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Examining U.S. Higher Education's Function in Fostering Social Justice Leadership Development among College Student Leaders of Color

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Abstract: This study examines the function of U.S. higher education in fostering social justice leadership development among college student leaders of color. Specifically, this study investigates various on-campus educational opportunities at postsecondary institutions that college student leaders of color identify as being meaningful for their social justice leadership development. Social justice leadership development refers to an individual's growth in increasing motivation to lead, building leadership skills, and performing leadership with an orientation toward advancing justice. Using the Social Action, Leadership, and Transformation model framework (SALT) and a critical qualitative methodology, this study centers on the knowledge and experiences of 16 college student leaders of color at seven postsecondary institutions across New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The findings suggest that (1) leadership education designed for students of color, (2) culturally relevant academic majors and classes, (3) designated institutional offices and programs serving diverse students, and (4) identity-based or political student organizations play a crucial role in fostering student participants' social justice leadership development. The study results inform a need for broadening institutional curricular and extra-curricular leadership educational opportunities across various spaces on campus to foster meaningful leadership development for students of color especially.



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1. Introduction

College student leadership has been highlighted as a common learning outcome in U.S. higher education, and there are at least 2000 leadership education programs existing on college and university campuses across the country (e.g., Student Leadership Development Program at the University of California-Davis, Panther Leadership Academy at the University of Pittsburgh) [1]. However, despite the abundant research studies and leadership educational practices on college student leadership development, there remains relatively less knowledge about leadership development among students of color. (i.e., non-White students) For instance, compared to present findings about White students' leadership development, existing scholarship provides limited insights into racially diverse student populations regarding their growth in establishing an understanding of what leadership means, demonstrating motivations to lead, developing leadership skills, and performing leadership in personal, academic, or professional settings.

As U.S. higher education enrolls more racially diverse students in that about 49.3% of the 15.4 million undergraduate student enrollments were students of color (i.e., non-White students) in Fall 2021 [2], it is imperative to focus on culturally relevant leadership scholarship and educational practices that will meaningfully and equitably support leadership development for students of color. Culturally relevant practices describe scholars' and educators' considerations of different social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) and respective needs of diverse students to meaningfully support their learning and success,

including leadership development [3]. In addition, when racism and other systemic oppression (e.g., sexism, homophobia) persist under the current U.S. socio-political context where communities of color continue experiencing harm and oppression, there is a timely demand for leadership, specifically social justice leadership to ensure that there are leaders initiating collective efforts to tackle issues facing the oppressed communities with a commitment to social justice. Social justice leadership includes leadership practices that demonstrate orientations, actions, or goals toward challenging unjust and unfair conditions for specific populations (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement). Higher education institutions, therefore, assume a crucial role in providing culturally relevant leadership educational opportunities for its diversifying student population with an explicit goal of supporting social justice leadership development.

This study examines higher education institutions' functions in terms of institutional opportunities and campus spaces that promote social justice leadership development among students of color. The research question is the following: What are the on-campus educational opportunities in higher education institutions that meaningfully foster social justice leadership development among student leaders of color? This study investigates institutional, educational opportunities (e.g., formal curriculum, extra-curricular programs, and other institutionalized spaces) that student leaders of color identify as meaningful in their social justice leadership development, including their understanding of social justice leadership, development of motivation to lead, establishment of specific leadership skills, and practice of social justice leadership. Applying critical qualitative methodology, this study centers on the knowledge and experiences of 16 college student leaders of color at seven postsecondary institutions. The findings suggest that (1) intentional leadership education for students of color, (2) culturally relevant majors and classes, (3) designated institutional offices and programs serving diverse students, and (4) identity-based or political student organizations demonstrate effective institutional functions in student participants' social justice leadership development. The results provide empirical evidence contributing to inform culturally relevant leadership programs and broadened educational opportunities across multiple institutional campus spaces to support social justice leadership learning and development among students of color.

This paper is organized into six sections. First, the Section 2 synthesizes three relevant bodies of literature on college student leadership to situate this study in context. Next, the Section 3 introduces the primary conceptual framework used in this study: the Social Action, Leadership, and Transformation model (SALT) [4]. Third, the Section 4 describes the study's research context, study participants, data collection, data analysis, and researcher positionality. Forth, the Section 5 presents findings with four salient themes. In addition, the Section 6 describes the study findings' contributions to affirm the need for considering race in leadership development for students of color, identify on-campus opportunities and spaces in supporting social justice leadership for students of color, and confirm the SALT model's utility and application. Lastly, the Section 7 summarizes the study and provides implications for future research and practices for supporting students of color and promoting social justice leadership.

2. Literature Review

To situate this study in the context of the current literature, this section includes three bodies of relevant scholarship on college student leadership: (1) common race-neutral framing in the leadership literature; (2) the role of race in leadership development for students of color; and (3) higher education opportunities encouraging leadership development for students of color.

2.1. Common Race-Neutral Framing in the Leadership Literature

Extant U.S. higher education scholarship and practices on college student leadership commonly depicts the concept of leadership from a Eurocentric, individualistic, and corporate-capitalist perspective [5–7]. When the concept of leadership reflects a predomi-

nantly White and Eurocentric lens, it could easily be considered race-neutral because race is minimally considered or acknowledged in leadership scholarship and educational practices. As a consequence, student leadership research often does not thoughtfully include student participants' social identity in the study of their leadership development [8,9], or studies would report social identity (e.g., race, gender, first-generation status) without providing additional data disaggregation or deeper analyses to examine the relationships between social identity and leadership development among diverse student populations. For instance, Katsioloudes and Cannonier (2019) [10] conducted a qualitative study with 65 college students to learn about their leadership development through a semester-long leadership development course, and the researchers only reported students' demographics (e.g., race) without further analysis or examination on potential associations between students' different identity backgrounds and their reported leadership experience and growth. These studies have limitations in separating students' leadership development from other forms of development (e.g., social identity development). With a race-neutral framing of leadership, current leadership scholarship and institutional leadership education often have a minimal emphasis that reflects and validates diverse students, including the salient identity and cultural backgrounds for students of color [11].

In addition, the current student leadership literature and education demonstrate a common focus on developing leadership for the corporate world, which promotes leadership as an individual capacity instead of encouraging leadership practices for community purposes or social justice [12]. For instance, Andreu and colleagues (2020) [13] conceptualize leadership using the National Association of Colleges and Employers' definition, which suggests the concept of leadership to be an individual ability with an emphasis on managerial leadership. Despite the widely-accepted concept of corporate-oriented leadership in the current literature and practices, there is a need to recognize leadership as a socially constructed concept that can be interpreted differently by individuals, and there are many types of leadership. In short, it is crucial to re-envision and broaden the definition of leadership beyond a dominant narrative in order to transform higher education research and practices toward considering the role of race and facilitating culturally relevant leadership development for diverse students.

2.2. The Role of Race in Leadership Development for Students of Color

Even though the majority of the literature presents a minimal consideration of race in studying diverse students' leadership development, there are scholars who specifically study how, if at all, race or ethnicity is associated with college students' leadership [14–25]. The findings suggested that race does influence different racial groups' leadership development, such as students' motivation to lead and leadership efficacy.

To begin with, some studies looked at college students' motivation to lead by race [19,20]. For instance, in Harper and Quayle's (2007) [19] qualitative research of 32 Black/African American male student organization leaders at six universities, the results showed that these student leaders developed the motivation to lead in order to represent Black/African American population in different student organizations. In this case, race and racial diversity was an important factor for Black/African American college students to develop the motivation to lead. In addition, limited studies were conducted to compare racially diverse students' leadership efficacy—students' self-belief in becoming a leader, and their findings also warranted a need for acknowledging different racial groups' various levels of this leadership attribute. For example, in Kodama and Dugan's (2013) [21] quantitative study of a national sample of 8,510 college students on leadership self-efficacy, findings showed that (1) having sociocultural conversations with peers and (2) holding a positional leadership role in on-campus student organizations were respective factors showing statistically significant, positive impacts on leadership efficacy for White, Asian Pacific American, African American/Black, Latino/as, and multiracial students. This study also found that participating in community service was a statistically significant, positive predictor for

Asian Pacific American, African American/Black, and multiracial students. This study provided some insights into a need for attending to cross-group differences by race.

In short, empirical studies recommend a relationship between race and leadership development for students of color. However, there is still a need for more studies on different racially diverse students to develop a comprehensive knowledge about their leadership development in various aspects.

2.3. Higher Education Opportunities Encouraging Leadership Development for Students of Color

Some literature provides indications regarding higher education institutions' function in encouraging leadership development for diverse student populations. Specifically, research findings have shown that instead of the credit-bearing leadership classes or designated leadership programs, certain co-curricular or extra-curricular opportunities were specifically identified as important experiences for leadership development for students of color. For instance, studies suggested that student engagement in joining identity-based student organizations [18,19,23–25], taking ethnic studies classes [26], and partaking in student activism [27,28] positively promoted leadership development among students of color. In Minthorn's (2014) [18] qualitative study that compared perceptions and values of leadership among 21 Native American college students at five institutions, the results revealed that Native American student leaders demonstrated determination to undertake leadership positions at Native American student organizations due to identifying a need for preserving Native cultures and voicing the needs for their Native American peers. In another study, Beatty (2015) [24] conducted a qualitative study to examine five Latin@ student leaders' experiences and involvement in one institution's Latin@ student organizations. The findings showed that these student leaders developed leadership identity and skills through organizing on-campus activism with their respective student organizations. In summary, these findings are significant in identifying important on-campus activities supporting leadership development among students of color beyond formal leadership educational opportunities. However, there is still a need for a comprehensive understanding of how different on-campus educational opportunities and activities encourage leadership development for students of color.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that informs this study's design and analysis is the Social Action, Leadership, and Transformation model (SALT) [4]. Based on critical literature and established college student leadership models, the SALT framework specifically focuses on social justice leadership, aiming to disrupt systems of oppression and achieve justice for minoritized and oppressed groups.

The SALT model delineates seven attributes that signify social justice leadership: capacity for empathy, critical consciousness, commitment to justice, equity in purpose, value of collective action, controversy with courage, and coalescence. Capacity for empathy refers to one's ability to understand others' different perspectives, particularly regarding individuals with marginalized identities. Critical consciousness describes one's understanding of their and others' privileged and oppressed identities in context. Commitment to justice foregrounds an individual's determination to promote social justice for oppressed and underserved groups. In addition, equity in purpose highlights one's efforts in including group members' respective needs while working toward a mutual goal in the leadership process. Next, value of collective action stresses a collaborative orientation that leaders proactively work alongside the communities to disrupt oppression. Controversy with courage is an individual's ability to constructively have difficult conversations with others for addressing or solving equity issues. Lastly, coalescence highlights the recognition that social justice empowers and benefits all groups, and it is crucial to work together to coalesce every person's effort toward this goal.

The SALT model is suitable for the current study for its explicit attention to considering power, privilege, and oppression in studying leadership, which corresponds with the

current study's intention and interest. Additionally, with the SALT model framework, the authors consider students' cultural backgrounds and social identities in their social justice leadership development, which supports this study's purpose of understanding social identities in relationship to leadership development for students of color. Lastly, the SALT model's specification on social justice leadership is consistent with this study's interest in better understanding social justice leadership development among students of color. In short, the SALT model is an effective conceptual framework for this study.

4. Methodology

This study utilized a critical qualitative study design with the goal of developing an in-depth knowledge of the research question [29]. Informed by critical methodological theory and critical epistemology, the critical qualitative methodology provides a tool for researchers to "capture internal connections between knowledge, action, power, human identity, and other basic concepts" [30] (p. 44) in their studies of human experience. Therefore, the researcher used critical qualitative methodology to examine college student leaders' conceptualization of social justice leadership (i.e., their knowledge) and how this understanding connects with contexts such as institutional spaces and educational opportunities.

4.1. Research Context and Study Participants

The researcher employed a purposeful sampling technique [29,31] to decide the research setting for recruiting eligible and information-rich participants. Specifically, the study applied the intensity sampling technique to include information-rich participants and the maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling strategy that "captur [es] and describe [es] the central themes that cut across a great deal of variation" [29] (pp. 234–235). Information-rich participants are individuals who demonstrate a great extent of knowledge about the research inquiry; in this study, it will be people who know about and/or practice social justice leadership in their life. Therefore, it is important to invite information-rich participants for meeting the study's purpose and maximize the possibility of understanding higher education's functions in supporting social justice leadership among students of color.

The researcher used intensity sampling to determine research sites with more social justice leadership opportunities, as well as sites with more potential participants. Recognizing that social justice issues often occur beyond higher education campus environments, a broader context, urban cities were chosen as the research setting. With the intensity sampling and maximum variation sampling approaches, New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles were selected as the study sites. These sites were comparable in (1) having a greater number of people of color (i.e., non-White) population; (2) having a high percentage of the total undergraduate students of color enrollment (i.e., potentially eligible participants) in eligible postsecondary institutions; and (3) being the states with notable progressive politics and official support for social justice advocacy.

Applying intensity sampling, the study included potential study participants meeting the following eligibility criteria: (1) self-identifying as a student of color; (2) being at least 18 years old and enrolled as an undergraduate student during the time of the study in an eligible postsecondary institution in New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles; (3) self-identifying as a leader regardless of formal or positional leadership; (4) partaking in social justice leadership on- or off-campus; and (5) enacting social justice leadership with advocacy for communities of color.

4.2. Data Collection

The researcher used purposeful sampling for data collection; the researcher directly contacted relevant institutional offices/programs/organizations at eligible institutions and off-campus community organizations that were mostly like to nominate or contact potential student participants. The researcher first compiled three contacts lists for each city site: (1) one list of higher education institutional office/program contacts; (2) one list with

student organization contacts; and (3) one list with off-campus community organization contacts. The researcher then reached out to these contacts for participant recruitment between September and November 2019.

The data collection included in-person, semi-structured interviews and participant-chosen site visits in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles between October and December 2019. Sixteen student leaders from seven postsecondary institutions completed the study. All 16 students completed two one-on-one, 60–90 minute interviews. Additionally, 14 of them completed a participant-chosen site visit with the researcher, while two other students opted out of the site visit due to inconvenience and schedule conflicts. Table 1 provides a participant profile summary. There were various forms of study data, including interview audio recordings, digital photos or videos taken from the site visits, and relevant materials in physical or electronic copies advocacy campaign flyers or community organization websites.

Table 1. Study participant profile.

Name	City	Institution ¹	Year	Gender	Race and/or (Ethnicity) ²	Social Justice Leadership
Jay	New York	Private University 1	3rd	Female	African American	Advocacy for Black Muslims
Ann	New York	Public College 2	3rd	Female	Black (West African) and Asian (Japanese)	Advocacy for African Americans and food justice for communities of color
Natalie	New York	Private University 1	2nd	Female	Black/African American (Ghanaian)	Advocacy for Black students and Black women
Vivian	New York	Private University 1	1st	Female	Hispanic/Latino (Colombian) and Asian (Indian)	Advocacy for students of color
Nia	New York	Private University 1	4th	Female	Afro-Arab (Ethiopian, Yemeni)	Advocacy for refugees (in U.S. and internationally) and Arab students/communities
May	Chicago	Private University 3	4th	Female	Multiracial Asian (White, Cantonese)	Advocacy for LGBTQIA+ people of color and wmxn and tgnc poc
Jordan	Chicago	Private University 4	3rd	Male	Black (Jamaican-Haitian)	Advocacy for student engagement in voting and community building in underserved communities
Patricia	Chicago	Private University 3	4th	Female	Asian (Filipina)	Advocacy for undocumented populations and Filipino communities
Tony	Los Angeles	Private University 5	1st	Male	Aramaean (Middle Eastern)	Advocacy for Middle Eastern communities
Jasmin	Los Angeles	Private University 5	1st	Female	Latina (Puerto Rican, Pakistani, Irish)	Advocacy for underserved communities of color
Nancy	Los Angeles	Private University 5	4th	Female	(Armenian)	Advocacy for underserved communities and orphans in Armenia
Donna	Los Angeles	Public University 6	4th	Female	Black	Advocacy for Black students and Black Lives Matter movements
Michelle	Los Angeles	Public University 7	4th	Female	African American /Black (Ghanaian)	Advocacy for campaigns to challenge standardized testing and empower communities of color
Annie	Los Angeles	Public University 7	1st	Female	Latina (Mexican)	Advocacy for underserved students and undocumented communities
Juliana	Los Angeles	Public University 7	4th	Female	Latina (Mexican)	Advocacy for community empowerment among underserved communities of color
Dorothy	Los Angeles	Public University 7	1st	Female	Latina (Mexican)	Advocacy for Latino/as

¹ Institutions were labeled with numbering for pseudonymization; ² Student self-reported race and/or ethnicity.

4.3. Data Analysis

The 33 interview transcripts were used as the primary data in this analysis, while other forms of data were used for supplemental or contextual purposes. In the analysis, the

researcher applied power analysis [30] and the SALT model [4] while developing a revised analytic procedure informed by critical qualitative research methodology [30,32]. There were four stages of the analysis procedure. First, the researcher reviewed the interview data using an open coding technique. Second, the researcher utilized the preliminary coding scheme established during the first stage to review and analyze the data. Third, several rounds of review were conducted to rearrange the codes and develop a full coding scheme. Lastly, the researcher analyzed the data using the full coding scheme. The MAXQDA software program was used for the analysis.

4.4. Researcher Positionality

To promote a rigorous and equity-oriented study, the researcher's mindfulness and reflexivity in the research process was carefully attended to [33]. For researcher mindfulness, the researcher constantly demonstrated empathy and nonjudgmental presumptions in the research engagement, such as listening to any information and opinions shared by the respondents [33]. As for researcher reflexivity, the researcher was engaged in a systematic reflection process and carefully examining her own perspectives that might influence her interpretation and sense-making of the results. Throughout the research process, the researcher stayed mindful in interacting with student participants, revisiting her motivation for conducting this research, reflecting upon her personal backgrounds and salient social identities, acknowledging her researcher positionality, and identifying potential power relationships [33].

5. Results

The study results show four salient themes regarding the ways college student leaders of color identified institutional spaces that signified the function of higher education in fostering their perception of social justice leadership: (1) leadership educational programs for students of color; (2) culturally relevant academic majors and classes; (3) designated institutional offices and programs serving diverse students; and (4) identity-based or political student organizations. Together, these on-campus spaces and relevant educational opportunities meaningfully fostered these student leaders' social justice leadership development.

5.1. Leadership Educational Programs Designed for Students of Color

Student leader participants highlighted their meaningful learning experiences from partaking in institutionalized leadership education opportunities that were developed with a focus on social justice and specifically designed for students of color. Seven student participants from four institutions had participated in such activities, and they described these experiences as being transformative in their social justice leadership development. For instance, Private University 1 in NYC offered a one-year-long, extra-curricular leadership program enrolling freshmen and sophomore students self-identifying as a person of color with a focus on transformative justice practices, and three of the student participants partook in this program during different years. Jay, a junior and African American female student leader at Private University 1, delineated her experience participating in the leadership retreat from this program:

One of the most significant things I would say really got me thinking about social justice was this leadership retreat for students of color that I went on last fall [...] [what] I felt very meaningful was when they told us we hold the power for social justices, and that is something we can bring everywhere we go and to every single space [...] social justice is the conversation we had with people every day, you can bring something about social justice to every conversation you have.

For Jay, she highlighted her understanding of social justice leadership as an everyday practice, and she also demonstrated the determination to practice social justice in every space, including her day-to-day personal interactions with others. Her perception of social justice leadership further motivated her to take on a leadership role in addressing justice issues impacting Black-identifying Muslim students on campus.

Natalie, a sophomore and Black female student leader at Private University 1, also identified this leadership program's positive impacts on her development of social justice leadership:

We did an activity at the end of the retreat where we created these sort of mind maps of ourselves and our goals for ourselves [...] and I felt that was a really powerful and important piece of the retreat because it was sort of saying, in order to be an effective leader in social justice, you have to be in tune with yourself and who you want to become as a person as well, because you can't just have goals for your social justice or for your advocacy. You need to have those goals match up with your own personal goals [...] I felt [the retreat] did a really good job about harnessing the personal work and the self-improvement that kind of goes along with the process of trying to make change in a community, and I thought that was really cool.

For Natalie, she perceived social justice leadership by connecting social justice leadership with personal goals and self-improvement to ensure meaningful practice of social justice leadership. To her, the goal of social justice leadership is to advocate for the Black population, especially Black women, and she practiced social justice leadership despite not holding a positional leadership position because she integrated social justice leadership advocacy in both her personal and academic lives.

At a different institution, Private University 5 in Los Angeles, there was also a designated leadership program for college students of color. This semester-long program featured training in awareness and competency toward promoting diversity and inclusion. This program encompassed bi-weekly meetings and large group events and was intended for first- and second-year students of color. Two student participants respectively acknowledged this program and described the program's impact on providing a safe and brave space for students with multiple minoritized identities to share their perspectives while developing critical awareness of and commitment toward social justice leadership. For instance, Jasmin, a Latina freshman student leader at Private University 5, shared,

Mostly we just focus on awareness, and so making sure that everybody is on the same page about these issues [...] [This program] makes me really happy, because I can see [what we learned] being applied to the whole school and just making this a more inclusive environment.

With Jasmin, her learning about critical issues related to identity, the campus context, and larger systemic factors together helped her develop a better understanding of social justice and a need for social justice leadership, and she demonstrated a firm commitment to promoting inclusivity and diverse presentation for marginalized students, specifically Latinx students and/or low-income students on her campus as a primary goal of practicing social justice leadership.

In short, student leaders of color identified specific leadership programs as important institutional spaces and educational opportunities that helped them develop social justice leadership through critical awareness (e.g., understanding their identities), sharing experiences with peers, and furthering critical knowledge of systemic oppression and privilege.

5.2. Culturally Relevant Academic Majors and Classes

Another salient finding pertaining to social justice leadership development for students of color is academic majors and classes that applied critical perspectives and/or were culturally relevant. Specifically, students highlighted that social sciences classes where professors taught histories of communities of color (e.g., Arab populations, Black Muslims, African Americans, or Latinx/o/a populations) were helpful and empowering for them to develop critical awareness and learn about various social justice issues. For example, Ann, a junior, biracial female student leader at Public College 2 in NYC, shared a meaningful experience through taking an African civilization course during her first year in college,

I found my major through my professor [...] I figured out what I wanted to study, what I wanted to put my passion, and that was teaching about racial issues and the history of different people. [...] I guess being from a place in Africa and me wanting to educate, I learned so much from her that people on the regular don't know, so I feel like I have so much to offer and spread information, and I guess it changed my life in a way that it made me passionate about something for the first time, really made me have a drive to do this.

As someone coming from a bicultural background, Ann described this course as transformative because she was able to learn about African cultures and histories from critical and asset-based perspectives while connecting to her salient ethnic identity as a West African. She also learned to conceptualize empowerment as one form of social justice leadership, which was for community advancement and collective awareness-raising. The course was more than personally inspiring because she developed a professional aspiration to become an educator as one way of practicing social justice leadership in education.

For Michelle, a Black, Ghanaian female senior at Public University 7 in Los Angeles, she described a conscious decision to change her major from Science to Sociology because she perceived the importance of taking culturally relevant courses to develop a critical understanding of the injustices she observed and experienced growing up in her own communities:

The classes that I am taking, my Sociology classes or my AFAM classes, and the professors teaching them are very realistic and they tell you all the issue that affect students and people in various communities [...] changing my major to Sociology and really learning about society and the social infrastructures that are placed could help me with [learning about] how health is dispersed in different areas [...] for my Sociology major, I am learning more about society, I am learning more about race, I am learning more about education, I am learning more about like these higher institutions and the ways that people are benefiting from them, and the ways that people are not benefiting from them.

Michelle learned to conceptualize social justice leadership to be doing the work in and with the communities to challenge inequitable conditions facing them, and she was determined to pursue professions in health administration to continue advocating for under-resourced communities in the city.

Similar to Michelle, Juliana, a Latina senior student leader at Public University 7, also attributed her major in Chicano Studies and her minor in Education to be crucial in developing her understanding and enactment of social justice leadership on giving back and empowering the communities from underserved neighborhoods in Los Angeles. She said,

I'm a Chicano Studies major and Education Studies minor, so it definitely goes hand in hand with what I do. So a lot of the classes that I do take are courses relevant to the work I do specifically looking at the different narratives of students and people in our community and like I said it's realizing the patterns that we see in the community. Finding ways or trying to figure out how we can break those patterns for the better, and I think for a lot of students it is meaningful because it is [that] you do want to change it and you want to have an impact on your community.

Juliana centered on the community and the people in her understanding and practice of social justice leadership, and she described the goal of social justice leadership as making impactful, positive, and sustainable change for these populations.

In sum, academic majors and courses manifest higher education's functions by providing spaces and educational opportunities to support social justice leadership development among student leaders of color through culturally relevant curriculum, contemporary content, and critical perspectives that encourage the disruption of injustices.

5.3. Designated Institutional Offices and Programs Serving Diverse Students

Third, student leaders commonly referenced the important role of institutional offices and institutionalized programs, especially the ones that served diverse students and offered meaningful community engagement opportunities in supporting their social justice leadership development. Offices such as multicultural affairs, cultural centers, and community engagement were identified as crucial places for social justice leadership development. Jordan, a Black junior male student leader from Private University 4 in Chicago, introduced his university's entrepreneurship center as one space that supported his learning and enactment of social justice leadership:

Entrepreneurship is a means of disrupting a current order that exists [...] [The center] is open to community members, that attempts and tries to be community-facing even though it's [a private university] [...] I think this space is one of those at the university that does a good job of trying to be engaged in a positive way.

Jordan showed his understanding of social justice leadership to highlight the collective partnership with the communities, as well as with the goal of empowering the communities. Through participating in the center's programs, Jordan also developed skills and commitment to utilizing entrepreneurship in enacting social justice leadership to work directly with and empower local businesses in underserved communities in Chicago.

Natalie acknowledged her institution's multicultural center that hosted the students of color leadership program and provided other workshops and opportunities to further students' social justice leadership development:

[The Center] really helped me see that there is a lot of value in just being a leader in your own way and in your own life, in your own community whatever that means for you, but it doesn't necessarily have to come with a title, you know? I don't have to be a president, or I don't have to be actively leading a group of people to be a leader [as] leadership comes in all different types of forms.

From her engagement with the center, Natalie affirmed her perception of social justice leadership beyond holding a formal title or positional leadership in order to advocate for social justice. Instead, she turned to focus on being a leader in all aspects regardless of a position title, and she had been practicing social justice leadership for herself or her community in various spaces, from classrooms to personal interactions with others.

In summary, specific institutional offices or centers served crucial functions in providing meaningful educational opportunities that fostered holistic development for students of color, including social identity development, academic success, and social justice leadership.

5.4. Identity-Based or Political Student Organizations

Lastly, most student leaders had affiliations or leadership positions with identity-based or political student organizations on their campus, and they talked about these organizations offering meaningful opportunities for their social justice leadership development. Donna, a Black senior female student leader from Public University 6 in Los Angeles, shared how she co-founded a Black dance team that was culturally relevant in incorporating Black/African American histories and cultures into their choreography and dance practices:

A dance we are working on right now is dealing with the theme of reparations that we are actually performing at an event [...] I have been grateful to have two choreographers who work well together, and also are creative in coming up with these dances and being able to display them in a way that people are able to understand, and also our team is able to internalize and learn from as well [...] I feel like I have been tasked with an important job especially with being a part of starting this organization [...] making sure that everyone is aware of why we are doing what we are doing, what the purpose of [the dance group] is, and I think that is also something that is unique to our team

To Donna, social justice leadership was a very intentional leadership with specific purposes and impacts concerning liberating Black/African American in the U.S. Through undertaking the leadership position within this dance group, she also learned that engaging arts and creativity could be a form of social justice leadership to empower and heal her communities from racial oppression and intergenerational trauma.

In addition, Juliana's participation with a community service organization on campus was vital for her social justice leadership development through in-person service working with underserved schools and communities in Los Angeles:

The way I started getting involved with leadership work, racial leadership work is through [organization name], which is a community service organization run by students. So we make sure that we have funding to book transportation—vehicles in order to ensure that volunteers don't have to worry about going to site. So site is basically our community partner that we work with out in the community, specifically for [organization name].

Juliana highlighted social justice leadership practices, including leveraging resources and advocacy to facilitate change for both the group members (e.g., student volunteers) and the communities. She also highlighted collective partnership being crucial in social justice leadership that everyone was working toward a common goal of supporting underserved schools and communities.

To sum up, student-led or -initiated organizations provided additional institutional spaces and educational opportunities that encouraged social justice leadership development for student leaders of color. The overall findings affirmed higher education's functions in positively fostering students of color and their social justice leadership development.

6. Discussion

The study and its findings provide important insights that contribute to the current literature and educational practices, specifically about college students of color and social justice leadership. The following delineates four aspects, highlighting (1) the importance of race in social justice leadership development for students of color; (2) students of color's perception of leadership/social justice leadership; (3) higher education campus spaces in support social justice leadership for students of color; and (4) evidence supporting the SALT model's utility.

First, the study findings affirm the importance of race in social justice leadership development among students of color. Even though the study's 16 students of color participants are not generalizable to all students of color population, every study participant acknowledged that their race or ethnicity was relevant to their social justice leadership development. For instance, Jay's social justice leadership advocacy for Black Muslims, Natalie's focus on supporting Black women, and Jasmin's commitment to promoting inclusion for Latinx students all showed a direct connection between their social justice leadership and their race and/or other salient social identities.

Second, this study expands existing knowledge of social justice leadership by centering the perspectives of student leaders of color, which is difficult to find in the extant literature. The study findings also demonstrate the ways in which student participants perceived the concept of leadership differently than the dominant perception of leadership. For example, instead of perceiving leadership solely based on formal positional leadership, Jay and Natalie highlighted the need for broadening the definition while asserting that everyone can be a leader, and leadership can be practiced in all settings, not just during specific times or situations. In addition, study participants defined social justice leadership with a purpose beyond self-advancement. In other words, they did not pursue and perform social justice leadership for their personal benefit. Instead, they engaged in social justice leadership with a purpose of making a positive change for the community/communities (e.g., Black Muslims, communities of color). Student participants also framed the concept of social justice leadership to be for and with people, which was different than the corporate, managerial leadership that emphasized hierarchy and power dynamics. In sum, the study

results challenge the conventional perception of leadership while clarifying what the concept of social justice leadership entails.

Third, the findings affirm higher education's functions in fostering social justice leadership development among students of color. Through identifying institutional spaces and relevant educational opportunities, the study findings support current literature that culturally relevant academic majors and courses [26] and identity-based student organizations [18,19,23,24] are crucial in encouraging social justice leadership among students of color. Moreover, this study presents additional evidence that leadership programs designed for students of color and institutional offices/centers serving multicultural or racially diverse students are instrumental in fostering student leaders of social justice leadership development.

Lastly, this study's findings provide empirical results supporting the SALT model framework's utility, as there are very limited empirical studies applying this recently developed model. For example, through the study participants' descriptions of their understanding of social justice leadership (e.g., Jay, Natalie, Ann, Michelle, Juliana, Donna), they specifically highlighted the SALT model's critical consciousness dimension, which describes a student's ability to understand the complexity of intersections of one's multiple identities, as well as the skill to identify systemic factors in relation to power, privilege, and oppression in perpetuating injustices toward specific communities in society. Student leaders also demonstrated capacity for empathy (e.g., Juliana's knowledge of how different communities are receiving inequitable treatment), commitment to justice (e.g., Jay's determination to advocating for Black Muslims), equity in purpose (e.g., Jordan's entrepreneurship leadership in working alongside underserved small businesses in the community), and value in collective action (e.g., Donna's leadership in working with everyone to perform dance as a form of social justice). In short, the SALT model is applicable to support a better understanding of social justice leadership development for college students of color.

7. Conclusions

This study centers on the voices of 16 college student leaders of color to highlight the ways in which seven higher education institutions' campus spaces and educational practices provide meaningful opportunities for their social justice leadership development. The study has implications for future research regarding a need for more empirical studies with various racially diverse student populations, as well as a different focus on students' leadership developmental stage (e.g., developing motivation to lead, leadership skills). This study also provides implications for higher education institutions that college campuses should continue utilizing their functions in supporting diverse students' leadership development through offering special programs for students of color and encouraging other leadership educational opportunities through academic courses and student organizations to prepare diverse student populations to become leaders practicing social justice leadership for their own communities, campus, and society.

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