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University of Northern Colorado

Greeley, Colorado

NAVIGATOR, NARRATOR, NEGOTIATOR: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC
REFLECTIONS OF A STUDENT LEADER

A Thesis/Capstone
Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment for Graduation with Honors Distinction and
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Malaika Michel-Fuller

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Abstract

I am a first-generation student, I am a person of multiracial descent, and I am a woman. I am also a four-term elected student leader, and I am one of the few, and in some cases, only person with these identities to ever serve in my leadership roles at the University of Northern Colorado. The development and configuration of these identities throughout my undergraduate tenure posed significant tension as I navigated college as both a private student and a public leader with responsibilities and relational ties to multiple campus populations whose perception and reception of one another often incites conflict. I reflect on my journey of multiple identity development in the context of elected campus student leadership and place my micro-level experience in the context of macro-level changes in our political and social campus landscape that have occurred during my time on campus, including four Student Senate administrations, two University Presidents, and increased student political activism and civic engagement. My reflection is grounded in theory within the current body of literature related to the experiences of college students, people of color, and campus student leaders related to the issues of identity and leadership development. I include David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model, Corey Seemiller's (2014) Student Leadership Competencies, Komive's (2005) Leadership Identity Development Theory, and national nonprofit Break Away's Active Citizen Continuum. Recommendations to leverage these experiences after my undergraduate career as a career professional and citizen of my community conclude this work.

Keywords

Leadership, higher education, student government, identity development

Introduction

Wanted: Dynamic student representative with the ability to motivate an often apathetic student body and deliver transparent, accessible public services with little money and even less time. Must set a personal example of self-sacrifice and exemplary participation, starting with overtime hours accompanied by below market compensation. Must be equally comfortable with a suspicious public and a combative constituency. Exemplary integrity and resiliency mandatory, fluency in sarcasm and empathy alike highly desired. Seek application from a group of well-meaning part-time amateur politicians who will evaluate you on the basis of keeping them individually, as well as collectively, happy.

If I were to write a job description for Student Senate, this is what I would advertise. In my first year I sought to understand the system of government, networks and resources, and I endeavored to build relationships among current Senate members. I quickly learned there are barriers to existence in a system that was not designed for young people, women, and people of color, three salient identifies of mine. In my second through fourth years I sought to remedy this inequity and increase representation within Senate. My ambitions took me further away from students despite the positive outcomes my work produced; by the spring of my final year Student Senate was comprised of the most diverse membership in its history. Stories are “how we make sense of our lives, with accounts as narratives that are strung together, with the intention of justifying our position and persuading others to see things from our perspective” (Choi, 2017). I believe the shortest distance between two people is a story, and this is mine.

Background

Break Away's Active Citizen Continuum

Break Away is a national nonprofit organization created to promote community-engaged service through alternative spring break programs for college students ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020). They designed a framework to track the development of leadership and service as students participate in the break programs and grow as members of their communities. The organization seeks to promote a mindset in student participants that "challenges them to think critically and compassionately-and to understand that there's no such thing as "not my problem" ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020). Their continuum has been adopted by student organizations and higher education institutions across the country.

The continuum consists of four roles students embody on their journey towards the optimal role of active citizen. First, a student starts out as a member not concerned with his/her/their role in social problems ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020). The member tends to stay away from activities that impact conditions outside of themselves. A volunteer follows the first role, and they are "well-intentioned but not well-educated about social issues" ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020). For example, a volunteer may spend time serving food at a homeless shelter to fulfill a service requirement for graduation. They are contributing to their community, but their intention is primarily to satisfy a need related to their advancement, and they have yet to pursue service for its own sake. The conscientious citizen comes next, and this student becomes more involved with viewing issues systemically and questioning root causes, and at this stage students start to see their role in a community beyond the isolated event of their volunteerism

("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020). The final stage of the continuum is the active citizen, and at this stage the student makes life choices based on their knowledge of the impact of their choices on a community, and the value of their involvement in the community's development ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020). These students are well-poised to transition into neighborhoods and cities as working professionals who engage in thoughtful and intentional lifestyles based on the stages they grew through.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model

David Kolb is an educational theorist currently teaching Organization Behavior at Case Western Reserve University. In 1984 he created his Theory of Experiential Learning and an accompanying model. Kolb's model contains four steps that begin with an experience and end with application. Experiential learning is defined by Kolb (1984) as "learning whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of an experience". The four tenets of his theory are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). The theory manifests in a cyclical model, which suggests that an individual can enter the cycle at any point.

The catalyst for entry begins with carrying out an action and observing its effects on a situation. This is the concrete experience phase, and when a learner reviews an experience they enter the reflective observation stage (Kolb, 1984). Here, a learner starts to pay closer attention to their experience by recalling details and beginning to align what they observed with what they remember. According to Kolb (1984), the next tenet of abstract conceptualization relies heavily on the reflection in the past stage. Essentially, the individual has taken away a lesson from their experience, not just remembered what took place. Finally, active experimentation is the culminative effort where a learner

applies what they have garnered from observation, reflection, and brainstorming, and they test their ideas on new experiences and begin the cycle all over again (Kolb, 1984). At this stage, learners are aided in the work they did before because they can use their knowledge to solve problems and make decisions.

Komive's Leadership Identity Development Theory

Komives et al. (2005) designed the Leadership Identity Development Theory (LID) after they conducted a study to “understand the processes a person experiences in creating a leadership identity”. The study consisted of thirteen college students intentionally sampled because they displayed evidence of relational leadership. This phenomenon is defined by authors as students who are “conscious of group process, empower themselves and others to heightened involvement, [are] committed to ethical processes, and were able to work toward common purposes” (Komives et al., 2005). The theory grew from findings in the study that showed students saw themselves embody constructs of leadership over time in six stages. Komives et al. (2005) notes that the stages should be viewed as linear within one role but circular within the entire model. Meaning, a student can go through six stages during one leadership experience, and when they are introduced to a new opportunity, they undertake the stages all over again.

The first stage of LID is awareness. Komives et al. (2005) explains that this stage occurs in childhood when we become aware of leaders that exist in our immediate and imagined worlds. Principals and parents are tangible authority figures, while historic figures and fictional characters in media like superheroes are intangible leaders we learn about. Students understand that leaders are valued members of society, but they likely do not yet conceptualize themselves as a leader. Next, students explore leadership in groups

settings as they grow more independent from parents and broaden their social networks. Leadership shows up in spaces like athletic practice, music lessons, and religious youth groups. As students are placed in more defined roles within a group (e.g. second chair, goalie, prayer leader, etc.) their view of themselves and their peers as leaders becomes more tangible (Komives et al., 2005). Leadership potential is an emerging characteristic at this stage that is positively reinforced by authority figures. By stage three, leaders have been identified, and this is when students start to believe leadership directly correlates with a position (Komives et al., 2005). Students in the study reached this stage in high school and entered college with this mindset about the positionality of leadership. At this stage, group involvements narrow based on students' belief in what activities had meaning to them rather than seeking non-positional participation in multiple groups. Once occupied in these core groups, students try on various leadership roles and practice skills such as conflict resolution, delegation, and mentor emerging leaders (Komives et al., 2005).

Stages four through six are comprised of a key change in how students define leadership, which has significant impacts on if and how they choose to take on leadership roles after they leave educational environments. In stage four, students see examples of both positional and non-positional leadership, which causes them to reevaluate the importance of group effort in accomplishing goals. Alternate titles such as organizer, facilitator, and community-builder emerge as tangible examples in students' lives that support the notion of a "leader without a title" (Komives et al., 2005). Students in the fifth stage apply leadership to abstract passions related to broader life and career goals. Examples include a desire to increase food security for a community in need or to

advocate for the human rights of an oppressed group of people. Students at this stage often express a desire to serve others and understand how leadership is a means to execute this goal in a multitude of roles (Komives et al., 2005). In the sixth and final stage, students are endowed with the understanding of how their style of leadership shows up when working with others, and they possess the confidence to lead in any context (Komives et al., 2005). Students truly believe “I am a leader” and are not tied to positionality to engage in leadership. The six stages overlap because they are built upon one another, and students likely will not fully embody each stage. Progress, not perfection, is the goal.

Seemiller’s Student Leadership Competencies

Dr. Corey Seemiller works at Wright State University teaching in the department of Leadership Studies in Education and Organization. She designed a 60-prong framework of “knowledge, values, abilities, and behaviors that help an individual contribute to or successfully engage in a role or task” (Seemiller, 2014). Leadership competencies are commonly utilized across multiple fields and sectors including the military, library science, and hospitality. Dr. Seemiller built her framework for leadership development in higher education student organizations like student government (Seemiller, 2014). The competencies can be used to both design student leadership opportunities and assess students’ development. Seemiller (2014) outlines three levels students can experience and grow through during their leadership development. The first level consists of significance, motivation, and efficacy. At level 1, students possess the motivation to use the competencies, they value the competencies, and they believe in their ability to make use of the competencies. In level 2, students articulate cognition and

proficiency, meaning they understand the competency and they have the skills to practice it (Seemiller, 2014). Finally, performance makes up level 3: students actively use the competency well.

There are 8 areas of competency in the framework: learning and reasoning, self-awareness and development, group dynamics, personal behavior, civic responsibility, strategies planning, communication, and interpersonal interaction (Seemiller, 2014). Dr. Seemiller (2014) believes students never reach master of a competency: they continue to develop and enhance their skills rather than grow them to a certain point. Because of the applicability of leadership competencies outside the realm of higher education, students stand to benefit from participation in campus organizations fostering these competencies.

Alive, Awake, Alert, Enthusiastic: 2016

“I already loved Wednesdays because I got to spend anywhere from 45 minutes to 3 hours learning and engaging in something that I’ve never found an equal to in its ability to bring me joy. But now, I was an official part of it. I have the power to vote, to speak, to change. I have this great feeling that this is exactly what I’m supposed to be doing, and nothing but positive things can come from this.”

I wrote the above sentiment in a journal entry barely two weeks into my first term as a student senator for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. I was almost two months into my first semester of college, and I felt eager to establish belonging within the Senate community. I had been hired to a vacant senator position unfilled by the previous election, and as the only freshman on Senate, I wanted to prove my worthiness of the privilege I had been granted. As the weeks passed, I grew frustrated. I struggled to contribute to the lengthy discussions of complex social issues and legislative challenges

posed by my colleagues. Seemiller (2014) would argue my feelings were evidence of fostering leadership competencies in the area of self-awareness and development. Under this area, personal contributions and personal values are two key aspects involved in a student's development (Seemiller, 2014). My earnest enthusiasm and willingness to take on new projects were derived from my values and comprised what I had to offer to Senate. These attributes were tied to my identity as a leader and I felt motivated to channel them into my work. However, I saw what I brought to the table as inequivalent assets compared to my peers' lived experiences that endowed them with the confidence to take an active role in our organization, which shows I failed to display efficacy, or belief in my ability to utilize these competencies, which inhibited me. Feelings of inadequacy moved me to overcompensate by accepting every committee assignment and legislative proposal that crossed my desk without paying close attention to what I involved myself in. My efforts left me feeling overworked, underappreciated, and without clear purpose. I was a volunteer, trapped in the second stage of the Active Learning Continuum ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020).

This role as a volunteer showed up in my work. I partnered with fellow senators to coauthor two pieces of legislation: one measure would establish gender-inclusive restroom signage in academic buildings and the other created a middle eastern studies certificate option in the International Relations major program. Both pieces were placed on the spring election ballot to garner feedback from students, but I hesitated to support the inclusive restroom proposal. Internally, I had strong doubts about the success of the project. The International Affairs department drew students from across the political spectrum, and the proposed program was perceived favorably by faculty, administrators,

and students. Our campus paralleled the shaken nation after November's election, and in the wake of uncertainty and fear, I shied away from conflict and controversy rather than leaning into it. I understood the multifaceted nature of the restrooms; people with young children of the opposite sex and individuals with physical disabilities would also benefit from the change as well as nonbinary and transgender individuals seeking inclusive spaces. However, our Senate and student body were not immune to the partisan divisiveness that swept our country, and I worried the fight to implement the project would attract negative attention to Senate and harm my reputation and potential for success as a student leader down the road. I saw the middle eastern program as a safer option, and one that I thought would earn me credibility among my Senate peers and my social science constituents. Much like the continuum describes, I was well-intentioned, but ultimately lacked the awareness and drive to pursue service for its own sake ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020).

Fortunately, this phase did not last. The more time I spent in Senate the more secure I grew in my role. Positive feedback from my peers about my work ethic and contributions validated my desire to contribute to the group and empowered me to work for more than approval from others. This is an example of when I grew my competency within the area of interpersonal interaction. I started to develop productive relationships through mentoring and collaboration with others, which all fall within this competency area. I developed a "mutual support system...[and] a greater sense of trust", two outcomes that often result from growth in the area of interpersonal interaction (Seemiller, 2014). I was utilizing the competency at stage 3, and as the election drew closer, I decided to take an active role in advocating for both measures to pass. I held forums, sent

out surveys, and conversed over coffee to find connections across populations and consolidate people's thoughts into a coherent, persuasive narrative to share with campus administration. Over the course of my first year, I engaged in what Break Away calls "disruptive experiences...[including] strong direct service, critical reflection, and on-going education" ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020) that move students out of the volunteer stage. I had significant progress to make in the coming years, but I was slowly growing into a more cognizant and authentic student leader.

A seat at the table: 2017

"I spend many evenings at the open-air theatre. Fall is late, and I even my breath to match the sway of the yellowing maple trees. I came here to process the news that I will help hire our next President. The leaves are changing and so am I". My sophomore year started auspiciously when I was chosen as the third student member of the presidential search committee after president Norton's announcement to retire. I felt a strange mix of emotions because this event signaled the beginning of a new identity as a student leader. Last fall, I sat enraptured when students produced a list of demands to the Board of Trustees, read out offenses against the study body by the administration, and demanded president Norton's resignation. The display accompanied a wave of student activism following then presidential candidate Donald Trump's campus rally, which many students interpreted as a political decision by president Norton. I attended countless panels, debates, and closed-door meetings where students convened to express their distaste of the establishment that governed UNC and made plans to incite change. I was awed by the notion that young people could openly criticize authority figures and make demands about how they should be treated. I was used to the leaders described in stages

1-3 of the Leadership Identity Development Theory (LID), where students play minor leadership roles in their age-appropriate activities, but they are still governed by larger authority figures like their parents, coaches, and teachers (Komives et al., 2005). Before college, I was familiar with traditional hierarchy and I felt mostly content with letting others govern me. This mindset followed me to college, and I felt some discomfort taking on a role where I would work closely with the very people students openly vilified. I started to question what of all the rumors I heard were true, and why the students were so angry.

Much like last fall, my inexperience based on my age generated feelings of insecurity in my worthiness of my position and confidence in my ability to deliver. I felt that if I had not been hired to Senate last year and then formed close relationships with the two other student members, I would not have been in the position to be chosen. In short, I felt guilt over the privilege my position endowed to me, and I would continue to question “why me and not someone else?” for the first few months of my tenure on the committee.

To say I was overwhelmed by my duties as a committee member is an understatement. I was simultaneously given immense responsibility and then heavily restricted in how I could exercise my power. My inbox was saturated with confidential documents detailing the candidates’ resumes, the Board’s meeting procedures, media documenting the search, potential interview questions, and information about our search firm, to name a few. There was no feasible way I could consume all of the information I was expected to, but I tried my hardest. Much like my first year, I was the youngest and least experienced person in the room merely by virtue of my age and time affiliated with

UNC, and I wanted to show the people who placed trust in me I could keep up with them and contribute to the group.

The five months that followed were a whirlwind. My position on the committee thrust me into visibility around campus and I felt proud to be recognized by peers, professors, and administrators for my efforts. People wanted me to provide student voice on committees, speak to incoming students on panels, engage with community members at university events, and provide countless interviews to campus and local news hungry for details of the search. However, my “leadership identity in this stage was largely defined by the context of one's role in a designated group”, and I did not always feel confident in accepting the label of “leader” in the groups I occupied (Komives et al., 2005). When I was in the room with the Board, I felt small and inadequate. I was warmly welcomed, but I did not yet belong. I had yet to solidify the notion within myself that I was a leader there and I could participate in a satisfactory way when I did not hold the most powerful position in the group. I was used to chairing subcommittees on Senate and championing group projects in my classes, but it was an entirely different matter to work alongside powerful and privileged adults and feel like an equal contributor. This circles back to Komives et al. (2005) stages one and two of LID. As children we are taught leaders exist, but we do not envision ourselves in the same category. I worried the quality of my suggestions were not helpful in determining the next leader of UNC. Nothing prepared me for this position, and despite the encouragement and reassurance from my fellow student committee members, progress was slow on my part.

One cold day in March, I arrived at a hotel where our interviews and briefings would take place for the next days, and as I joined committee members for breakfast in

the lobby, I soon realized I was familiar with the venue. This was the hotel I stayed in the first time I visited UNC as a high school junior. I reflected on my feelings of nervousness and excitement that day and recognized the emotions I felt now were the same, though directed towards a different situation. I marveled at the growth I made in three short years: I had just turned 20 and I was preparing to interview the next president of my University. I was proud of myself and what I had accomplished, and I felt moved to do right by my past self and give best to the committee. That day I experienced all four stages of Kolb's model. I took my experience from the past, and that served as my basis for observation. It was the new experience of reuniting my past with my present that triggered an opportunity for learning. Next, I sought meaning behind the experience through exploring the impact of my past on my present state of mind. Finally, I identified a "recurring theme...that will help [me] with new learning experiences" (Kolb, 1984). This occurred when I recognized I experienced the same feelings at two different points in my life, and I resolved that I made it through the first experience as a prospective college student, and I can do the same with the new tasks in front of me as a committee member. Something shifted in my outlook that day, and the I moved forward fueled by a renewed sense of confidence in my abilities.

One week later, the committee sat in a different hotel in another city with a narrowed list of final candidates. Throughout the process the committee had been bombarded with accusations about transparency and were being pressured to conduct an "open" search, which entailed selecting multiple finalists and allowing the campus to vote on their pick for president. The discussion was not progressing because members seemed hesitant to suggest any course of action; we all represented UNC in some respect

and did not want to go against the campus's demands. I had been silently sitting on an idea for most of the discussion, trying to work up the courage to speak. I can clearly remember bursting into the discussion ineloquently and trying not to maintain eye contact with anyone for too long, lest I lose my courage. My hands shook as I calmly explained my belief in representative democracy where individuals choose their leaders and place trust in them to safeguard their interests, and this is why I felt compelled to advocate for a single finalist option. Along with 3 student Senate members, the other non-Board committee members were representatives from faculty and staff governance groups who were elected by their representative bodies to speak for them on the committee. Though I did not fully comprehend the anger that my professors, peers, and others directed towards the Board and the administration, I understood that the campus desperately wanted to be heard, and they did not want to be denied this opportunity under a new president. I proposed ideas for campus events to invite engagement with the new president and ensure people were given space to speak and be heard. When I spoke up with a "an organized course of action to work toward a larger goal", I started to display proficiency in level of the competency area: strategic planning (Seemiller, 2014). Additionally, I stated I was willing own my decision and support the Board if we chose this course of action.

The Board then convened in executive session sans the rest of the committee to discuss my proposed solution. They unanimously agreed and proposed an unpredicted idea: they asked that each member of the search committee be granted voting rights to choose the final candidate to present to campus. There are seven voting board members, and there were 15 committee members total. If the group faced disagreement on their

final choice and the Board voted unanimously, they could be overruled. They removed absolute decision-making power from themselves and placed the influence in the hands of the people. Ellis (2004) argues “all stories are potentially about more than our own experience...it’s up to us to tell them in a way that makes that apparent”. Not only because of me, but certainly with the influence of my actions, a positive shift in power dynamic of the room took place and I started to feel like a true part of the group.

Of the people, for the people: Spring 2018

“The idea behind this campaign was a simple one. That, with hard work and positivity, a group of people can make a difference. During my term as your Student Trustee, I want to focus on your hopes, and not your fears. I want to solve problems instead of creating friction. And I will work hard, every hour of every day, to make our campus a better place to exist.”

When I returned from spring break, I continued to play an active role on the committee while championing my own campaign for student trustee. The above message was an excerpt from my opening statement at a candidate debate. The work on the Committee challenged my aversion to conflict and fostered my development as a consensus-builder, and I wanted to continue the progress I made working alongside the Board; student trustee presented itself as the best next path. This period in time displays me at my peak of the active citizen continuum. The campus “community becomes a priority in [my] values and life choices” because I continued to seek opportunities for self-education and service to others after my initial experience with the Board (“The Active Citizen Continuum”, 2020). I also felt empowered to try to engage people in the electoral process. I sat down one evening at a cultural center with a group of graduating

seniors to talk about what they wanted to see change at UNC. After our conversation, they told me they had not participated in elections in their entire four year career, but our short interaction made the difference and they were going to vote this year. I was rewarded with 51% of the vote and turnout rates that doubled the overall participation last year. The incoming Senate would be a female-majority organization, 5 out of 7 cabinet members were people of color, and 40% of membership was the first in their family to attend college. I was quickly moving into stage 5 of LID theory. I ran for trustee because the position would provide the access and resources to do more for a greater number of people. The choices I made based on my interests at stage three, namely accepting a role on the committee, “now became commitments to more transcendent purposes”, specifically, increasing the representation of students across leadership spaces on campus (Komives et al. 2005). I saw the difference I made on the committee as a student, a woman, and a person of color, and I wanted more people like me at table. Securing a more permanent seat on the board seemed like the optimal move forward.

Action not Ideas: 2019

“I feel that I have a unique link as a student and board member to bring both bodies together through channeling information, insight, feedback, and ideas to each respective group...[and] as a member of the steering committee, I will be a vessel for student voice and actively contribute to accomplishing the outcomes determined by the committee.”

This comes from an email I wrote to UNC’s president the same night I returned home from one of the most disheartening encounters of my Senate career. The fall of 2019 hit UNC’s campus hard. There was a distinctly tense yet panicked air on campus

when the reality of our budget deficit set in. On the night I wrote the email, Senate hosted a town hall. People felt excited and were confident the event would be well-attended and positively received. This year's Senate prided themselves on their grassroots student outreach, and they felt that a space for students, by students was what the student body needed. We failed to predict or prepare for the vitriolic response that would follow.

Around 60 students and a handful of administrators attended the event. After settling in with full plates of complimentary dinners, the questions began. We were accosted with inquiries about rising tuition, underpaid student employment, racial diversity in the professoriate, and of course, the looming \$10 million dollar deficit. Students felt no progress was being made to make our college more diverse, affordable, and safe, and they were upset we had not done more as elected student representatives to remedy their complaints. As a highly engaged Senate member who served on several key committees and task forces addressing these very issues, I felt excited to share what I knew. I expected a different response than the biting complaints and dismissive attitude the audience delivered. I knew the faces in the crowd; they were my classmates, peers in scholarship programs, and fellow Bears that I had gotten to know at dinners, retreats, and parties over the past two and a half years. I felt betrayed and isolated from the people I so desperately wanted to help. Complaints arose that marginalized perspectives and student voices were not represented in leadership spaces across campus. As a first-generation female student of color from a working class family, my identities felt overlooked and invisible. Students forgot that I was one of them, and they disregarded anything I said or represented otherwise. I wanted to tell them about how I challenged a Board member that once made an ignorant, sweeping judgment that all minority students were less prepared

for college than their white peers. I too felt at odds when I was the only woman or person of color in the room, but I was seeking to remedy these very inequities through my work in Senate. I experienced a conundrum at the second stage of the active citizen continuum. I was “ill-prepared to face complex social problems”, and because of the adverse emotional reaction the students evoked in me, I sought to distance myself from these feelings rather than examine the root causes of the students’ anger, which is the role of conscious citizen ("The Active Citizen Continuum", 2020). My efforts fell on deaf ears, and after the event was finally called to an end, I went home and wrote to Andy to advocate for a spot on UNC’s newest task force.

My solution to the excoriation I endured by the student body was to try harder, but not to alter my approach. I believed the more information I could access, the more informed I would be, and the better I would be able to answer student inquiries and educate them about the work being done on our campus to address their needs. I was well-received on this task force by administrators and faculty, and I thought I was heading in the right direction. Evaluation, analysis, and problem solving were all in play at this time, which fall under the learning and reasoning area of competency (Seemiller, 2014). I was utilizing the competency and therefore operating at a level 3. However, I failed to employ other perspectives outside of my own, which is also part of the learning and reasoning competency area, and this miscalculation would lead to frustrating outcomes down the road.

On this committee I helped coordinate an event to connect students with administrators to talk about the anticipated division-level budget cuts the campus would face come fall. I employed the same strategies I had in the past when I wanted to advance

my goals: I spoke to classes, I emailed club presidents, I designed eye-catching social media resources, and I relentlessly reminded Senate members to recruit their roommates and classmates to attend the event. And, not a single person showed up. This combined with my narrow reelection to trustee ended my third year in Senate on a sour and confusing note.

A head for government, a heart for Students: Fall 2020

“Why do I feel the furthest away from the people I want to help the most?” is what I wrote when I penned my frustrations about the distance I felt from students in the new school year. Not more than a few weeks in, a monumental experience shifted my relationship with the student body. After several students on Colorado State University’s (CSU) campus posted a photo in blackface on social media, UNC students mobilized to take action. They organized a sit-in at the next CSU student government meeting and planned to pressure the members to pass a resolution that condemned the incident as a hate crime. Truthfully, I brushed the event off at first. After the humiliation and defeat that I felt by the end of last spring, I harbored a strong resentment towards the student body, and I was entirely disinclined to support what I saw as an unwarranted outburst that would do more damage than good. I had reverted back to the member stage of the active citizen continuum. I recognized the problem that provoked by the students’ action, but I did not see the issue as *my* problem. The lynchpin of the continuum is the community identity, because belonging to something outside of oneself motivates students to care about larger social issues and take action (“The Active Citizen Continuum”, 2020). I did not feel a part of the student body and so I saw no reason to involve myself. I eventually

changed my mind and made plans to attend; the professional superseded the personal and I had a responsibility to be an informed student leader that supported my constituents.

At the meeting, the CSU student body president and his chief-of-staff gave reports about their interactions with the university president and Board of Governors. They reassured students that the situation was being taken seriously and the student government was working hard to represent their interests. As I listened, I felt a strong wave of second-hand embarrassment. I had been in their place before; caught between students and administrators at odds and faced with the dilemma to show solidarity with my peers and simultaneously support the decisions of campus leaders that were my colleagues. Needless to say, when put into this situation, no one tends to fare well. The audience booed the Senate members and demanded they yield their time so protestors could speak. I wondered to myself: *Is that what people think of me? Am I seen me as a puppet of our administration and an adversary of student activists?* Kolb (1984) notes that the reflective observation stage is characterized by asking lots of questions. When I attended the sit-in, I was “taking time-out from ‘doing’ and stepping back from the task and reviewing what has been done and experienced” (Kolb, 1984). When I was there, I was not performing in my usual role as a student leader, and so I could think about my past experiences as I were an outsider and make connections with the experiences of others in relation to my understanding of myself. I empathized with the distaste that rolled off the crowd in waves because it was within me too; I did not want to be told the president cared about me and was deliberating over how to address the incident. I wanted my feelings to be validated and for students to speak without being offered solutions.

By one in the morning, the resolution finally passed in our favor, and I drove home and reflected on the evening. I had stepped into the shoes of the very students that scrutinized me last spring, and through doing so, I better understood the town hall and why the campus negatively responded to my earnest attempts to educate them about our campus's budget. Here I expressed cognition in the second stage of Seemiller's (2014) model in the area of civic responsibility. I thought about others' circumstances in relation to my own and I understood how I could use the skills from this discovery to perform service. Ellis (2004) explains that autoethnography is more than just speaking about yourself, "[and] if you can't get outside your experience to get into others' experience of your experience, then you're too self-absorbed". Hard as it was, I appreciate that I was humbled and received a taste of what it was like to occupy both sides of the table: to be the nervous audience member standing at the podium and the wary authority figure who controlled the microphone.

I have done what I could; let those who can do better: Spring 2020

Before the pandemic, I was speeding towards graduation laser-focused on my future. I interned for a hardworking state senator, I held student government office, and I nannied part-time. I was writing a senior thesis, attempting to pick a graduate school, juggling a full course load, and planning my graduation party. I had made peace with the changing landscape of Senate and instead devoted myself to using the experiences, skills, and knowledge I gained to propel me into my future. I chose to write this autoethnography as a means to continue the work I did in Senate through a different medium. My writing is "giving voice to stories and groups of people traditionally left out

of social scientific inquiry”, one of the key goals of autoethnography that mirrors my goals as a student leader (Ellis, 2004).

I am a glass- $\frac{3}{4}$ -full type of person. I know where I am going because four years ago I was offered a seat at the table, and from that first opportunity I crafted my future. I poured four years of my life into Senate, and it gifted me with lifelong friends and mentors, a national community of alumni, and the access, support, and opportunities to chase what I wanted in life.

Recommendations

I was the 38th student Trustee in UNC’s history. I was the second student to serve two terms, the third person of color, and the seventh woman in the position. This meant there simply was not a well-trodden path forward for me. I was forced to make my own way, on my own terms, which was as liberating as it was terrifying. I learned several lessons in four years that I will follow me to graduate school and into my future career as a public servant.

As student trustee, I was unknowingly cast as the face of UNC students when outside the bounds of campus. This carried privilege and responsibility; people watched me and paid attention to the things I said and did much more closely than I had ever experienced. My actions spoke for young people, women, and students of color whether I wanted them to or not, and I strove to show the best of these groups through how I carried myself in my position. Unlike other Senate roles, my job tasked me to spend most of my time away from students and among people I often was challenged by based on our differences in age, race, political affiliation, and socioeconomic status. I learned not to allow preconceived notions about my colleagues to thwart my determination to enact

change, and by doing so, I opened myself to the opportunity to build meaningful relationships across UNC's campus and throughout Colorado.

I learned there is strength in vulnerability; some of the scariest and most gratifying moments were when I shared my own experiences to foster understanding of the issues afflicting the student body. When I spoke up about being selected for FAFSA verification and the arduousness of the paperwork process, the Board listened and gained deeper understanding of the barriers to completion facing marginalized communities. When I engaged in conversation respectfully, civilly, and with the intention to work towards tangible goals, change occurred. The greatest challenge and reward in my position was to bridge worlds through diplomacy and empathy and remain content as a member of multiple disparate groups of people I was pulled between.

My time in student Senate unearthed the notion of intersectional advocacy and taught me its importance. Governments are the most intersectional body in the world; our legislative choices resound beyond a single campus, district, or state. Prison reform is not complete without addressing the public education system or homelessness, and on UNC's campus, the Board is not complete without the student body and vice versa. Choi (2017) notes that "as an autoethnographer...you have a privileged access to your past experiences...[and] first-hand discernment of what is relevant to your study". Writing about these cathartic and didactic experiences provided additional closure and space to process the past four years, for which I am grateful. Senate affirmed my belief in the importance of the institution of government and showed me I am capable and equipped to lead in multiple contexts and positions. I will carry these lessons into the next chapter.

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