

# MOBILIZING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP: NARRATIVES OF EARLY-CAREER PROFESSIONALS' SELF-EFFICACY IN TRANSLATING LEADERSHIP THEORY TO PRACTICE

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## **Abstract**

Given calls to integrate critical perspectives in leadership education, this paper presents the findings from a study conducted to see how efficacious early-career professionals are in translating these concepts into their practice. Guided by narrative inquiry, we centered the stories of nine practitioners after they participated in CSP 786, a graduate program leadership course informed by an attention to equity. Findings included: experiencing barriers within institutional contexts, working within spheres of influence, reacting to feedback when actualizing theory, and reflecting on power via social identities. Implications for practice are then offered.

Keywords: leadership education, self-efficacy, critical, early-career professionals, graduate preparation

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As the primary means of socializing graduate students into the field of higher education and student affairs (HESA), graduate preparation programs aim to teach knowledge and skills about how to be an effective student affairs educator (Perez, 2021). However, studies have found minoritized students feel alienated and disconnected from white faculty and peers in graduate programs (e.g., Linder et al., 2015), indicating a need to interrogate how whiteness is present in socialization processes, curricula, and pedagogy. Additionally, professional development in student affairs often centers on dominant narratives and requires “individuals who do not hold those identities to conform to dominant norms in order to be respected and taken seriously” (Perez, 2021, p. 106). Thus, the notion of redefining the graduate student experience in HESA programs to be more inclusive and cognizant of social identities is of great importance to the field.

A similar paradigm shift is occurring in courses on leadership education due to how whiteness is also intertwined in leadership and higher education spaces today (Dugan & Humbles, 2018). Leadership education has a renewed focus on praxis that encourages self-reflection to examine the ways in which the larger social context, one’s socialization, and environments shape the beliefs, understanding, and the practice of leadership (Dugan & Humbles, 2018). These goals align with the NASPA and ACPA (2015) professional competency domains focused on social justice and inclusion that call for professionals to “advocate on issues of social justice, oppression, privilege and power” as a foundational outcome (p. 30).

Within graduate programs in HESA, there is variation in how, or even if, leadership education is incorporated into the curriculum. Some programs have a leadership-related course as a requirement, while others offer it as an elective. Additionally, the content of leadership classes ranges from a crash course in “traditional” leadership theory, to designing co-curricular leadership development

programs, to more recently, applying critical perspectives to leadership (Boyd et al., 2019). Hopefully, this newer pedagogical approach that centers deconstruction and critique as learning outcomes in leadership education will prepare professionals for creating just leadership spaces for students.

Seeing the need to further comprehend how students apply learning from their leadership education courses, the purpose of this study was to understand how HESA professionals described their efficacy in implementing critical perspectives to their practice after learning this knowledge in a graduate leadership course. Since the use of critical perspectives is a newer approach in teaching about leadership education, this study has significance for faculty in higher education who are considering incorporating this critical lens. Using leader self-efficacy and Reason and Kimball’s (2012) theory-to-practice model as a framework, we learned how efficacious early-career professionals felt to translate critical understandings of leadership in their work. The guiding research questions were:

1. How do practitioners who took a leadership education graduate course focused on critical perspectives describe their efficacy in applying their learning to higher education contexts?
2. What contributed to early-career professionals’ efficacy when implementing critical perspectives in leadership?

## Literature Review

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The field of higher education and student affairs has notably been a space where professionals are overworked and where burnout rates are high, especially when diversity work is concerned (Anderson, 2021). For professionals of Color, the challenges are greater as the work can “take a toll on their physical, emotional, and social well-being” (Boss & Bravo, 2021, p. 201). The pressure to conform to unhealthy standards begins during graduate programs, where faculty, supervisors,

and peers socialize students into the norms of the field (Perez, 2021). This socialization continues into their first professional roles, where they may have little power to affect change due to hierarchies and systems of power (Dinise-Halter, 2017). The socialization of graduate students through curriculum, professional development, and informal messaging is still highly influenced by dominant narratives (Linder et al., 2015; Perez, 2021).

Related, scholars have interrogated how educators have traditionally operationalized and taught leadership development and education (Dugan & Leonette, 2021). This shift is imperative given that the ACPA/NASPA (2015) competency on leadership is devoid of a focus on power-based analysis beyond reflecting on “one’s personal values, beliefs, and histories” (p. 27). Advocates for more justice-based learning emphasize the need to better promote equity, increase access to opportunity, and amplify marginalized voices in leadership education while adopting pedagogy focused on critical perspectives (Dugan, 2017). By challenging and critiquing white and men-centered views of leadership, graduate students are given an opportunity to re-envision leadership and their own professional development through a more equitable lens.

Learning to analyze leadership contexts for inclusivity is important, but some researchers argue there is more to be done (Bitton & Jones, 2021). Naming and confronting power and how leadership spaces privilege certain dominant identities is key to progress towards a more justice-oriented approach to leadership education. And the first step in making these strides is to educate new professionals in the field of education on how to identify, analyze, and critique power as it relates to social identity and positionality (Barnes et al., 2018). Highlighted in this scholarship is that leadership courses in HESA programs should hold equity as a goal and striving for equity requires a focus on justice. Teaching leadership and social justice should be linked in one’s curriculum and culturally relevant pedagogy (Chunoo et al., 2019).

Integrating a focus on critical perspectives in curriculum can focus on facilitating dialogue, critical self-reflection, and attending to social location; all require an emphasis on not just individual leader identity development but also the “ways that students develop and are treated within structural systems of power that perpetuate privilege and oppression” (Bitton & Jones, 2021, p. 64). The pressure to perform and achieve in student affairs is based on a perception of the ideal worker that is also steeped in dominant narratives (Boss & Bravo, 2021), a concept that leadership education can interrogate and redefine. By helping students learn about critical leadership education, faculty could impart knowledge to build efficacy for socially-just, critical leadership broadly.

### Conceptual Framework

We used a framework integrating scholarship on leader self-efficacy alongside Reason and Kimball’s (2012) theory-to-practice model in conducting this study. Building upon Bandura’s (1997) work on self-efficacy, researchers have applied this concept within leadership development, describing it as:

a person’s judgment that he or she [or they] can successfully exert leadership by setting a direction for the work group, building relationships with followers in order to gain commitment to change goals, and working with them to overcome obstacles to change. (Paglis & Green, 2002, p. 217)

Scholars have investigated the importance of attending to self-efficacy in individuals’ leadership development, given that a person’s belief they can execute tasks in leadership situations is key to their performance (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011). Researchers have also described what contributes to leadership self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) asserted that mastery experiences (i.e., engaging in experiences directly to develop skills), vicarious experiences (i.e., seeing others role modeling behaviors), assessment of physiological and

psychological states, as well as feedback can improve self-efficacy. Although this scholarship was formative to developing the study, to answer our research questions, we also incorporated the work of Reason and Kimball (2012).

Reason and Kimball's (2012) model of theory-to-practice translation showcases how practitioners implement knowledge of formal theories in their work. Professionals assess their institutional contexts, examining how the formal theories they learned align or conflict with their environments. Once they process formal theories through institutional contexts, they develop informal theories on how to fulfill their roles. These informal theories then lead to practice. Of note, there are two feedback loops as people adjust informal theories based on their practice and as they gain new knowledge of their contexts. In the present study, the formal theories included the knowledge that students gained about critical perspectives and leadership from the graduate preparation course. Therefore, we were interested in how participants' self-efficacy was shaped by the supportive or discouraging contexts they navigated, as well as what feedback they received from those around them (e.g., students, supervisors).

### Study Design

We grounded our study design in a constructivist epistemology. Constructivism asserts that knowledge is co-created between the researcher and participant, as each actor contributes their understandings relative to the study phenomenon (Schwandt, 1994). Working well with constructivism, we elected to use narrative inquiry as our study methodology (Chase, 2008). Narrative inquiry offers insights into "the versions of self, reality, and experience the storyteller produces through the telling" (Chase, 2008, p. 214). Narrative researchers are interested in comprehending the arc of participants' experiences, paying attention to formative settings, moments, as well as interactions and internal processing that occurs. A narrative approach was beneficial as we inquired

about participants' journeys before, during, and after their time in the leadership course.

### About the Course and Researchers

This study centered on individuals who took a HESA class titled, "CSP 786: Leadership in Higher Education Contexts" (a pseudonym). The third author of this manuscript (Amy Barnes) taught this course, as she serves on the faculty in the graduate program. The course occurs in the first semester of the cohort master's program. Since 2017, this class has utilized Dugan's (2017) book which uses critical social theory to deconstruct and reconstruct leadership theories, practices, and education. Assignments ranged from engaging in personal reflections about one's leadership philosophies to presenting on a theory cluster (see Dugan, 2017) with a focus on deconstruction/reconstruction.

It is fitting, at this point, to articulate our positionalities relative to the course, noting how they influenced this project. Antonio Duran served as a teaching assistant (TA) for CSP 786 during the fall of 2018. His status as someone who knew the course material provided him context when engaging with participants. However, much like his fellow co-researchers, he was cognizant of how his pre-existing relationship with individuals shaped the information they divulged. Adrian Bitton came into this project with experience in leadership education at higher education institutions. Although she did not have a direct connection with CSP 786, she reviewed course materials and debriefed with her co-researchers throughout the project. As mentioned above, Amy served as the instructor of record for CSP 786. Because of her direct role, the research team made decisions to encourage participants to be as forthcoming as possible, explained below.

### Participant Recruitment and Selection

After receiving IRB approval, we began recruitment for this study. Participants needed to meet the following criteria: (a) have completed the CSP 786 course in Fall 2017 or Fall 2018, given this

was when the course employed the Dugan (2017) textbook; and (b) identified as a practitioner who engages in leadership education, which included working with students. To recruit participants, we emailed students and alumni using available listservs. Those who were interested in participating filled out a demographic form asking them to identify when they took the class, their present functional area, and social identities. Nine participants elected to participate. Since this would be a substantial sample to understand their narratives, we selected all nine to engage in the study. See Table 1 for demographic information.

### Data Collection

Guided by our methodology and integrated framework, individuals engaged in two semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes and recorded via Zoom. Because Antonio served as a TA for the students in the Fall 2018 cohort, Adrian conducted interviews with this group to create a space where they could feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. Antonio, in turn, interviewed the Fall 2017 cohort of participants. Given her status as the instructor for the course, Amy did not conduct any interviews though participants were informed at the beginning of the interview and in the consent form that Amy would have access and would analyze the data.

The first interview focused on the experiences participants had in the course, reflecting on the lessons they gained about using critical perspectives in leadership. The second interview asked them to reflect on their present work, encouraging them to name how they translated their knowledge. The team designed the interview protocol to align with literature on leader self-efficacy, using concepts named by Bandura (1997). To align with narrative inquiry, the interviewers motivated participants to name events and stories revealing how they made meaning of efficacy when translating leadership theory to practice. Example interview questions included:

- Tell me about a time you felt like you did well in applying critical perspectives to leadership in your role.
- How did you know you did well?
- What kind of feedback did you receive from others when you presented a more critical perspective of leadership?
- Tell me about a particular time or moment when you experienced this.

Of note, these interviews occurred in the spring and summer semesters of 2020, meaning the contexts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the #BlackLivesMatter movement were oftentimes salient. After their completion, a professional transcriber then transcribed the interviews verbatim.

### Data Analysis

After interviews were completed, Antonio and Adrian engaged in the analytical process, with Amy serving as an informed peer debriefer, which bolstered trustworthiness. Antonio and Adrian began by individually engaging in a deductive and inductive coding process. Specifically, the research team created a list of deductive codes aligning with the leader self-efficacy literature (e.g., *mastery experiences*, *self-correcting cycle*, and *verbal persuasion and affirmation*) by meeting to discuss important concepts from scholarship. They also applied inductive codes that were either in vivo or salient parts of the participants' stories, honoring narrative inquiry. Example inductive codes included: being challenged by students when using critical perspectives, considering context when applying critical perspectives, and experiencing challenges due to departmental/institutional norms. Following this step, the team generated focused codes that offered insights present across participants' stories. After analysis was completed individually, the team came together to discuss insights and develop study findings. In this process, the team members engaged in discussions about the emerging themes and challenged each other to consider their potential biases (e.g., based on their

engagement with the course or social location).

## Findings

Participants' narratives provided insight into how efficacious they felt in translating critical perspectives on leadership to their practice. We offer four themes that manifested across participants' stories: experiencing barriers within institutional contexts, working within spheres of influence, reacting to feedback when actualizing theory, and reflecting on power via social identities.

### Experiencing Barriers Within Institutional Contexts

Participants named institutional contexts (e.g., institution size, type) as discouraging their efforts in translating critical perspectives of leadership. For example, Ty described how the predominantly white institution where he worked had operated in ways that stifled critical perspectives: "...historically, [my institution] is a very privileged set of students who go there. And...they're just used to having a lot of resources and a lot of supports..." Because of this history, institutional leaders overlooked the needs of historically minoritized students:

So all sorts of isms and biases go into those decision-making processes...the... people who hold the power to change things at [the institution] have...a large set of privileged identities and so it results in having a hard time understanding what it's like to not have that level of privilege and therefore maybe doing a lot of discounting of people's experiences.

In response to questions about how this influenced his efficacy in using knowledge gained in CSP 786, Ty described, "I think how decision-making works...my sphere of influence is very, very small here and I think that's the nature of where I sit in the hierarchy and how power and decision making is distributed at the university." His assessment of who makes changes at his institutions

led Ty to not feel efficacious in moving toward equitable goals in his practice.

Mauricio similarly described how he learned about institutional leaders' complacency to not improve conditions on campus for Students of Color, which in turn had a negative effect on his self-efficacy. Mauricio offered this example:

I got to sit in on, some retention committee meetings and the conversations were just kind of sad because... it was never really a conversation about how we can improve. It was more so a conversation about where we are doing good and let's keep doing that.

As Mauricio communicated, these committees were not engaging concerns he learned in CSP 786. Instead, they simply thought, "Hey, we're already doing all this, so, you know we're all good." In explaining the effect this had, Mauricio shared, "that...discouraged me. It's from the interactions I had with different folks once I started the role...It's the institutional layout [of] everything." Although he saw potential in "applying the stuff from the class," Mauricio's institutional context lowered his self-efficacy. As Mauricio later named, "being entry-level as well...it definitely hurts it a lot more because I think that your perspective isn't really seen."

Like Mauricio, other participants named challenges critiquing long-standing practices within departments and institutions, referring to them as the "ways things always worked." For example, Crystal was in Career Services for her first full-time role, a functional area that she mentioned was rife with "regular old racism." The office culture meant that co-workers pushed back on the critically-oriented conversations that Crystal wanted to have:

Conversations I've had with colleagues when I have talked about diversity and social justice in particular, have resulted in people being like, "Okay, but where's the data to back that up? And/or how were we supposed to do that logistically?"

As colleagues regularly told Crystal, “we’re a service at the end of the day,” which she interpreted to mean that pushing against the status quo was not encouraged. Although Crystal’s motivations to engage a critical lens within career services did not waver, these moments did affect her overall efficacy to change the dynamic in her office.

Fernando also discussed how he did not have “the infrastructure” to engage socially just perspectives within his residence life department. Fernando offered, “there’s policies, protocols, procedures that don’t align with the...critical perspective or that it’s not the education or the material is not provided by the departments...” This lack of departmental support and desire to maintain long-standing practices affected him as an entry-level professional:

As an entry-level professional,... you know that you’re trying to implement that critical perspective. But...a lack of feedback or a lack of supervision or infrastructure...you...are swimming in the darkness...you don’t know if you’re doing a good job or a bad job.

His context, combined with his entry-level professional status, led Fernando’s self-efficacy to fluctuate when implementing knowledge gained in CSP 786.

### Working Within Spheres of Influence

Participants were met with resistance when trying to affect change from a critical lens on a broader scale, but these individuals did speak to a higher sense of self-efficacy in doing so within their spheres of influence. Although they experienced frustrations on a departmental or institutional level, these participants felt an ability to take the ideas gained in CSP 786 and apply it with programs, staff, and initiatives within their individual purviews. Being able to do this served as mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997), positively shaping participants’ self-efficacy.

Participants like Amanda, Cecil, Crystal, Fernando, Jordan, Mauricio, and Ty could think of an

experience where supervisors trusted them to apply knowledge of critical perspectives within their roles. For instance, Jordan spoke of when she got to implement new practices at her internship within sorority and fraternity life (SFL). A staff member asked, “Okay, what else do you want to take on?” Because Jordan noticed that “nobody was really working with...academic initiatives or supporting them,” this was where she saw her impact potentially being. She hoped to infuse the concepts she learned in CSP 786, stating, “similarly to how you deconstruct and reconstruct ideas about leadership, deconstructing and reconstructing academic success and what that means.” The outcome was talking about issues like how “power and privilege that goes into being able to have a high GPA” and the need to discuss these ideas differently across councils given their racial demographics. In this experience, Jordan became “more comfortable... talking about all of this stuff,” showcasing she had the ability to infuse this critical lens into SFL. What is important to underscore from Jordan’s story is that an SFL staff member encouraged her to have this mastery experience, which raised her self-efficacy.

Like Jordan, Cecil articulated how being able to take ownership over projects within her role had a positive influence on self-efficacy. Cecil spoke about how, alongside her supervisor, they built RA training “from the ground up.” Taking the lessons she learned from CSP 786, she asked questions about how to inform students’ ideas about leadership: “how are we going to mold leaders? How are we going to train them and then scratch things, move things, change it completely?” What was meaningful about this for Cecil was the autonomy she felt from her supervisor to do this work successfully. As Cecil put it, “The autonomy helps the confidence a lot and feeling as though people trust me to do a good job. That allows me to maintain a critical nature without feeling like I’m doing something wrong.” In these moments, Cecil could question underlying assumptions about leadership from a more socially just point-of-view

and importantly, her supervisor provided her the chance to do so.

Other participants shared how they taught about critical perspectives within leadership contexts, which had a beneficial impact on self-efficacy. One example was in Amanda's narrative as she reflected on her time presenting at conferences on the topic of "how to diversify and talk about racism within your college union." As Amanda named, this subject is not broached within college unions, as many think about leadership and management from a more "operational" lens. When a lot of people attended her national presentation and were interested in her knowledge, she experienced a boost in her self-efficacy:

It boosted my confidence 'cause people were all of a sudden asking me, "Amanda, I'm a higher-level leadership and I am having this issue. What do you think?"... People were all of a sudden asking me things. And it boosts your confidence.

Consequently, it was teaching others on a national scale that showed Amanda she was capable of applying the lessons she learned in class.

Examples of this also came through in the stories offered by Cecil, Mauricio, and Ty as they educated their students about these ideas. Mauricio specifically recalled an interaction he had with a student who identified as a Black man. This student approached Mauricio describing his issues in connecting on campus socially and academically. As Mauricio also identified as a Black man, he recognized that he could engage with him on topics about social identities and navigating college. He stated, "It was them understanding how they can be more of a leader, like in, you know, their spaces and things like that. So... authentic leadership was what kind of comes up." Mauricio acknowledged this student could be further reflective on how he showed up in spaces and how people perceived him based on his social identities: "It was for them being their authentic selves in that environment... Being able to do things that made them feel more

comfortable, that helped them feel a little bit better...with the people around them." Mauricio named this instance as meaningful for his self-efficacy because he saw that his teachings "helped him" and that he was "applying those principles" in this situation.

## Reacting to Feedback When Actualizing Theory

When listening to stories of how participants enacted critical perspectives in leadership, we asked how they knew their actions were effective. As a result, feedback was interpreted as an important theme, consistent with Bandura's (1997) work with self-efficacy. Though most participants could recall feedback they received, there were key differences in the methods and sources of comments. Direct and verbal feedback were the most common responses, particularly from colleagues and supervisors. Fernando shared that at times the feedback he received was conflicting. His supervisor(s) would say, "Well, you know, you can have these conversations, but maybe you don't want to deliver it too harshly." This moderating feedback affected his efficacy as he wondered if students were telling his supervisor that he was imposing his views on them. However, the feedback Fernando received from students was more appreciative and complimentary. After facilitating an activity, he responded to students' feedback to gauge his effectiveness:

They would literally say, "Ohhh", or they would give me back, "I'm really...I'm really happy that like we're having these conversations. I'm really glad that you've mentioned this because otherwise I wouldn't have felt confident." And so I think it was through those instances of the direct feedback from students rather than those above me.

Other participants such as Sarah cited other's reactions as measurements of success. Sarah elaborated, "I think it's been positive feedback... in the sense of the person engaging back in con-

versation.” Coworkers’ and students’ reception to her sharing critical perspectives and their further engagement in the conversation served as a sign her ideas were important. Sarah explained,

Experience working with different populations of undergraduate students have contributed a little bit to my confidence. Having those conversations with students first and then moving on to, you know, colleagues and then supervisors... that has helped with my confidence for sure.

For Sarah, experiencing positive receptions from students and fellow staff were meaningful.

Critical reflection was another response to feedback among participants. For instance, Jordan recalled an instance when she challenged a staff member’s deficit thinking in her job. After this occurred, someone came up to her to praise her for doing so:

One of the people on the committees came up to me and she was like, “Thank you for that feedback. I was so happy that someone said something.” And I was like, “Weren’t you on the committee? Couldn’t you have said something before it got to me?”

Jordan felt it was a shared responsibility among committee members to engage in critical perspectives despite being aware of the power and authority among staff members. Therefore, her response to feedback, even when positive, was to challenge others to engage in critical perspectives too. Participants also tended to filter negative feedback through the lens of critical reflection. Fernando described reflecting on supervisors’ feedback specifically:

I came to understand to take feedback with a grain of salt ... From time to time, it would make me doubt myself if it was more critical or more negative feedback or...but then I would also kind of try and step back and take a step back and realize, like, who is it coming from? Or why is that being presented to me?

Although negative feedback had consequences on efficacy, the ability to depersonalize it and critically reflect upon the larger contextual elements of the feedback, such as who is giving it and why, helped participants such as Fernando to process and be resilient to reactions.

Another reaction to feedback was participants’ more regular engagement in the process and practice with students. This, in turn, role modeled how feedback is an important element of critical perspectives and leadership. Cecil shared a teachable moment she had with a student leader supervisee. The student was navigating the scope of her role and having a leadership position with increased responsibility. Cecil explained,

And so we’ve had a lot of conversations about how do we internalize information and kind of move forward with it? How do we move more emotionally, intelligently? And how do we kind of also communicate effectively in a way and be transparent without feeling like you have to lie?... Being like more critical and getting them to think more critically is also getting them to just slow down a little bit.

Cecil, like many of the other participants, recognized the value of engaging in critical perspectives with students. Witnessing students embrace and enact critical perspectives was mutually beneficial in that it also increased their efficacy.

### Reflecting on Power Based on Social Identities

All participants also discussed how their social identities influenced their agency in voicing critical perspectives on leadership. Individuals who identified as white (i.e., Jordan, Ty, and Fred) had mixed conclusions about how their racial identity and other dominant identities affected their effectiveness in conversations about social justice. Fred acknowledged,

As someone who identifies white, straight, male, mid-

dle class, I hold a lot of predominantly privileged identities. That when I'm talking about social justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, critical perspectives, I'm talking about...the lived experiences of others that I've read about or done research on.

Fred would attempt to approach these conversations with humility naming, "I'm sort of the reason we're in this problem, historically. So, I'm not going to be the one to solve it on my own. So, take my ideas and run with them, or you can shoot them down and we can start over." In these instances, Fred made it evident that he could not solely guide conversations regarding equity and justice.

Despite effectiveness concerns, the white participants articulated feelings of heightened responsibility to use their white privilege and other privileged identities in meaningful ways. Jordan, who identifies as a white woman, talked about "when it comes to applying critical perspectives to leadership, I am finding it a lot more comfortable to have those conversations with people who share my identities. And I see it...as my role to educate them." Jordan committed to leveraging her privilege to reach people who did not have as much exposure or awareness of issues of power, privilege, and oppression. Her strong commitments to social justice were a powerful contributor to her efficacy.

All three (Jordan, Ty, and Fred) also expressed some degree of cultural humility. Ty, who described himself as a "walking ball of privilege" recognized,

Social identities do give me a lot of power in that regard... As with everybody who has a lot of power like this, I could be doing better and doing more. So that's something that like I just constantly have to be thinking about and adjusting. Being willing to admit that I was wrong and, yeah, things of that nature.

Ty named the need to support colleagues with less privileged identities and wanting to ensure

that the burden of educating others, particularly about issues of race, did not default to them. Although he was committed to the ideas and values behind these principles, Ty expressed much less efficacy in following through and acting upon these intentions. As seen in these examples, this critical reflection and awareness of their racial privilege affected white participants' efficacy in differential ways; as noted, some were hesitant to engage without knowing how their colleagues of Color would want them to show up for them and others, who viewed it as their responsibility, felt more efficacious to advocate on their behalf.

Comparatively, participants who identified as People of Color or who held other minoritized identities discussed the pressure and lack of support they felt in bringing critical perspectives into leadership. As a self-identified Latinx woman, Amanda described,

Because I'm the only one, it's you're tokenized or you're exhausted...there's not enough representation... these [social identities] all influence how I see things and how I try to lead, but it also influences how much support I have when I walk into a room or how much people are gonna understand me without me having to explain as much.

Despite the added burden due to oppressive realities, most participants still described a high degree of efficacy in engaging in critical perspectives. In fact, Crystal credited her exploration of her social identities as one element that contributed to her efficacy of enacting critical perspectives to leadership:

As I learn more about myself, as like a queer person or as I learn more about myself as, in terms of like my class and how that fluctuates, too...Continuing to do work around exploring those identities is what contributes to the growth.

Crystal's critical reflection about the fluidity of her identity and her desire to learn more made

her a mentor for students exploring their social identities and leadership development.

Almost all participants also talked about how their social identities allowed them to relate to the identities of students they supported. For instance, Cecil described how being open about her identities as a Black queer woman was instrumental to her relationship building:

I think that has helped me show up as a leader and engage in critical conversations. 'Cause, one, it allows the students to feel comfortable asking questions because I've started the conversation. And I think has allowed me to create that silver lining between the professional and the personal of being a leader means being aware of the ecosystem around me and the world around me.

Cecil named the exhaustion of COVID-19 and white supremacy, and that having vulnerable and authentic conversations with students was an important part of how she showed up as a leader and built trust with them. This practice of critical reflection and authentic relationship-building with her students served as a mastery experience that built and contributed to her own self-efficacy as a leader who practiced critical perspectives. Additionally, the students she worked with also benefited through the vicarious experience of engaging with Cecil regarding critical perspectives and leadership.

## Discussion and Implications

Findings from this narrative inquiry study revealed how early-career professionals navigated leader self-efficacy when translating critical perspectives of leadership to practice. Guided by the knowledge they gained in CSP 786, participants detailed the challenges and successes when engaging the shift in leadership education to attend to power, privilege, and oppression (Dugan & Humbles, 2018). These perspectives are imperative, especially as the field of higher education has historically lacked a power-based analysis in compe-

tencies on leadership (ACPA/NASPA, 2015) and as leadership educators continue to make calls for more critical lenses (Dugan & Leonette, 2021). In this section, we highlight how study findings contribute to extant literature while offering implications for various audiences. Of note, we believe this research will be particularly relevant to those who teach leadership courses and those who have leadership roles in higher education.

One insight gained from this project is that the institutional contexts where early-career professionals find themselves influenced their self-efficacy substantially. Consequently, the participants' narratives echo Reason and Kimball's (2012) argument that the ability to translate formal theory into practice depends on campus environments. What participants detailed were numerous barriers that prevented them from engaging with the critical perspectives obtained through CSP 786, showcasing how many in their contexts held older and power-devoid ideas about leadership (Dugan, 2017). Stories like Mauricio serving on the retention committee at his institution exemplify the complacent ways that institutional leaders viewed enacting a commitment to diversity and equity (Dugan & Leonette, 2021). The consequence of these realities is that professionals, especially People of Color, may feel overworked and burnt out in the face of these barriers (Anderson, 2021; Boss & Bravo, 2021).

What these instances indicate is that senior-level administrators must demonstrate more willingness to listen to the lessons that early-career professionals learned in their graduate programs. This could take the form of asking newer professionals to share readings and insights they see relevant to their practice. Such practices could bolster the leader self-efficacy (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011; Paglis & Green, 2002) of early-career professionals. Too often, early-career professionals feel they lack the ability to impact practices in their roles as a result of the hierarchies present (Dinise-Halter, 2017). Consequently, senior-level administrators must make active decisions to

change these cultures. Nevertheless, it was clear that even when participants felt less efficacious to impact large-scale change, they could do so within their spheres of influence. This reality showcases how individuals are dedicated to confronting oppressive systems, which is required of critical leadership orientations (Chunoo et al., 2019), in some spaces but do not feel equipped to do so on a larger scale. This finding suggests practitioners should engage mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997) at different organizational levels to bolster their efficacy.

Additionally, as referred to in the self-efficacy literature (Bandura, 1997) and Reason and Kimball's (2012) theory-to-practice model, feedback was integral to practitioners' belief in their ability to translate critical perspectives. For example, Fernando's and Sarah's stories of receiving positive feedback served as exemplars of the importance of feedback when actualizing theory in one's practice. For those in the position to supervise early-career professionals, it is evident that there needs to be concerted opportunities for supervisors to offer constructive feedback regarding how individuals mobilize equity in their practice. Moreover, supervisors should offer supervisees the same opportunities. During these conversations, individuals should prompt early-career professionals to be mindful of their own physiological and psychological states, as this is another component of bolstering self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Questions can include: what motivates you to engage in this critical work? How do you feel when doing so? What do you think you can improve on in the future, given your previous responses?

Finally, early-career professionals described how their social identities shaped their efficacy as well. Their narratives showcase how formal theory becomes informal theory as professionals make meaning of their contexts, but also their positionalities (Reason & Kimball, 2012). For instance, for those with more privileged identities, their efficacy shifted depending on the situation. Their insights thus substantiate the literature in leadership ed-

ucation that names how professionals should be taught how power operates, especially related to their own social identities (Barnes et al., 2018). In practice, graduate program faculty can better prepare early-career professionals on what it means to engage in critically-oriented leadership while being mindful of one's social identities. This can take the form of guided reflections or case studies where students think about how their social location would impact their decision-making calculus. These conversations are valuable in leadership courses like CSP 786 that take a structural lens to understand goals of equity. Such discussions could also be integral in shifting the curriculum in graduate preparation programs that often reinscribe dominant narratives (Linder et al., 2015; Perez, 2021). However, supervisors of early-career professionals must follow up this education by having individuals consider how their practices around leadership stem from their privileged and minoritized identities.

As leadership evolves to be more attentive to systems of power and oppression (Dugan & Humble, 2018), student affairs must respond to this paradigmatic shift. This research exposes the need to empower early-career practitioners to demonstrate their knowledge to transform institutions in critically-oriented manners.

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**Table 1***Participant Demographics (Self-Disclosed on Demographic Form)*

Pseudonym	HESA Cohort	Functional Area	Salient Identities
Amanda	Fall 2018	College Unions	Latinx cisgender heterosexual woman
Cecil	Fall 2018	Residence Life	Multiracial cisgender queer woman
Crystal	Fall 2017	Career Services	Black cisgender pansexual woman
Fernando	Fall 2017	Residence Life	Latinx cisgender gay man
Fred	Fall 2018	Residence Life	White heterosexual cisgender man
Jordan	Fall 2018	Honors Communities	White cisgender woman
Mauricio	Fall 2017	Academic Advising	Black cisgender heterosexual man
Sarah	Fall 2017	Student Engagement	Latina cisgender heterosexual woman
Ty	Fall 2017	Residence Life	White heterosexual cisgender man