

## AGENCY: A KEY DRIVER OF STUDENTS WITH MINORITIZED IDENTITIES INTO STUDENT ACTIVITIES LEADERSHIP

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*With marginality and power, forms of resistance, and student development literature serving as a framework, this article explores how student leaders' minoritized identities impact their student involvement journeys. Utilizing the methods of Constructivist Grounded Theory, this paper answers the following research question: "In what ways do student leaders with minoritized identities exercise power in their involvement choices and involvement experiences?" Findings indicate that student leaders with minoritized identities exercised power in what they chose for involvement and that they chose opportunities that provided agency to execute their agendas.*

### INTRODUCTION

During my first year as a student activities graduate assistant, I had a hallway conversation with my supervisors that stayed with me. My supervisors noted that for years the leadership ranks of student organizations advised by our office had far more representation of minoritized identities than other areas in our large, Southern public university. We mused about whether our students with minoritized identities, which I, too, had been before graduate school, felt more comfortable in our organizations and with our staff than in other spaces on campus. And we wondered if these students with minoritized identities were intentionally choosing to spend their time and effort with our office versus others. In the subsequent ten years and two additional schools where I have served as a student activities advisor, I have found this trend of students with minoritized identities serving in greater mass in student activities persists. This study seeks to answer the questions of whether students with minoritized identities are intentionally choosing involvement in student activities, and if they are intentionally choosing student activities organizations, why?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

For decades higher education scholars have studied the impact of involvement on students. Astin (1984) found that students learn more the more they are involved in both academic and co-curricular activities and that the more energy a student places into their involvement, the more they will get out of the involvement experience. In their assessment of the research on the effects of college on students, Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) found substantial evidence that suggests that involvement and engagement in extracurricular and social activities during college, including Fraternity and Sorority Life, has an overall positive impact on the self-assessments of students concerning their development of career-related skills. They also found that both involvement in diversity experiences and in service activities during college appear to enhance students' perceptions of how well college prepared them for their current jobs. In their updated volume, Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert, Wolniak, Pascarella & Terenzini (2016) found evidence supporting the positive impact of engagement in student activities on campus, including the positive association with retention and graduation and the development of leadership skills.

Scholars have also chronicled the differing impact involvement in student organizations has on students with minoritized identities. Griffin, Nichols, and Perez (2008) found that minority students are not experiencing being involved in the same ways as their peers and argue that student affairs professionals must find ways to

make campus activities most inclusive of minority students. Fischer (2007) found that involvement in formal involvement activities on campus led to greater social and academic success, particularly for Black and Hispanic students, but both Black and Hispanic students were also most likely to have relationships off campus and were more likely to leave campus to go home potentially harming their integration into campus. Baker (2008) found that different organization types impacted minority students differently than white students – participation in political organizations improved academic performance for Black and Latinx students, while involvement in Greek Life caused a decrease in academic performance for all students except Latinx women. Stewart (2013) further found that students with minoritized identities were less likely to participate in leadership trainings (though Black students participated more than other minoritized races and Asian Americans were least likely to participate) and internships but were more likely to participate in volunteerism.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) acknowledges and affirms the legitimacy of the lived experiences of people on the margins (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Delgado (1989) emphasizes the need for naming one's reality. Counter-Storytelling provides a way to combat these common narratives rooted in whiteness by offering stories of people on the margins either to dispute existing narratives or to center the stories of people of color in general without responding or refuting other points (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Though not originally included in Ladson-Billings's (1995) adaption of CRT into education, intersectionality has become one of the leading tenets of CRT in education research (Mitchell, Simmons & Greyerbiehl, 2014; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term intersectionality when discussing the increased marginality black women felt in the legal system. With this term and critique, Crenshaw joined other scholars in highlighting the compounding marginalization often faced by women of color and others with more than one marginalized identity (Collins, 1986; Frye, 1992; Zavella, 1991).

Scholars also note that though many view marginalization through a lens of oppression, it can also be a space of power. hooks (1990) argues that choosing a life on the margins as opposed to integration into white hegemony offers opportunities for power and resistance. hooks (1990) further adds that it is only on the margins that you have the power to say “no” to the colonizer and “no” to the “downpresser.” Collins (1992) argues that the distinctive angle life on the margins provides Black women can be used as a strength. Anzaldúa (1987) found a similar theme in her semi-autobiographical work detailing the *mestiza* and her fluidity and flexibility born through having to navigate many different worlds with many intersecting marginalized identities. But Anzaldúa (1987) finds that the new *mestiza* offers unique opportunities to anticipate cultural expectations and resists them at will as a result of having to exist among different worlds.

### **Critique of Student Development Theory**

With an understanding of the progression of CRT and its application to education, we must examine what surfaces from a critique of student development theory through a CRT lens. Patton, McEwen, Rendon & Howard-Hamilton (2007) explored how the tenets of CRT could apply to theory in Student Affairs and argue that theory has been fundamental in how student affairs practitioners approach their jobs and develop students. But except for racial identity development models and race as one social identity, student development theorists have largely ignored race and racism in their theory formations by either not discussing it formally or by not having study participants of color. Dill & Zambrana (2009) echo these thoughts and argue that to truly be intersectional, the lived experiences of marginalized people should be the starting point for theory creation. Nash (2008) further argues that people with marginalized identities have an epistemic advantage that scholars should employ when creating visions of a just society. Though scholars have sought to ascertain the impact of involvement on students with minoritized identities, the literature will always be found lacking until the voices and lived experiences of students with historically marginalized identities are centered in shaping what elements of involvement matter most.

### **Marginality, Power, and Resistance as an Expression of Power**

Marginality is an opportune way to situate the study around student leaders from various non-privileged iden-

tities. Lee (2015) applies the tenets of marginality and power to higher education by arguing that in this setting, power is the ability of individuals to access and master institutional privilege, including formal forms of power such as administrative structure and informal forms of power such as understanding cultural norms and an overall sense of belonging. Lee (2015) also argues that power and marginality exist more as a spectrum than a binary. With this view of marginality and power as a spectrum, Solórzano & Villalpando (1998) provides a helpful view of how students with minoritized identities might exercise power in their marginality. Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) build on the concepts of power existing on the margins (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1992; hooks, 1990) by using Giroux's (1983) notions of oppositional behaviors to evaluate the forms of resistance students with minoritized identities choose to employ. Solórzano & Villalpando (1998) argue that those forms of resistance or oppositional behavior can be overt, where students choose to exist outside of the expectations teachers and administration officials have of them, or covert, where students take quieter paths of resistance often within established power to push back on oppression.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to center the voices and experiences of student leaders with minoritized identities on the executive boards of departmentally advised student organizations to determine the impact of identity in student leaders' involvement journeys, including the ways student leaders with minoritized identities experience marginalization and power as a result of their identities. Though many scholars have called for utilizing the voices and experiences of students with minoritized identities to create theories of engagement instead of data about the students, few studies have emerged doing so. Also, no studies have sought to use the experiences of students with minoritized identities to expand the main narratives in involvement literature. This study will fill that void and shed light on the role of identity for students with minoritized identities in departmentally advised student organizations. The main research question this study answers is: "In what ways do student leaders with minoritized identities exercise power in their involvement experiences?"

## METHODOLOGY

Through Grounded Theory methodology, I inductively analyzed the involvement experiences of student leaders with minoritized identities. Constructivist Grounded Theory particularly allows for sensitizing concepts and calls for situating data and study participants in their relevant social and situational contexts, including power structures (Charmaz, 2014). This analysis led to the emergence of theoretical concepts on the role of identity and how these students exercise power within the marginality of their compounding minoritized identities while navigating involvement on campus. These emerging theoretical concepts are grounded in students' lived experiences and center their voices, bucking the trend of creating theory and practice based on quantitative analysis and observations of students' experiences.

To answer the study's research question – "In what ways do student leaders with historically marginalized identities exercise power in their involvement choices and involvement experiences?" – I searched for participants fitting the following criteria:

- 18 Years or older
- Have served at least one full term in a student leadership role on the executive board of a departmentally-advised student organization or in an equivalent student leadership role.
- Possesses either one or a combination of minoritized identities.

The above criteria created a sample of students whose lived experiences highlight the roles their intersecting identities played in navigating campus and their student leader journeys. Because students had to have completed one full term, study participants were either upperclassmen or recent graduates. In total, I interviewed 20 students. All students had at least one minoritized identity, though most had multiple minoritized identities. Most students in the study had also been involved in their student leadership experiences for more than one year, some serving multiple years on executive boards and serving in leadership roles in multiple student organizations, allowing for a rich comparison of activities at the university. I provide a chart of the breakdown of

study participants in Table 1. Each participant completed an intake form that provided general demographic information and signed consent waivers.

**Table 1.** *Demographics of Study Participants*

<b>Gender</b>		
	Female	11
	Non-Binary	2
	Male	7
<b>Race</b>		
	Asian	4
	Black	7
	Latinx	7
	Middle East & North Africa (MENA)	2
	White	1
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
	Gay, Bisexual, Other	11
	Heterosexual	9
<b>First Generation</b>		
	Yes	9
	No	11
<b>Pell Grant Eligible</b>		
	Yes	12
	No	8

### Research Setting

All students in the study attend the same large, Research 1 institution in a major city in the Midwest, Big City University (BCU), which boasts an enrollment of about 30,000 students. BCU is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI). The institution holds no racial majority on campus though Latinx students hold the plurality at 34%. Also, 60% of students are Pell grant eligible, and 70% of students receive financial aid. Finally, 38% of students are first-generation students, and 36% of freshmen report having a first language that is not English. BCU provides the perfect setting to get a diverse group of student leaders with minoritized identities and examine their involvement through a critical lens.

### Intensive Interviews

Each student sat for a semi-structured interview. The interviews lasted between 40 and 100 minutes long. I had a list of questions, but one aspect of intensive interviews is the ability to let participants take the conversation where they want to go as well (Charmaz, 2014). I also explicitly asked students questions about their identities and how those identities might have manifested in their experiences.

### Observations

For data triangulation, I observed three virtual student-led events and secured a recorded portion of an executive board meeting of one departmentally advised student group featured in the study to gain a better insight into some of the critical elements of the student leaders' experiences. Maxwell (2013) states that observations are a way to see theory in use and allow you to gain information that you were not able to get in an interview because of participants' potential reluctance to share a certain set of their actions with the researcher. The observations allowed me to get a first glimpse of the work of student leaders and the way they support and challenge each other and advisors as they accomplish their aims.

## Data Analysis

**Open Coding.** I utilized an open coding process using Atlas Ti to code for actions and interactions I saw in the observations and interviews. I chose open coding because of its inductive nature, allowing me to freely name what was occurring without any sort of influencing theory or data. I also coded each interview additionally for the roles of identities and marginalization in students' experiences. I ended my open coding phase with 887 individual codes. Open coding is used to find the core variable that explains the behavior of the participants. Once researchers discover the core variable, they can now engage in selective coding – coding for only the core variables and sub-core variables. (Charmaz, 2014) The core variable that arose in this study was care.

**Focused Coding.** Charmaz (2014) defines focused coding as using the most significant codes that emerged during the open coding phase to sift through and analyze large amounts of data. It may also involve coding your previous codes to fracture and splice data together. Glaser (1978) adds that focused coding advances the theoretical direction of your work and that the codes are often more conceptual in nature than the codes derived from open coding. I analyzed the 887 codes that emerged from the open coding phase and reworked those codes into larger, more conceptual codes and ideas that reflected the shared actions taking place across the student leaders' experiences and the common ways identity and its marginalizing and empowering impacts had through student leaders' experiences.

**Theory building.** After open and focused coding, researchers engage in theoretical sampling, seeking data from their study participants that match emergent themes from the initial data while the researcher attempts to define the theory (Charmaz, 2014). I coded interviews in groups of five before moving on to conducting additional interviews. This allowed me to engage in theoretical sampling. My core variable of care explicitly came in interview nine. I evaluated the previous interviews before to see how care emerged in those interviews. And as I proceeded with the other 11 interviews, I looked for and explicitly asked about various sub-core variables of care. I also tried to interview people with either less or different minoritized identities to see how the variables would appear in their interviews. Through the constant comparative method of comparing codes to each other, I ultimately condensed the initial 887 codes to 41 codes between six major code groups. Two of the major code groups represented the way identity impacted students' leadership journeys. As I compared the codes of identity through all interviews, I realized that identity acted in two main ways– it served as a barrier and/or bridge to one's community and as a focal point of students' agency and advocacy.

## FINDINGS

**Table 2.** *Study Participants.*

Pseudonym	Primary Involvement	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Orientation	Religious beliefs	First Generation	Pell Grant Eligible	Work Part Time
Alex	Activities Board, Activities Office Management	Female	Asian	Bisexual	Muslim	Yes	Yes	Yes
Amy	Orientation, Cultural Programming	Female	Black	Bisexual	n/a	No	Yes	Yes
Anna	Activities Board	Female	Latinx or Hispanic	Prefer not to say	Raised Catholic but not very religious today.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Anthony	Activities Office Management, Orientation	Male	Latinx or Hispanic	Heterosexual (straight)	Catholic	Yes	Yes	Yes
Arthur	Activities Board	Male	Asian	Bisexual	Spiritual	No	No	Yes
Blue Sky	Activities Board	Female	Latinx or Hispanic, International Student	Bisexual	Catholic	No	No	Yes

Pseudonym	Primary Involvement	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Orientation	Religious beliefs	First Generation	Pell Grant Eligible	Work Part Time
Brendan	Activities Board	Male	Black	Homosexual (gay)	Spiritual	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gabrielle Orta	Greek Life	Female	Latinx or Hispanic	Bisexual	Agnostic	No	Yes	Yes
Harleen Quinzel	Greek Life, Cultural Programming	Female	Asian	Homosexual (gay)		No	Yes	No
Isha	Activities Board	Female	Asian	Heterosexual (straight)	Muslim	No	Yes	Yes
Jay Doe	Activities Office Management	Male	Latinx or Hispanic	Heterosexual (straight)	Catholic	No	No	No
Jesus	Greek Life, Cultural Programming	Male	Latinx or Hispanic	Heterosexual (straight)		Yes	No	Yes
Nicole	Student Government	Female	Black	Heterosexual (straight)	Southern Baptist-Christian (Evangelical)	No	No	No
Peach	Cultural Programming, Orientation	Female	Black or African American	Bisexual	Spiritual	No	No	Yes
Persephone Jones	Activities Office Management, Residence Life	Non-binary/ third gender	Middle Eastern & North African	Bisexual	Buddhist, Spiritual	Yes	No	Yes
Rachel	Greek Life	Female	Middle Eastern & North African	Heterosexual (straight)	Spiritual	No	Yes	Yes
Roman Pierce	Greek Life	Male	Black or African American	Heterosexual (straight)	No Affiliations or Beliefs	Yes	Yes	Yes
RS	Campus Ministry	Non-binary/ third gender	White	Other	Christ-follower, still exploring	No	No	No
Steffon Del Valle	Greek Life, Cultural Programming	Male	Black & Latinx	Heterosexual (straight)	Spiritual	Yes	Yes	Yes
Veronica	Activities Office Management, Orientation	Female	Black or African American	Heterosexual (straight)		Yes	Yes	Yes

Student Leaders with minoritized identities exercised power and agency in their involvement experiences and choices in two main ways – they used their salient identities to determine which experiences to become involved in, and they used their salient identities to build an agenda for the work they undertook in their roles. In this study, student leaders typically fell into one of two camps – students who foregrounded their identities when deciding how to engage with campus either out of necessity or advocacy, and students who preferred inclusive spaces affirming to everyone no matter their identities.

The more minoritized the group felt on campus, the more students with that identity led with their salient minoritized identity when seeking involvement experiences. For example, Black students comprise the smallest ethnic group at BCU. All but one Black student in the study explicitly sought out or created involvement tied to their Black identity. Also, most Black students in this study shared the importance of creating spaces for the Black community on campus. The student who did not specifically seek out Black spaces still participated in a summer bridge program for Black students that allowed him to connect with other Black students and staff on campus. In juxtaposition, Latinx students form the plurality of the student body on campus. Of the seven study participants who identified as Latinx, only two engaged in explicitly Latinx experiences, both choosing Greek experiences in Latinx-based organizations. But only one of those two students shared that their involvement was

an explicit choice used to connect with and advocate for their Latinx culture. The vast majority of the Latinx students in this study opted for multicultural experiences that centered inclusion of all instead of centering their Latinx identity. Many of the students shared that this was a result of coming from high schools where they were not used to foregrounding their race to fit into their white environments. Because the Latinx student population is the plurality of the student body, the Latinx serving offices on campus are both well-resourced and politically well-connected. These students shared that different Latinx student support offices on campus reached out and attempted to connect to them, but students rebuffed these overtures and instead chose more inclusive spaces.

In all cases, the departmentally advised student organizations that students chose served as a caring environment where they could show up as their whole selves. This choice was often an example of students' agency. They actively used identity to choose their experiences. Steffon exemplifies how his Black identity directed his involvement on campus.

I made it a mission to not just be a number, so to be more involved. And the only way I could be involved in something is to be passionate about it. And that was all black. Everything I did was black. Everything I did was cultural, anything. That's what I was there for.

Peach echoes Steffon's sentiments saying she actively chose activities to be in community with other Black students.

I didn't really go to school with a lot of Black folks 'til I went to high school. I think even though the Black population is very low at BCU, I think I was always putting myself in places to find those folks. I think also because it's so small, I think we are closer knit if that makes any sense. I think BCU is a microcosm of the city. I think folks definitely self-segregate, which I don't know is necessarily a bad thing. But I think people stick to their racial group or ethnic group or their ... people who look like them when they create friend groups. So just deliberately putting myself in those places. So going to the African American cultural center. Going to events hosted by [Black Student Services]. Signing up to be a part of the [Black History Month Planning] committee. Joining these very particular organizations that have to do with Black students.

In each of the above examples, students showcase how their identities drove them to determine which activities to choose. But some students also chose involvement based on their explicit "multiculturalism." Anna shares that the fact that her identities weren't emphasized made it easier to connect with her organization.

So I feel like [the Activities Board] was more of a place where it didn't really matter about my identity. I feel like maybe that's why I connected with them more because it wasn't, like, all based around that, you know.

A subtheme of some student leaders choosing spaces that centered multiculturalism compared to joining organizations specific to their salient identities was the harm they feared might come from their communities. Alex, a Vice President of the Campus Activities Board and a Muslim bisexual woman, avoided the Muslim Student Association (MSA) because she feared not fitting in with them, as she hadn't fit in with her high school's MSA. She shares:

I'm not somebody that likes to be heavily involved in, like, the Muslim student association or whatnot because I don't like being grouped into that ... there's a whole stigma and drama. And I didn't want to be part of that. I was fine being friends with the people that I was friends with as long as they didn't, like, push that on me and bring that drama with them. Also, I don't wear my hijab, the same way other girls do and I don't dress the way that I'm supposed to, so I felt like being part of that space would just lead to more judgment from them.

Asian students comprise the third largest student population at BGC, accounting for 20% of the student population. This student power and resulting student organizing led BCU to launch the first Arab American Cultural Center on a college campus in the United States. The BCU Muslim Student Association boasts of being the largest MSA in the country, with 5,000 Muslim students on campus comprising 15% of the student body. Thus, a large number of institutional resources are allocated to Muslim and Asian students on campus, and MSA forms a large nexus of community for students on campus. Though many of her friends joined the MSA, Alex was forced to find community through different avenues because of how she felt her differences would be received by her

peers and the pressures from her peers to conform to standard practices. Thus, choosing not to join the MSA could have meant being separated from important cultural support for Alex, especially since the university did not provide or support other mechanisms for Muslim students to connect (The Arab American Cultural Center had not opened when Alex arrived on campus).

Another vestige of identity that constantly appeared in the data was how it related to finances. Seventy percent of BCU undergraduate students receive some form of financial aid. Thus, finances are a huge factor for students. In this study, 80% of the participants worked part-time jobs to help offset their college costs and help support their families. Students often reported working anywhere between 30-60 hours a week, sometimes across multiple part-time jobs to earn enough money. Also, at least two participants who reported that they did not work to help support their family shared in their interviews that they participated in experiences that paid them or worked summers for spending money. Thus, 90% of study participants worked at some point during their college careers. Veronica reflects on the role finances played in her involvement.

A lot of my quote-unquote leadership experiences were paid experiences. I am paid to be here. I'm a first-generation college student, so a need for adequate funding was definitely essential. I'm currently a senior with my very first apartment. I'm fully efficient, I'm able to pay big girl bills now, but a good portion of me growing up was realizing that there isn't anyone that's going to do for me. It has to be me.

For Alex, the fact that her on-campus experiences were paid both helped reduce her work burden and legitimized her staying on campus for her strict parents.

Finances played a huge role. Throughout college, there were multiple times where I was working two to three jobs at a time. Just because I don't like relying on my parents' money, and they don't have a lot of money to begin with, so I didn't want to be asking them for things. So I paid for whatever expenditures I had. And I wanted to be able to support myself at least to whatever extent I could without asking them. So that led me to take on more roles where I was being paid. If it was a super high commitment and I was not being compensated in any way for it, I most likely would not have taken it on. So the fact that [the Activities Board] let me get paid and the fact that [the Activities Office] gave me a position where I was able to get paid was really great for me, and I think that the fact that I had a job on campus made it easier for me. Because then my parents were like, "You're actually working. You're actually making money for this, so you can do it."

Both of the above excerpts showcase a sentiment echoed by many of their peers – because of the financial burdens placed on these students, they had to be very intentional about what they chose to spend their time on. In addition to full-time class loads and extracurricular activities, they also worked well over part-time hours to support themselves and their families. Several students said they chose not to participate in certain activities, especially joining Greek Life, because of the heavy financial burdens they would incur.

In addition to the number of hours students worked preventing them from engaging in too many unpaid activities, students also talked in detail about the financial burdens attached to just being in community on campus. Nicole shares the financial woes of her freshman year when she had less money saved.

I think finances were very different for me freshman year compared to where I've been at post freshman year. Freshman year, I was still depending on my parents for money, so, I didn't mingle as much. I don't know, for a freshman, it's like going out to dinner with friends, I guess I didn't have as many like, "Let's go get coffee or let's go get a burger." I just didn't have money to go do that type of stuff. So, I was very much so not able to congregate with people off campus with this being very much so an off-campus kind of university as much as I would've liked freshman year. I knew what I could and couldn't do or can't afford; so I would just shy away from conversations like that. After freshman year, because I started saving money, my parents allowed me, I should say, to save money from my internships, so I was able to help finance myself throughout the year. I felt like I went out more with people and that just helped me, ... I mean, Black folks eat a lot as a form of sharing time together. And I think about this really in relation a lot to student government, like everybody always went out to eat after the student government meetings and I didn't do that freshman year. But I got to do so after freshman year.



This example, and examples other study participants shared, showcase just how expensive being in community on campus can get. RS shared that one way their organization showed care was by actively making space and assisting people who may not have been able to afford the costs of engaging with the group, including carpooling for people who couldn't afford Uber rides to events or arranging to lodge people who would miss trains home because of the time events ended.

### **Building / Enacting Their Agenda**

A unique aspect of student leaders' journeys occurs once they realize their agency and begin to use their positions and power to advocate for others both in resource allocation and outward programming, as well as advocate for others internally by creating the team environment they desire. Often it is through their advocacy and the utilization of the resources they have to accomplish specific goals that students engage in covert and sometimes overt forms of resistance fueled by the passion for creating the space they want both on and off campus. Brendan, an Activities Board President and Black, Gay man, shared an example of advocating for making the internal experience of the organization better.

Honestly, the reason that I even joined the executive team for [the Activities Board] was because of my advisor. I told her that I didn't like how the organization was run, and I left it as a general board member and she asked me to come back as a committee chair and shape it to the way I thought it should be run, to fix it. To be the change I want to see instead of just sitting back and disliking whatever is going on.

Peach, Chair of the Black History Month Planning Committee and a Black, Queer woman, shares how students were able to use their platforms to ensure their salient intersecting identities received representation and visibility in programming on campus, thus using their agency to create space for others.

So yeah, I am someone who is queer. I think definitely with Black History Month programming I at least try to be intentional about programming around the intersections within our community. The fact that queer people, queer black people exist for one. And also just the fact that queer Black people absolutely fought for your rights and you wouldn't have rights without Black queer folks. So I think I'm making that a part of the learning that I do in these spaces, but also a part of the teaching in some regard.

In the above excerpts, as a result of the work students were tasked with, they found their voices, realize their power, and utilize that power to advocate for the change they want to see both inside and outside of their organizations. This opportunity for advocacy leads to students recognizing and utilizing their voices and helps deepen both their experience and their connection with the campus and their peers.

## **DISCUSSION**

When employing the Critical Race Theory lens of marginality and power, a major finding of this study that emerged is just how intentional and self-directed the process of connecting to involvement experiences is for students with minoritized identities. Students chose the experiences in which they engage. This demonstrates the agency students exercise in their involvement journeys. In these roles, students execute agendas they have to serve and help build their chosen communities on campus. They shared how they worked to further their values of inclusion of people with minoritized identities, advocated for their shared values and visions, and used whatever power and access they had in leadership roles to help other students who shared their identities and/or values. Also, they used their power in these roles to enact both overt and covert forms of resistance, including creating counterspaces on campus for community building to advocating for changes in campus programming that better aligns with their values. Even when institutional factors like the student body's racial and ethnic composition and the allocation of resources to support various minoritized student populations created less than satisfactory experiences for students, those students then worked to find and create their own pathways for community, support, and success. I contend that students should not be forced to seek out or build community on their own. But the fact that they were able to find and even build their own spaces and communities showcases the agency they execute in their experiences.

Also, Black students who felt the most marginalized on campus because of the low population of Black students

participated in the most overt, covert forms of resistance. They most bluntly stated that they chose to get involved in things on campus to further the Black community on campus and to make sure the Black community on campus was seen and spotlighted. Other racial minorities advocated for more of a multicultural, generally welcoming space, but they were very active in promoting that open and accepting space.

The findings outlined above support and expand on the findings of Kinzie et al., (2021) that agency, accomplishment, and giving back to their community lead to higher satisfaction in High Impact Practices (HIP) experiences for students with minoritized identities. In this study, the aspect of giving back to their community was embedded in the advocacy work students undertook once they realized their agency. A key expansion this study offers is that agency doesn't just lead to higher satisfaction. Agency seemed to be a key factor that drew students with minoritized identities into the experiences. Students sought opportunities to make changes they desired on campus and chose to engage in opportunities that provided this agency. Thus, to truly actualize this emerging key characteristic of agency, we must account for the agency of and in the student's choice, not just in their ability to exert agency within experiences.

Finally, 90% of participants primarily participated in paid student leadership experiences, and 80% of participants shared that they needed paid experiences to be able to support themselves. Some students shared that had the experiences not been paid, then they would not have been able to be involved on campus. Because the institution met students' financial hardships with care by providing paid involvement opportunities, the institution was able to mitigate some of the marginalization students felt because of their financial realities.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is that though I argue the setting of this study represents the future of higher education, it is not representative of the main type and composition of higher education institutions in the country. This setting does give novel findings, but the uniqueness of the setting could impact generalization. Also, this study evaluates a somewhat narrow avenue of involvement – students at the highest levels of leadership in departmentally-advised student organizations. Though this sample may seem narrow, this type of leadership position is available on every type of campus in the country, providing the ability for generalization. Finally, I had access to an email list of student leaders for this study, but I also relied on students' advisors to recommend study participants. This could lead to a large representation of students with positive experiences in their organizations in the study.

### **Implications**

The findings in this study provide many implications for practice. One chief implication is agency. Student leaders with minoritized identities sought out experiences that both aligned with their identities and experiences that allowed them to give back to / build their chosen community on campus. The ability of the experiences in student activities to create their own organizational culture and direct resources to causes that resonated with them were selling points for their involvement. Student activities professionals should more explicitly market the agentic nature of these involvement experiences to recruit students. Recruitment campaigns should highlight the ability these experiences provide to students to shape the campus. Furthermore, practitioners should continue to find ways to increase the agency of student leaders within these experiences.

Another implication for practice is to provide more paid involvement opportunities. It is clear from this study's findings that one of the greatest ways an institution can reduce barriers to students with minoritized identities is to remove financial barriers that exist for students trying to engage in the university in a meaningful way. An interesting finding of this study is that even many of the students from higher socio-economic backgrounds still experienced financial hardship that forced them to work 30+ hours a week. And all but one student in this study participated in experiences that paid them in some way. Students shared that, at minimum, this funding enabled them to engage in the social and community aspects of the university that often come with unforeseen costs, such as transportation and food. Thus, if more experiences provided students with stipends, they could also help offset student costs. For years, activities offices have debated whether their involvement opportunities

should be paid, and many activities offices have moved to pay students. This study's findings respond with a resounding yes to the question of the value of paying student leaders and further found that paying students for involvement experiences could make the difference in whether students with minoritized identities can access the vast benefits of involvement.

A final implication of this study is the continued need to center policy creation and student development praxis on the lived experiences of those with historically-minoritized identities. Through the lived experiences of students with historically minoritized identities, this study surfaced the central role of agency, and the ability to harness and employ the institution's resources to build their chosen community led students to choose student activity offices for their leadership opportunities. We were also able to surface some of the barriers students face to engagement, such as finances, through the examination of the lived experiences of students with historically-minoritized identities. I join the clarion call of scholars who have argued for more student development and college impact studies that center the lived experiences of those on the margins.

### **Future Research**

This study provides many threads for further research. First, these students' experiences surface an interesting question about how marginalized identities influence students' experiences on campuses where their identity is no longer on the margins of a particular space. Researchers could more deeply explore that question to fully understand the impact of identity on involvement. Also, identity and agency represented three code categories of a larger study. Researchers could launch a full study focused on the role of identity and agency in student involvement experiences. Finally, this study was a step in answering the call of researchers to center the experiences of the most marginalized among us in the creation of theory and practice. More studies are needed to fully realize the impact this change in focus will have on student activities, student development and practice, and higher education writ large.

## **CONCLUSION**

Scholars have long documented the immense benefit of involvement on campus for students. But more recent literature has highlighted the disparities both of students with minoritized identities being involved on campus and the impacts of involvement on these students. This study sought to answer the call of scholars to center students most on the margins in the creation of theory and practice by exploring the role identity plays in the involvement experiences of students with minoritized identities. By employing a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology with a framework of the Critical Race Theory concepts of marginality and power and forms of resistance to speak to student development within student involvement as sensitizing concepts, this study surfaced the emerging theoretical concepts of barriers and bridges of identity and agency to explain the role of identity in the involvement experiences of students with minoritized identities. Students with minoritized identities used their intersecting identities and the meaning they made of those intersecting identities to determine what to get involved in and find opportunities for involvement that allowed them to enact their agendas and create space for their chosen communities on campus. More research is needed on the role of agency and identity in students with minoritized identities on campus. Particularly, more research that accounts for the intersections of students' minoritized identities and the impacts of those intersecting identities on students' experiences on campus is needed to truly determine how to make student activities praxis most accessible and beneficial for all students.

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