

Sophomore Leadership and Identity Development in Men's Fraternities

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Abstract

Largely based on Baxter-Magolda's (2001) self-authorship theory and model as well as Komives et al. (2005) Leadership Identity Development (LID) theory and Komives et al. (2006) LID model, this theory focuses on the time frame of initiation into the chapter through an individual's time in a formal leadership position during their sophomore year. The theory follows the cycle of holding a position for an academic year and is a sub-layer in the larger holistic development model of external formulas and may or may not promote a broader movement to crossroads. This theory argues that there are three distinct phases: pre-leadership, in-leadership, and post-leadership. The term phase is used consciously to indicate the cyclical nature of leadership, especially for students, and the fact that students are likely to return to these phases again as they take additional leadership roles. Furthermore, as indicated in the model above, the theory proposes that there are two tasks to each phase of development that an individual must complete before moving into the next phase. Failing to complete these steps will further inhibit development or create a regression in one or both areas.

Keywords

Sophomore, Leadership, Leadership Development, Fraternity, Greek Life

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Suggested citation:

Beach, E. (2021). Sophomore leadership and identity development in men's fraternities. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 68-77.

Background

The American fraternity and sorority experience began out of the founding of Phi Beta Kappa literary society which served as a means for students, predominantly if not entirely white males, to come together outside of the classroom to further their studies in areas they deemed lacking (Torbenson, 2009). The fraternity experience took off throughout the late 19th century and early 20th century. However, these organizations saw a decline during the World Wars due to the draw on the typical membership base. Fortunately, fraternities expanded rapidly in the aftermath of World War II as soldiers coming back from the war were seeking to recreate the brotherhood they found on the battlefield (Torbenson, 2009). Since its inception, the fraternity experience has faced many challenges, especially relating to hazing, drinking, and drug use that has, in modern days, seen significant public backlash due to several deaths, including five during the 2019-2020 school year alone (Collman, 2019). Despite these challenges, the allure of the fraternity and sorority experience persists and while there is no single reason individuals may choose to join, leadership opportunities remain one of the most visible. While a relatively abstract idea, leadership is practiced on a regular basis in the daily life of a fraternity man, but it is something that support must be given to provide a developmental structure to ensure these practices are built on a solid foundation.

Sophomore Leadership Phenomenon Explained

At many large public institutions, a phenomenon that has been observed is that of a trend toward younger executive board leadership in fraternal organizations (Adams & Keim, 2000). Specifically, sophomore and junior members serving in some of the pinnacle positions including chapter president (or equivalent), new member/pledge educator, and risk manager. These positions play a critical role in the direction the organization may take, how new members are educated and enculturated, and the accountability (or lack of) that is directed at members. This trend is important to note because we must look at how (un)prepared student leaders are and what conditions need to be put in place for student leaders to be successful if this trend continues. While time serving in a formal leadership role in fraternal organizations has been shown to provide development in various areas (Cory, 2011), if it is not positively supported, this development may turn into a regression or continued focus on external support that limits individual growth. The focus of this theory, the Sophomore Leadership Development Theory, will be directed at historically white Greek letter organizations (GLOs) specifically looking at the members that comprise their freshmen and sophomore membership. The Sophomore Leadership Development Theory attempts to address the developmental gap that occurs due to the limited leader and leadership development support.

Literature Review

Literature focusing on sophomore student leadership and the impact of development during this time is severely limited. However, there are several theories and studies that can be used to help better frame understanding of this topic and the developmental issues that may arise. The four thematic areas that best frame the literature used to understand this theory are the sophomore experience, leadership identity, transition, gender, and peer support.

The Sophomore Experience

In recent research, it is noted that studying college sophomores is made more difficult as of late due to a wide variety of definitions and a greater prevalence of students starting college with credits taken during high school. This is made even more difficult because of the general lack of focus on sophomores by institutions as many keep their primary focus on freshmen (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). Though no uniform definition of sophomores exists, this theory will utilize the definition posed by Gahagan &

Hunter (2006) which defines sophomores as “first-time, full-time students who have persisted into their second year of academic work” (p. 18). The sophomore year is also notorious for the ill-defined sophomore slump which sees students in an awkward stage of expected growth but lacking in support to achieve it. Furthermore, they are faced with many decisions that they feel ill-equipped to make such as their choice in major, relationships, and leadership decisions (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Schaller, 2005).

Leadership Identity Development

Baxter-Magolda (2001) provides a firm foundation in most identity development theories through the self-authorship theory model. This model depicts the path that individuals take as they develop through life. In the first stage, individuals remain reliant on external influences in most aspects of their life. In the second stage, individuals are in a state of transition as they begin to understand and make meaning of these external influences and interpret them based on their own values and beliefs. The third stage marks a greater development in their internal voice and a stronger development of their own values. The final stage reflects the individual’s solidified belief in their internal values and an understanding of how these beliefs impact their decisions and actions. Ideally, leaders would make it through to the final self-authorship stage but, due to the lack of support, the developmental setting does not exist for this to occur in the demographic focused on in this theory.

Baxter-Magolda helped lay a foundation for the work of Komives et al. (2005) and Komives et al. (2006). These studies took significant strides in reframing common thought on leadership through the Leadership Identity Development (LID) theory and model. In this theory, the authors posit that leadership development occurs over six stages with each ending in a transition into the next. These stages start with individuals recognizing figures in leadership positions, but this is limited to a belief in external leadership with little to no understanding of internal abilities. The second stage is highlighted by involvement in groups and organizations that help better understand and identify internal and external leadership qualities and capabilities. The third stage involves a dualistic view of leadership where individuals believe in a rigid form of leaders and followers and strategically work to be in one of these positions. The fourth stage is a break from dualistic thinking and involves an understanding of a greater variety of leadership, including the belief that leadership is not dependent upon a position. The fifth stage is highlighted by a commitment of individuals to support future generations in their path to leadership. The final stage is the peak of the leadership summit in which individuals bring these leadership ideas into every aspect of their life. Additionally, the Komives et al. (2006) study further developed the LID theory by creating a model to further illustrate the theory.

Though not fully identified in these works, it is important to note the difference in leadership and leader development as leadership development is a central piece of the fraternity experience but lacks the foundation of leader development necessary for proper development. Dugan (2017) helps establish the distinction by framing leader development as a process grounded in building a knowledge base whereas leadership is more experience-based and helps put the leader development into practice. In the case of sophomore fraternity leaders, they are inundated with leadership development but are provided limited opportunity for leader development. When they are provided leader development, the opportunity is lost as they are not afforded an opportunity to bridge the gap between the two or they are not in a developmental state to make the connection.

Transition

Transitions play a vital role in every person’s life. One of the leaders in analyzing the impact of transition is Nancy Schlossberg. Schlossberg’s research focuses on transition in the lives of adults. Schlossberg posited that it was the meaning associated with a transition rather than the transition that truly mattered (as cited in Schlossberg, 1984). Arthur and Hiebert (1996), utilizing the research of Schlossberg and others, took a focused look at the impact of transition on students going into post-

secondary education. This research further highlighted the massive transition that occurs as students enter higher education and continue to work to make meaning of these new and varied experiences. They also note the difference in coping with transition based on age showing that younger students have fewer strategies to handle transition than older students. (Arthur and Herbert also note sex differences discussed in the next section). Another influential work that analyses student transition within higher education is that of Schaller (2005) who analyzed the transition that occurs for students going into their sophomore year. Schaller (2005) notes sophomore year as a time of potential indecision and notes the need for self-reflection to occur to help work through this and allow the students to better understand the responsibility they have in developing their own path. Paired with potential indecision in a leadership position, it is important to consider these experiences together.

Gender Identity Development

In any theory, one must consider the difference in gender development. However, when considering the massive influence that gender norms play within the fraternity experience, it may be even more important than other considerations within this theory. Bussey and Bandura (2001) identify the massive role that peer influence has, specifically with male students. When considering the collegiate environment, peer influence is a critical factor to consider as students are largely housed in single-sex residence halls or involved in single-sex organizations such as fraternities. They also build on the four sub-processes governing observational learning (as cited in Bandura, 1986) which further our understanding of how students understand their societally influenced gender roles. Peer influence compounded with reinforcing gender roles has a massive impact on student leadership and provides a strong understanding of how students lead. As referenced in the transition section, Arthur and Herbert (1996) built on the work of Nancy Schlossberg and helped provide an understanding of student transition in higher education. One of the key takeaways from their research was in the noted differences in how males and females cope with transition noting that this may come down to societal expectations that allow this variance (as cited in Miller & Kirsch, 1987). Lastly, Edwards and Jones' (2009) help further the understanding of the socialization of gender roles, especially in men. Their qualitative research helps provide a better understanding of how individuals perceive their place in society as a male and what they should and should not be and can and cannot be.

Peer Support

Cory's (2011) work reviewed the influence of the fraternity and sorority experience on leadership development. One of the big takeaways from this research was that peer influence plays a dramatic role in if the student leads and the roles they take. The extreme focus on peer influence within fraternities (and sororities) is important to recognize in looking at the influence on leadership style for younger members. Renn and Arnold (2003) further the understanding of peer influence as they connect it to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Within their work, they pay special attention to the microsystems and mesosystems due to the choice students have in these groups which is especially prevalent within fraternities.

Another key factor in peer support within fraternities is the idea of stewardship. Hernandez (2008) took a strong look at how stewardship is affected by the relationships built in an organization. As defined in this research, stewardship is "the attitudes and behaviors that place the long-term best interests of a group ahead of personal goals that serve an individual's self-interests" (Hernandez, 2008, p. 122). Within the context of fraternities, stewardship plays a key role in how a leader will complete their time in their leadership role. If the attitude of stewardship is strong within the individual or the culture of the chapter, the leaders to follow will likely receive the support they need to be competent and successful. However, too often and especially within the scope of this work, fraternity leadership becomes burnt out

due to the cycle of succession that does not provide adequate support or mentorship, leaving incoming leadership nearly helpless and missing the peer support that is needed.

Sophomore Fraternity Leadership Identity Development

As defined by Schlossberg, a transition is “any event, or non-event which results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (as cited in Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33). By this definition, it can be argued that the presumption of a new role, such as becoming a leader of a fraternity, constitutes a transition. Furthermore, these students are also in an additional transition in college going into their sophomore year as well as learning the norms of an organization they just joined. All these transitions come together to throw off the status quo of normal student and leadership development. Because of this chaos, a new theory is needed to better understand how students develop during this time.

Largely based on Baxter-Magolda’s (2001) self-authorship theory and model as well as Komives et al. (2005) LID theory and Komives et al. (2006) LID model, this theory focuses on the time frame of initiation into the chapter through an individual’s time in a formal leadership position during their sophomore year (described in Table 1). The theory follows the cycle of holding a position for an academic year and is a sub-layer in the larger holistic development model of external formulas and may or may not promote a broader movement to crossroads. This theory argues that there are three distinct phases: pre-leadership, in-leadership, and post-leadership. The term phase is used consciously to indicate the cyclical nature of leadership, especially for students, and the fact that students are likely to return to these phases again as they take additional leadership roles. Furthermore, as indicated in the Table 1 above, the theory proposes that there are two tasks to each phase of development that an individual must complete before moving into the next phase. Each phase is broken down to identify how the stage is achieved for an individual to move into the next. Failing to complete these steps will further inhibit development or create a regression in one or both areas.

Table 1.
Phases of Sophomore Leadership Identity Development

Pre-leadership Phase	In-leadership Phase	Post-leadership Phase
External formulas	Faux self-authorship	Crossroads
Exploration/engagement	Leadership exploration	Leadership identified

Pre-leadership Phase

The pre-leadership phase takes place during the time leading up to officially taking on a leadership role. This is a time in which the member begins to learn the norms of the organization and learns more about the leadership roles available to them (Bussey & Bandura 1999; Cory, 2011; Komives et al., 2006). Typically, students are not given a significant leadership role during the first year of membership, so it is truly a time of learning and enculturation as they take in their new environment.

External formulas

Within the pre-leadership phase, the student has been identified by current chapter leaders and is provided minor levels of support, largely targeted at building leadership efficacy (Murphy & Johnson, 2016), as well as continuing to strengthen cultural and gender norms found within the chapter (Bussey & Bandura 1999; Cory, 2011; Komives et al., 2006). During this time, the student continues to rely on external formulas (Baxter-Magolda, 2001) and is still exploring their leadership capacity and capabilities through minor roles within the chapter. At this time, the student’s reliance upon their peers limits further

developmental gains as they attempt to remain within the norm of the new organization (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Cory, 2011; Komives et al., 2006).

Exploration/Engagement

In terms of their leadership identity, due to the limits of leader development aimed at non-position holding members, freshmen and sophomore students without a formal role are further hampered from developing. Because of this, they are seeing leadership practices that reinforce the socially normed leadership which may or may not be based on effective theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Dipaolo, 2010; Dugan, 2017). Despite this and because of the limited training offered to chapters and individual students in assessing leader and leadership capabilities, students may be elected or selected for leadership positions for which they are not capable. It is at this point that development slows as the student is forced to take on a position for which they are not receiving adequate support. Furthermore, student leaders are not provided enough opportunities to connect their leadership development to the leader development through self-reflection, guided practice, or other means which is a critical piece in development. On top of these limitations, the student's preoccupation with the transitions they are facing creates another hurdle to development (Patton et al., 2016). This leaves the student focused on external formulas (Baxter-Magolda, 2001) and dependent upon the peer support which limits their development of an individualized leadership identity (Komives et al., 2006; Schaller, 2005).

Achievement

To successfully pass through this phase, the student will have continued acceptance of external formulas (Baxter-Magolda, 2001) but, in this case, it will be accepting external formulas from a new environment in that of their fraternity peers (as defined by the individual) and will also be at the exploration/engagement stage (Komives et al., 2005; Komives et al., 2006) which is highlighted by their commitment to the fraternity and their move toward taking on a new leadership role.

In-leadership Phase

It is in this phase that the potential for development is greatest as the student has access to a wide array of support systems including higher education professionals on campus, headquarters staff, programs from both groups, and potentially support from chapter members and alumni. This is also the stage in which student leaders are most likely to regress as some of this support could be misplaced or not given which can leave the student leader to remain dependent on external formulas without beginning to develop an internal voice.

Faux self-authorship

Students entering this phase face another transition as they enter their second year of undergraduate education and taking on a formal position of leadership. Due to gender norms as well as the lack of leader development, the student remains reliant upon the external formulas provided by his peers. Furthermore, a sense of overconfidence is built by social and gender cues as well as support gained from their peers, which further limits the individual's growth potential as they blindly rely on these inputs without questioning how these inputs may apply to them (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Cory, 2011; Komives et al., 2006). This overconfidence causes a temporary hold from the normal transition to the crossroads stage and instead leads to a false sense of self-authorship as the individual attempts to lead based on the leadership identity of previous leaders they have encountered (Baxter-Magolda, 2001; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). To compound this phase, sophomore year is a time in which students are facing numerous transitions and choices. As freshmen, individuals are in a time of random exploration but, by sophomore year, should be able to move to more focused exploration (Schaller, 2005). Within this

context though, individuals are preoccupied with their transition and remain in this stage of random exploration that limits their development or ability to make significant strides forward.

Leadership Exploration

The jump to faux self-authorship has an impact on the student's leadership identity development, which is temporarily slowed, keeping the student within this stage of random exploration which slows or halts their leadership identity development. The student leader also remains in a fixed position as their changing view of self with others remains dependent as noted within the LID model (Komives et al., 2006). Without the want or ability for the student to gain a more independent view, they remain in a state of exploration rather than building a stronger identity. This delay in the LID model then limits the potential developmental impact that would normally be supported and used to build their leadership capabilities. This theory posits that this development does not occur until the post-leadership phase in which they are afforded more time to reflect on their time in their leadership position.

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Achievement

To move forward from this stage, the student leader must recognize their lack of control and reliance upon others before they can truly move forward. Usually, this is inspired by some sort of event that leads them to question their external formulas such as a lack of trust in someone they previously counted on, a planned event failing, or something else not going as planned that would fall under their purview. Once this event has occurred or they are nearing the end of their time in leadership, they are then able to move into the next phase and may see developmental gains.

Post-Leadership Phase

The final phase does not occur until the student is beginning to move out of their formal leadership position. It usually is not until this time that they, by choice, crisis, or opportunity, can reflect on their time in their leadership role. This reflection is critical in making connections between what they have been taught about leadership and what they have implemented or acted upon. Though limited to the general experience, studies show that membership in a fraternity increases one's social capital especially upon graduation. This is largely shown in job acceptance and increased salary potential but can also manifest in other positive ways (Mara et al., 2016). It can be extrapolated that this only increases when a student has held a leadership position versus just being a general member. However, since these leaders are seeing this social capital at a younger age, we also see an increased reliance by chapter members, especially new and younger members, relying upon these individuals for their social and gender cues which can reinforce a negative cycle (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Cory, 2011; Komives et al., 2006).

Crossroads

After the initial faux jump to self-authorship in which the student leader believes they have a high level of control, they are brought back to the reality that they are still reliant upon others for support. However, through their leadership experience, they are now more capable and willing to use their internal voice to guide them and to question others as described in the crossroads stage (Baxter-Magolda, 2001). Though they still use others for support in the decision making and identity building process, this will be less prominent in their identity than in the previous phases.

Leader Identified

This time of reflection is critical in helping these leaders make sense of and assess this time (Dugan, 2017; Schaller, 2005). Furthermore, this time is critical in helping the student connect the practical leadership development that occurred to the leader development skills that did not (Dipaolo, 2010; Dugan, 2017). Time in the previous phase will remain impactful as it leaves a lasting mark on their leadership identity and helps create an additional frame of reference for future leadership experiences.

Achievement

To achieve both tasks, a student must receive support to make connections between their practical experience (leadership) and theoretical (leader). Once these connections have been made, the student will be able to use this experience and the development that occurred to continue to move forward in the larger holistic development model of self-authorship and leadership identity development (Baxter-Magolda, 2001; Komives et al., 2005; Komives et al., 2006).

Recommendations

The fraternity experience can be a rich proving ground for undergraduate students to gain leadership experience and knowledge that can support them in their future endeavors inside and outside of higher education. However, it is critical that higher education professionals provide support to help fraternity leaders make explicit connections between leadership and leader development, give time to think about actions, both before and after, and make connections to leadership practice outside of their organization. These types of support can ensure the heavily application-based leadership experience is connected to leader development that will ensure a more holistic experience. Dugan (2017) notes an important difference in leader and leadership development that higher education professionals would do well to remember. Fraternity members, especially those in leadership positions, gain plenty of leadership development, but their leader development opportunities are much more limited. As professionals, we must look for opportunities to provide support in helping students reflect on their leadership practices and ground these practices in well-established theories.

Along with leader development, professionals must also consider building in programming to develop self-efficacy in undergraduate fraternity leaders. Murphy and Johnson (2016) suggest having more realistic conversations with current and future leaders about what “real” leadership looks like including the idea of failures. Furthermore, their research emphasizes the importance of holistic feedback that not only focuses on results but also the effort that a student puts into their leadership experience.

Another suggestion that can help in leader and leadership development in younger fraternity members is an emphasis on a true lifetime experience. It is a well-documented phenomenon, especially in White male GLOs, that members tend to remain involved for two to three years and then either disaffiliate or stop participating in the organization. If chapters can improve retention of older members, they are more likely to have a more cognitively developed leader which allows younger members an opportunity to take a low-risk leadership position to practice their leadership development. Furthermore, these

younger members would then have a greater number of mentor-like figures available to support their leader development.

When considering the time frame being referenced within this work, institutions should consider the role that transition plays in the life of sophomore members. Students, especially in their sophomore year, are in a time of exploration, either random or focused. It is important that professionals help students productively explore their environments and options to make sense of the major transitions taking place around them and within them. It is critical that “sophomores can be taught to engage in self-reflection and then be required to do so in curricular and co-curricular activities” (Schaller, 2005, p. 21). It is also important that institutions place a greater emphasis on sophomores as they are largely under-supported in comparison to freshman, though they face many of the same challenges as well as very new challenges (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). The more professionals can provide opportunities for this self-reflection to take place, the more students will make meaning of their leadership experiences and make connections to further develop.

The final suggestion for higher education practitioners surrounds the idea of partnership. Across nearly every institution in the field, departments are understaffed and underfunded and fraternity and sorority offices are no exception. One of the positives that can greatly benefit these offices that are unique to fraternity and sorority life is the partnership with national headquarters, alumni boards, and other advisory boards connected to fraternity chapters. Though also largely understaffed and underfunded, partnership with the national headquarters can help increase available resources for the institution and headquarters, which then allows for better support to individual organizations and potentially entire communities.

Furthermore, we have seen a growing need for this partnership as the 2019-2020 school year has already seen five young men pass away in connection to fraternity events (Collman, 2019). While it cannot prevent deaths, a strong partnership that includes providing holistic support for chapter members, especially chapter leaders, can help students feel more comfortable making the right decision in potentially dangerous situations (such as calling 9-1-1) or more willing to have difficult conversations.

Conclusion

While not a holistic look at the fraternity experience, this theory proposes a new way to perceive the developmental delay that may occur in students who take on critical leadership positions without an adequate support system in place. The fraternity experience has always had the potential to provide students with numerous leadership development opportunities. However, at some institutions, this can be made more difficult due to the lack of chapters that provide a full four-year experience which forces younger members to take on important leadership roles early and less of an opportunity to practice and learn leadership. Professionals should look to build out programs that help support freshmen and sophomore members to develop leadership skills and provide opportunities to develop self-reflection skills needed for leader development and not just leadership development. This is important because these young men are potentially making life changing and life-saving decisions but without critical support, these may be misguided decisions. Furthermore, a greater emphasis must be placed on training members before they are in a leadership position to provide a knowledge base from which young members can work. While there is no exact solution to this problem, higher education professionals should seek opportunities to provide support to these leaders to ensure fraternities can continue to provide a meaningful experience to members which supports holistic development.

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