosted that confidence. Conversely, practicing informal leadership was an experience that participants typically had after holding formal leadership roles. Participants shared that this helped them to realize leadership does not result only from having a formal title. Joining extracurriculars was often cited as the start of participants practicing leadership abilities. It gave them an environment to apply what they knew about leadership and continue to grow in their abilities.

## **Description**

In total, of the 116 significant statements, 39 statements were high points, 35 were low points, 40 were turning points, and two were not identified as a specific point. The themes of identity, influenced by others, influencing others, and involvements were addressed by all six participants. The themes with the highest number of significant statements were identity, influence by others, and involvements.

In essence, high points, low points, and turning points of participants' leadership identity development all contributed to the individuals' continued growth. Experiences such as developing confidence, strengthening one's sense of identity, growing from challenges, being influenced by and influencing others, and getting involved in organizations created experiences that led participants to discover and reflect on their growth and development as leaders. These key moments shaped their leadership abilities and leadership identity. While many other factors have influenced participants' growth, the high points, low points, and turning points shared were regarded as the significant leadership identity development moments and have been identified by participants as having had the greatest impact on their growth.

### **Discussion**

Through the narrative interviewing process, participants shared their experiences with their leadership identity development. They were asked to identify high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams, 2007) so that their collective experiences could illustrate the phenomenon of the intersection of meaning-making experiences and leadership identity development. The results of the research demonstrated the potential to increase individuals' leadership identity development by providing experiences for them to build confidence, discover their identity, grow from challenges, be influenced by others, influence others, and participate in involvements. These experiences allowed the participants the opportunity to better understand themselves in relation to others while putting their skills to practice and learning from their interactions with others along the way.

### **Implications for Research**

The current study explored how meaning-making experiences throughout an individual's life impacted their leadership identity development. The results from this research build upon

previous research identifying meaning-making experiences as understanding oneself and humanity in its entirety (Gehrke, 2008) and informs how meaning-making experiences specifically influence the development of one's leadership identity. The meaning-making experiences that participants shared aligned with Komives et al.'s (2005) model of Leader(ship) Identity Development, as the meaning-making experiences that participants shared as influential in their development covered the spread of the five organizational categories outlined in the Leader(ship) Identity Development model: Developmental Influences, Developing Self, Group Influences, Changing View of Self With Others, and Broadening View of Leadership. These categories appeared throughout the meaning units such as Recognizing Skills and Values, Developing Confidence, Learning From Others, Helping Others Develop, Rediscovering Identity, Self-Discovery, Needing Support, being Recognized by Others, Recognizing Different Leadership Styles, Power Dynamics in Relationships Shifting, and Uniting Others. The remaining meaning units had less direct ties to the five organization categories, but the impact could still be seen.

Notably, the current study asked participants to share experiences prior to emerging adulthood that impacted their leadership identity development. The majority of participants, when stating their high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams 2007), shared moments from high school and college. When asked to identify moments prior to these periods, participants shared influences from significant people in their lives and experiences with involvements, but many noted they were unaware of the concept of leadership before approximately middle school age. Future research should explore the average age that individuals gain awareness of leadership and if there are experiences that could build this awareness sooner in life, allowing more time for leadership development.

Additionally, the narrative interview process allowed participants to take their established self-concept and communicate it with us as researchers. Future researchers could use this research methodology to examine how participants reflecting on their high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams, 2007) through the interview process further develops their self-concept and leadership identity.

### **Implications for Practice**

The current study sought to identify key moments in college leaders' development process that aided in their growth as leaders. Experiences such as developing confidence, strengthening one's sense of identity, growing from challenges, being influenced by and influencing others, and getting involved in organizations were all critical moments in participants' leadership identity development. Leadership educators can use this information to design curricula and experiences that create opportunities for students to engage in similar experiences. As emphasized by the results of the current study, when designing developmental opportunities, it is important for leadership educators to create opportunities for reflection, so that students can improve their skill of meaning-making and increase their identity status development (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Further, based on the results of the current study, we recommend leadership educators create a leadership identity development program that is centered around each of the six themes: design activities meant to build confidence; have discussions and lead activities that help students discover and strengthen their identity; affirm students in the abilities they are exhibiting; create opportunities for students to lead each other and recognize each other's differences; encourage students to get involved in organizations at school and in the community. Notably, by reflecting on these critical developmental moments, students' may experience an increase in their self-concept (Blagov & Singer, 2004).

## **Limitations**

The current study was impacted by limitations that affect the results and application. Due to the participant sample size being six individuals, a full scope of the phenomenon may not have been reached. Additionally, while bracketing occurred to minimize researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018), it was not possible to eliminate all bias. The final limitation of the study was that participants are all members of the same leadership mentoring program at one higher education institution.

## **Conclusion**

The results found in the current study identify key life events that shaped participants' leadership identity development. Participants shared meaning-making experiences that contributed to their key life events, identifying high points, low points, and turning points (McAdams, 2007) throughout their lives that shaped their view of themselves as a leader, as well as the way that they view leadership. As a result of these findings, we encourage leadership educators to build curricula and offer educational experiences that are centered around the six themes of development identified in this study. Leadership educators are advised to structure learning opportunities around these themes and offer opportunities throughout for reflection and discussion.

## Results

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