Queer Activist Leadership: An Exploration of Queer Leadership in Higher Education

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Higher Education has witnessed an increase in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities on college campuses. Despite this slow growth, many colleges and university climates remain largely unwelcoming to LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff. Student activism has largely been responsible for this growth, supported by staff and faculty advocates. This qualitative case study explored the tactics and strategies staff and faculty leveraged in advancing LGBTQ equity at Rural Public University in the Midwestern United States. The study advances a conceptual framework for queer activist leadership in higher education. Findings reveal how a small network of campus leaders engaged in queer leadership strategies through queer centered activism to advance LGBTQ equity in institutional policy and practice. Findings reveal rich implications for college administrators and higher education leaders advancing change for LGBTQ equity.

Keywords: staff activism, faculty activism, LGBTQ equity, queer leadership

When I was in high school and in undergrad, what would now be called the queer student group, it certainly was not called that at the time, the only way you could find out where they were meeting was being told by somebody else. There were no flyers, there were no posters. They met in a nonposted room, typically with the lights off and black paper over the windows.

—Barbara

Rural Public University (RPU), like many other colleges and universities, has not been a place of historic inclusion for its lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community members. Discrimination, violence, and a lack of institutional protections have kept this community at the margins. Barbara's quote, a faculty member at RPU, exemplifies the pervasive hostile campus environment RPU once occupied. Queer activists like Barbara have been at the forefront of institutional change in higher education for nearly five decades (Dilley, 2002; Marine, 2011). Historically, much of the progress for LGBTQ inclusion and equity work on college campuses can be attributed to the success of college students advocating for inclusion as organized student groups (Dilley, 2002; Linder, 2019; Marine, 2011). This burden comes at a cost to students, who should not have to navigate institutional hostilities in their educational experience. Yet, staff and faculty are uniquely positioned to advocate for institutional resources and policies benefiting members of a campus community (Kezar, 2010). Illuminating the ways staff and faculty support student initiatives are valuable, although staff activist scholarship is underrepresented in the literature (Hart, 2007; Kezar & Lester,

2011). Faculty roles in activism have been more readily documented, largely because of the protections of tenure and autonomy not afforded to their staff colleagues (Kezar, 2010). Understanding the leadership strategies of staff and faculty activists can provide valuable guidance to scholars and practitioners who work to advance LGBTQ equity in higher education.

As colleges and universities continue to expand their support services for LGBTQ college students, much of this work often requires the buy-in and leadership of institutional agents. Thus, university staff and faculty members often carry the weight of advocating for and implementing new initiatives. Yet, strategies to advocate for LGBTQ equity among faculty and staff are underexplored or unrepresented in scholarship. This burden is the impetus for this study, which aimed to understand how professional staff and their faculty colleagues at RPU advocated for LGBTQ equity on their college campus. Specifically, I put forward a queer activist leadership framework to understand the experiences of these campus leaders, distilling how the campus and regional climate impacted their opportunities and challenges. The research question guiding this study asks: How do LGBTQ leaders at RPU engage in grassroots queer leadership to change policies and practices to improve the climate for LGBTQ individuals?

Literature Review

It is important to acknowledge the use of the term queer as representing nonnormative gender experiences or sexualities (Jourian, 2015). Queer is often interchangeably used to represent LGBTQ identities more broadly. However, scholars and practitioners must not conflate the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) people and trans experiences (Renn, 2010), and this is not the purpose in my use of the term. Simply, queer experiences, often framed around experiences of being othered or discriminated against, share a history of oppression from traditionally heterogendered institutions (Bilodeau, 2009; Dilley, 2002; Preston

& Hoffman, 2015; Pryor, 2018). The participants in this study identified along a spectrum of sexual and gender diverse identities, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer; some holding multiple identities within the broader LGBTQ community.

Additionally, the term queer is leveraged as an epistemological tool to consider how leadership may be viewed through a nonnormative lens addressing heterogenderism in higher education. Queer is then used to honor the multitude of possibilities for nonnormative gender or sexual identity (Dilley, 1999; Jourian, 2015), but also to acknowledge the pervasive discrimination experienced by those in the larger LGBTQ community, particularly at traditionally heterogendered institutions (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). Although this study aims to specifically advance and explore queer leadership, it is important to recognize the complexities that arise when considering possibilities for other forms of queer leadership, particularly trans leadership. Emerging work is beginning to explore trans leadership pathways (Jourian & Simmons, 2017), particularly related to trans student leadership. Considering queer leadership as the primary lens for addressing the inequities of traditionally heterogendered institutions is not meant to diminish the possibilities of trans leadership. Assuming there is only one way to approach queer leadership runs counter to the underpinnings of *queer* as challenging normative and dominant discourse (Jourian, 2015). Thus, much room is left for further exploration of what trans leadership may look like through the use of the grassroots leadership framework. When issues arise that are specific to LGBQ or trans identities, they are properly noted in the findings.

The Traditionally Heterogendered Institution

Despite some advances for LGBTQ communities on campuses, as evidenced by policy and programming efforts (Marine, 2011; Patton, 2010), institutions continue to reinforce a narrative of otherness toward queer communities by reinforcing binaryistic programs and structures across university spaces and policies (e.g., campus restroom facilities, dress codes, locker rooms, Greek Life, and Residential Life; Mobley & Johnson, 2019; Nicolazzo, 2016; Patton, 2014; Pryor, 2018). Preston and Hoffman (2015) critique colleges and universities as sites of historic exclusion toward the LGBTQ community. Their assessment of the *traditionally heterogendered institution* (THI) reveals how college campuses continue to perpetuate ideals about LGBTQ students as needing to be saved from their institution. Specifically, campuses are challenged to reframe how support services engage LGBTQ students, moving from primarily victim-centered support to empowerment and activist centered programming.

Further, Preston and Hoffman (2015) demonstrated that these well-meaning queer oriented programs have the potential to perpetuate a narrative of needing to be saved, by supporting institutional structures of power. Instead of creating space for activism and disrupting policies or practices that perpetuate normative identity construction, the "THI [traditionally heterogendered institution] limits the ability of students, faculty, or staff, to imagine new ways of being [queer] . . . in ways that allow for more freedom, that creates spaces to confront violence, and that empower individuals to enact agency" (Preston & Hoffman, 2015, p. 82). As a result, some institutions provide well-intentioned support; however, they do not engage students in activism or challenging normative expectations placed on queer identities.

The extant scholarship provides an important backdrop for considering how professional staff and faculty navigate advocating for LGBTQ equity, particularly within an institutional setting that has historically oppressed LGBTQ identities. Studies continue to demonstrate campus climate as unwelcoming chilly environments for LGBTQ communities, and even more so when accounting for intersections of race, gender, disability, and class (Blockett, 2017; Garvey, Squire, Stachler, & Rankin, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016; Vaccaro, 2012; Zehner, 2018). Faculty and staff are in unique, although potentially vulnerable, positions to support student activism toward social change. Together, these institutional actors have demonstrated considerable change on college campuses (Kezar, 2010). The work of professional staff and faculty to improve these climates provide valuable implications for practice, particularly at institutions lacking LGBTQ centered programs or resources.

LGBTQ Representation in Higher Education

Much of the representation of LGBTQ centered literature in higher education has historically centered White gay cisgender men (Marine, 2011; Renn, 2010). This gap has become increasingly addressed in contemporary work illuminating the experiences of communities of color and other sexual and gender diverse populations in higher education (Blockett, 2017; Duran, 2018; Duran & Pérez, 2017; Means, 2017; Miller & Vaccaro, 2016). However, the earlier scholarship provided a basis for some policy and practice decisions, which led to growth in institutional programming and support for LGBTQ students (Marine, 2011; Renn, 2010). Further, much of the scholarship focused on LGBTQ people in higher education is focused on students, leading Renn (2010) to argue for more research about LGBTQ student affairs staff and faculty. Previous literature about LGBQ staff focused on those within student affairs roles (Croteau, 1995; Croteau & Lark, 2009; Sanlo, 2000). Emerging scholarship about trans educators' experiences navigating higher education illustrate the continued chilly and unwelcoming environments of college campus spaces (Pitcher, 2017; Simmons, 2017). Although LGBTQ visibility in higher education literature has increased, research illuminating staff and faculty roles in addressing challenges of unwelcoming campus environments remains limited.

LGBTQ Activism on Campus

Historically, professional staff participation in campus activism has been tempered (Kezar & Lester, 2011; Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, Nemeth Tuttle, & Gaston-Gayles, 2004). One reason may be that staff are more vulnerable to pressures of supporting the institution and its prestige (Kezar & Lester, 2011). These expectations on staff facilitate institutional complacency and have largely deviated from the activism and advocacy that led to the creation of most campus LGBTQ resource centers (Self & Hudson, 2015). The hidden expectation for professional staff is that they need to "fall-in-line" and not rock the boat. Yet, there are examples of campus staff taking active roles toward change on their campuses. Martin, Broadhurst, Hoffshire, and Takewell (2018) demonstrate how student affairs administrators advocate for LGBTQ students through advocacy, education, and policy and practice initiatives.

In the last decade, student activism has reemerged as issues of racial and social injustice reached greater tensions on college campuses across the country (Evans & Lange, 2019; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The 2016 political climate has further illuminated tensions of racial and social injustice, keeping institutions accountable in support of their minoritized communities on campus (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Instead of dismissing student activists, Martin (2014) argues for campus professionals to engage these leaders in institutional decision making. A primary role played by the campus professional is that of a mediator, placing staff, particularly those dedicated to serving minoritized communities, in challenging positions between the student activist and the institution (Linder, 2019; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004). However, institutional agents have also actively engaged students in their activism, making themselves vulnerable to institutional retaliation (Linder, 2019). As activist efforts witnessed an increase in support for diversity and inclusion efforts, institutions often ill-equip these programs and services to successfully accomplish goals of liberation and justice (Patton, 2010; Stewart, 2018). While an institution may respond to activist calls by establishing formal LGBTQ spaces, these centers are then poorly funded and not capable of addressing the larger systemic challenges. For campuses without dedicated LGBTQ centers, this work may then become the burden of staff and faculty already dedicated to other roles.

There is also a dearth of scholarship focused on LGBTQ leadership in higher education related to improving the climate for LGBTQ communities (Martin et al., 2018; Renn, 2010). Scholarship considering the role of LGBTQ staff has primarily focused on resource center staffing (Marine, 2011; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). Yet, faculty and staff networks have provided collective movement toward on-campus initiatives. For example, faculty and staff have advocated for inclusive partner benefits, supported LGBTQ colleagues through tenure and promotion, and lobbied for institutional antidiscrimination policies (Sanlo et al., 2002). Despite these documented efforts, little is known about the processes LGBTQ campus faculty and staff use for navigating leadership dynamics. This study seeks to further understand those experiences.

Conceptual Framework

The study leverages Kezar and Lester's (2011) application of grassroots leadership in higher education to model a possibility for queer activism on college campuses. Applying a queer lens to grassroots leadership in higher education, I explored the use of positional leadership and applications of grassroots activism toward social change, illuminating the experiences of grassroots leaders who work toward LGBTQ equity on their campus. Kezar and Lester (2011) identify grassroots leadership efforts on college campuses as a response to the changing higher education landscape. Grassroots leadership is nonhierarchical, often collective, and not an institutionalized process, where structure, networks, and support systems are individually created efforts (Kezar & Lester, 2011).

To queer leadership, necessitates queer viewpoints to be centered (Dilley, 1999) and actively entangled within the grassroots leadership framework. A queer lens focuses on liberatory practices for gender and sexual diverse communities (Dilley, 1999; Jourian, 2015), centering the engagement, leadership, and outcomes of queer leaders. Working up and through a historically heterogendered system may create barriers for leaders pursuing institutional change. Following the conceptions of grassroots leaders as bottom-up and challenging the status quo, layering a queer epistemological lens on to and enveloping grassroots leadership into this framework, provides an opportunity to enhance our understanding of how staff and faculty navigate and disrupt the *Traditionally Heterogendered Institution* (Preston & Hoffman, 2015).

Queer Activist Leadership

To build this framework, I adapt Kezar and Lester's (2011) grassroots leadership in higher education model, placing a queer lens on the three phenomenon areas they identify as *individual, group, and organizational*. Each of the phenomena speaks to the nuance grassroots leaders may experience at a personal individual level, within or around group engagement and movement, and organizational development and movement. I contend queer activist leadership encompasses three additional considerations within these areas: (a) queer activist; (b) queering leadership; and (c) queer policy and practice, respectively. The model is supported by previous literature that illustrated the success and challenges of queer activists in higher education and the resultant growth of LGBTQ support in higher education student affairs (Dilley, 2002; Linder, 2019; Lugg & Tooms, 2010; Marine, 2011; Martin et al., 2018; Renn, 2007, 2010; Sanlo, 2000).

A *queer activist* adds to the complexity of the individual phenomena (Kezar & Lester, 2011) by extending our conception of individual *identity, motivation, and resiliency*. Queer activists establish themselves as leaders for institutional transformation, where their identity as a member of the LGBTQ community may leave them vulnerable to harassment and discrimination. Identity is a central component to grassroots leadership (Kezar & Lester, 2011), yet the naming of oneself as a queer activist in a historically oppressive climate deepens the stigma attached to that leader. Adding this queer lens to *identity* phenomena centers the leader's queerness, but does not exclude other pertinent social identities they must engage in their leadership. Identity, particularly for other oppressed identities, is an important aspect of grassroots leadership (Kezar & Lester, 2011). How someone's queer identity intersects with other social identities also deepens the possibility for understanding multiple experiences of oppression within a queer leadership frame (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, disability, etc.). Given the invisibility often applied to some queer identities, being a queer activist is a commitment chosen and acted upon by the grassroots leader (Figure 1).

Queering leadership reveals the strategies the individual leader leverages to center queer experiences in their leadership practice and extends grassroots leadership efforts in disrupting power dynamics in higher education institutions. Centering queer experiences in leadership practices necessitates a disruption of heterosexist and cissexist culture embedded in institutional leadership and practice. Heterogendered practices are the result of heteronormative (Abes, 2008; Dilley, 1999) and genderist (Bilodeau, 2009) ways of seeing the world, often perpetuated by nonqueer individuals unaware of their power and privilege, or unaware of how heterogenderism impacts LGBTQ communities on college campuses. Centering queer issues, when often overlooked and misunderstood in higher education and student affairs, establishes
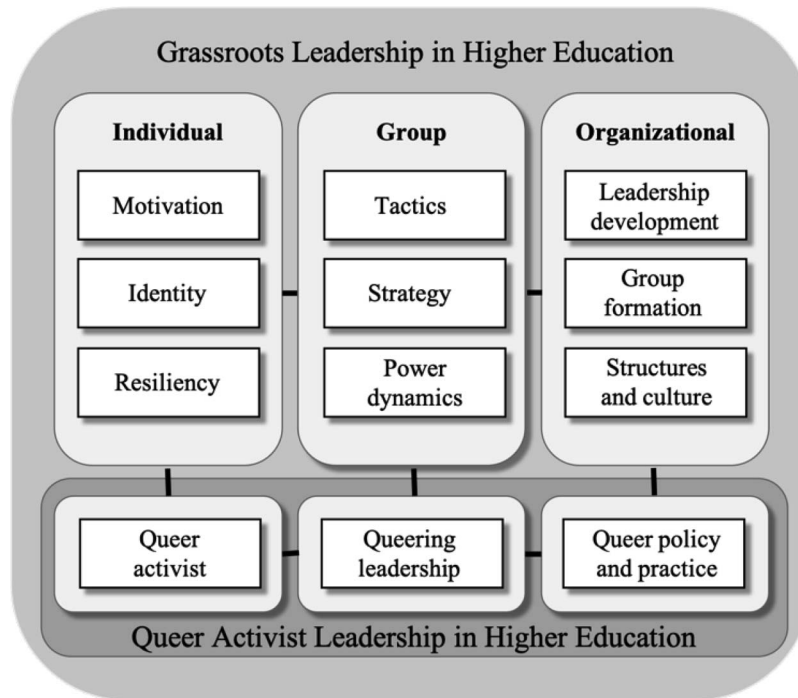
Figure 1.   From *Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership: An Examination of Grassroots Leaders in Higher Education* (p. 40), by A. J. Kezar and J. Lester, 2011, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Copyright 2011 by Stanford University Press. Adapted with permission.

an added layer of complexity to the group phenomena of grassroots leadership. This lens questions and problematizes the role of tactics, strategies, and power dynamics within the group phenomena by restructuring these practices and placing queer viewpoints front and center in leadership practice (Dilley, 1999; Jourian, 2015).

A final important contribution to queer leadership connects outcomes to a campus's organizational structure. Renn's (2007) queer activists demonstrated the need for transformational leadership that advanced social change. Thus, *queer policy and practice* extends the organizational phenomena *structures and culture* within grassroots leadership (Kezar & Lester, 2011), specifically advancing LGBTQ centered policies or initiatives. Challenging institutional norms and advancing queer-inclusive practice or policy is a cornerstone to queer leadership (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). These additional strategies serve as an important outgrowth of grassroots leadership, centering queer activism, disrupting heterogendered practices through queering leadership, and advancing policy and practice to advance LGBTQ equity in higher education.

Method

To answer the study's research question, I utilized a qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2014) to understand and make meaning of the leadership experiences of campus LGBTQ leaders. I focused particularly on how LGBTQ leaders at RPU navigate campus political climates to pursue, create, and implement change. Criteria for participants focused on identifying staff members on campus who were involved with LGBTQ change initiatives or self-identified themselves as LGBTQ advocates. Because of the intimate nature of the campus environment, snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) assisted in identifying other participants involved with change initiatives on campus. Although the study was initially interested in how professional staff advocate for LGBTQ equity, faculty participants contributed to the case context and served as partners in RPU's progress for LGBTQ equity.

Case Context and Historic LGBTQ Activism at RPU

Because I relied on case study as my method of inquiry, it is necessary to provide context to the case site. RPU is located in Rural City (RC), a town of approximately 20,000 people. As a rural community in Middle America, RC is primarily known for the presence of RPU and the neighboring military base less than 20 min away. A small city where the university sits right at its heart, RPU hosts a student population more than half the size of the city itself. The regional political climate is quite conservative, a point acknowledged by many of the participants in this study, and evident by the 2016 Trump political signs that littered the highway I would drive on for my site visits and interviews. The setting provides an important backdrop for considering how university members engaged their campus in advocacy for LGBTQ equity.

All participants spoke about the impact of living in or near Rural City has on the RPU campus climate. The community has grown with RPU, but there are also tensions between the town and gown. Tom Andrews, who has been at the institution since the 1980s, described a strong influence of Christianity within the town, "you can't swing a dead cat by the tail without hitting a church in this town." The strong presence of conservative religious social values

shape some of the experiences of the LGBTQ community in RC and, ultimately, at RPU.

RPU has also experienced incidents of violence and harassment by students and staff directed at the LGBTQ community on campus. Reviewing campus newspapers and reports, in the mid-2000s a gay student was physically assaulted on campus. In 2013, a gay first-year student living on campus reported being threatened with a knife by his roommate. Sheila, an out staff member who also instructed some Women and Gender Studies courses on campus said, "10 years ago, my wife [Barbara] and I got called dykes by a colleague in the hallway . . . we had another incident on campus where a fraternity defaced a homecoming float by the gay and lesbian group, which was about 6 years ago." These incidents provide a context to the harassment LGBTQ individuals have experienced at RPU over the last couple of decades, suggesting that the work of the queer advocates on campus is needed, but may also be risky.

The presence of out queer staff and faculty on campus has historically been minimal and according to Barbara and Sheila, only a few others have participated in queer advocacy on campus. Tom noted that the presence of queer staff and faculty seemed limited to out women; and there is a noticeable gap in out gay men, particularly those involved in any advocacy efforts. Tom shared, "these women, who are out, not only are a lot of them out but they're advocates. Whereas this guy, who is not out but everyone knows he's gay, he certainly doesn't function as an advocate." This gap is consistent with the identities of the participants; none of the participants are gay cisgender men. Although it is not possible to fully ascertain why, participant stories and newspaper accounts of physical violence in the community report those targeted to be gay cisgender men. This raises questions about how gay men experience the campus climate and what barriers existed that prevented them from engaging in queer work.

Data Collection

Data from this study primarily comes from interviews with RPU campus leaders who advocated for LGBTQ equity in both policy and practice and were collected in the summer and fall of 2016. I used documentation as a secondary source of evidence to better understand the institutional context at RPU. These data included optional participant demographic surveys, campus websites promoting LGBTQ equity, and student newspaper articles. Documents provide an unobtrusive source without interfering with the case and provide a broader context to the site (Yin, 2014). I also conducted informal interviews with other staff members and graduate students. These informal interviews were primarily a strategy for learning more about the campus context and climate and were conducted with individuals in nonformal settings during campus visits. These individual accounts were not audio-recorded but their data were added to my field notes and included in analysis.

Because my interest was in the experiences of LGBTQ leaders, my primary source of data relied on open-ended semistructured interviews with self-identified LGBTQ leaders. The interview protocol was guided by the grassroots leadership framework (Kezar & Lester, 2011), focusing on the three phenomena areas previously identified. The interviews discussed the Participants (a) perceptions of campus climate related to LGBTQ identities and issues, (b) how they have engaged in leadership efforts to advocate

for LGBTQ equity, and (c) how institutional agents have responded to LGBTQ concerns on campus. Further, I explored how participants navigated power structures, if and how they engaged constituent groups, and what successes or setbacks they experienced. I conducted at least one interview with each participant, with interviews lasting 95 min on average. After the first round of interviews, it became apparent which participants were most engaged with advocating for LGBTQ equity. Leading me to identify select participants for a second interview, to further understand their leadership philosophy and how they centered LGBTQ students in their work. This second interview averaged 31 min, with a total of three staff members participating (i.e., Sheila, Jennifer, and Benjamin). Finally, participants were asked to fill out an optional demographic form, completed by all but one participant.

Participants

A total of eight participants met the criteria for enrollment in the study at RPU (see Table 1), including five full-time staff members, two posttenure faculty members, and one graduate assistant. As Table 1 illustrates, participants' years of work dedicated to campus range from 2–35 years, and despite diversity related to sexuality and gender expression, the group is racially homogenous. All participants at RPU identified as White. Despite criteria interest in staff leadership experiences, Barbara and Jeremy provide important experiences as faculty members who advocated for LGBTQ policies. Barbara, who is married to Sheila, provided input as a former student, former staff member, and now associate professor. Participants who were most heavily credited and involved were those who identified as part of the LGBTQ community. Those who claimed a commitment to LGBTQ allyship but were straight and cisgender, spoke of their role as supporting, often deferring progress to the work of Barbara, Sheila, Jennifer, or Benjamin.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred at every stage of the data collection process (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014), and was ongoing and tracked through researcher log and memos. Memos served as a tool during the analysis process, assisting with making sense of the data and identifying early interpretations of the data (Jones et al., 2014). Once interview data were transcribed and documents reviewed, data were organized in a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program to assist with data management.

Using *analytic induction*, both deductive and inductive coding methods were used during data analysis (Patton, 2002). "Sometimes . . . qualitative analysis is first deductive or quasi-deductive and then inductive as when, for example, the analyst begins by examining the data in terms of theory-derived . . . framework" (Patton, 2002, p. 454). Because this study explored queer activist leadership, I identified a set of a priori deductive codes following the queer activist leadership framework that was informed by grassroots leadership levels: *Individual*, *Group*, and *Organizational*. Relying on this deductive process may have limited the analysis of the case; thus, I also used open and axial coding (inductive), to capture nuances of the case not identified through the deductive methods. I reviewed interview transcripts and other data through line-byline open coding (Patton, 2002). Presentation

Table 1
Participant Demographics and Involvement

Name	Salient identities	Gender pronoun	Campus role	Years of service to campus	Engagement with LGBTQ initiatives on campus
Jennifer	White queer nonbinary disabled	She/her	Psychologist	5	Facilitates LGBTQ counseling group for students; advocated for policy changes in department and other campus offices; implemented and facilitates updated Safe Zone training.
Benjamin	White queer trans man	He/him	Graduate assistant	2	Facilitates Safe Zone trainings; advocated for gender inclusive restrooms and other policy changes; serves as graduate assistant to LGBTQ programs.
Sheila	White queer gender fluid/masc woman disabled	She/her	Student services	16	Served as advisor to LGBTQ student organization; managed student engagement and multicultural campus programs; advocated for LGBTQ inclusive policies.
Barbara	White queer cis masc woman	She/her	Libraries staff/asc professor	25+	Mentored LGBTQ students; served as staff and faculty member; advocated for LGBTQ inclusive policies.
Tom	White straight cis man atheist	He/him	Director of counseling programs	35	Managed the University Counseling Center; Supported expansion of Safe Zone program within Counseling offices; supported LGBTQ inclusive policies.
Jeremy	White straight cis man	He/him	Professor	30	Faculty member who assisted in LGBTQ inclusive policies on Faculty Senate; advocated for domestic partner benefits.
Sue	White straight cis woman	She/her	Counselor	5	Passively involved; supported LGBTQ student needs; committed to LGBTQ equity.
Debbie	White straight cis woman	She/her	Student services	4	Passively involved; supported LGBTQ student needs; committed to LGBTQ equity.

Note. LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.

of the case findings is guided by the proposed framework, conceptualizing queer activist leadership through grassroots leadership and the extant literature.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness and promote confidence and rigor in the research process, I am guided by Jones et al. (2014), who argue for the use of inquiry and relational competence.

Dependability and confirmability of findings were met through the use of multiple data sources, a rich audit trail outlining the data collection process, and transferability of the findings to practice in the field. Data was also triangulated through the collection and analysis of multiple sources (e.g., interviews, observation, and document analysis; Jones et al., 2014).

Trustworthiness is further enhanced by interrogating my role and relationship to the data collection and analysis process (Jones et al., 2014). My privileged and minoritized identities inform my work both as a researcher and practitioner. As a White, gay, queer cisgender man, it is important for me to acknowledge that my work as an LGBTQ advocate and educator is central to my purpose as a scholar-practitioner. During my time of data collection, I served as an LGBTQ Affairs practitioner at a neighboring institution. My work as a practitioner informs my research agenda and interest in creating meaningful change for LGBTQ equity in higher education. Situating myself is important as I recognize the work that I was compensated for doing, is not the experience many LGBTQ activists have in higher education, particularly the participants at RPU. My identities and experiences contribute to my worldview and positionality that attempts to center minoritized voices. Naming these areas of privilege and power is important for understanding how I maintained trustworthiness and established rapport with my participants during data collection.

Limitations

Findings and implications drawn from the study should be understood with the consideration and limitations of a single case study, particularly related to the engagement of queer leadership and participants' identities in a Midwest rural context. Thus, findings related to queer activist leadership are meant to provide transferable implications to higher education leadership practice, policy, and understanding queer activist leadership.

Further, access to participants was limited at RPU, and they lacked racial and gender diversity, particularly those involved with LGBTQ equity work. All participants identified as White and most participants were cisgender. Despite attempts to recruit more participants, the racial homogeneity likely speaks to the campus context and Midwest rural locale. Barbara retorted that she and a few colleagues of color were consistently tasked as the token diversity representatives for committee service. "We were the multicultural group and we would get called in everywhere. It seemed disingenuous." Although the experiences of the participants were valuable, a homogenous sample limits understanding about the intersections of race and gender. This limitation may impact how queer leadership is understood through various identity lenses, and serves as a call for continued exploration of queer leadership among racial and gender diverse staff. Finally, collecting case data as an outsider limited my time and exposure and served as a limitation toward fully understanding the institutional context; I sought to counter this limitation through thorough and rigorous data collection.

Findings

The findings revealed participants' experiences at RPU reflect a history of hostility and discrimination, yet their leadership dem-

onstrated action, persistence, and success. Through the conceptual framework of queer activist leadership in higher education, findings elucidate how these queer leaders managed to overcome challenges and find success in advocating for LGBTQ equity on campus. Through the framework, I discuss how participants found motivation and maintained engagement with queer orientated work. Ultimately their persistence led to changes in the institution. I explore their experiences along the queer activist leadership framework; queer activists, queering leadership, and queer policy and practice.

Queer Activist; Being Visibly Queer

> If you're an LGBTQ person, we used to talk, it is glass closets, just door after door, you just keep coming out. Man (sic), if you're a faculty person or a staff member or an administrator, it's like glass closets with four doors. There's a door on every wall and you're just coming out again and again.
>
> —Barbara

RPU has witnessed tremendous growth over the last couple of decades. Barbara and Sheila have both been present and active through a lot of these changes, and their experiences demonstrate how campus progress has been fraught with significant challenges and slow incremental successes. Barbara's statement reflects her experience as a highly visible queer person on campus. In light of her visibility, it was unavoidable that she continuously shared one part of herself that historically left her quite vulnerable. Sheila expanded on her identity in relationship to Barbara.

> Being an established queer married couple on campus, my wife [Barbara], she has a crew cut and is a big lady. People come to us looking for guidance. Most adults outside of higher ed do not treat us with respect. They see us as fat dykes. But when they hear what we do for a living, boy do they straighten up a little bit and treat us a little bit better.

Barbara and Sheila's visibility and experience navigating being out at RPU differentially shaped how they advocated for LGBTQ equity on campus, in ways that their nonqueer peer advocates could not experience. Their identity as a queer and married couple illustrates the varied ways in which LGBTQ leaders at RPU center their queer identities in their leadership strategies and push for an institutional culture shift.

Additionally, identity played an important role in their motivation for addressing issues of LGBTQ inequity. Namely, participants were driven by a commitment to support students and a personal commitment to the LGBTQ community. A commitment to student development undergirds much of the participants' efforts on campus, and working to establish a welcoming community at RPU for queer students manifests that commitment. For Benjamin, "My experience as a trans person has been very different from the experiences of gay folks in the Midwest . . . So when it comes to the housing, the restrooms [issues], I'm fighting for my trans students." Benjamin's service to students is one way he demonstrates his leadership, revealing the personal nature of engaging in queer equity work. Much of the commitment of participants to the LGBTQ community stems from these personal experiences. Barbara and Sheila reflected the notion that the "personal is political" through their support of queer students at RPU. For them, their visibility on campus is important to connect with and provide

support to other queer colleagues and students. Sheila noted, "being different, in my position, and advocating for the students who are different, is helpful. And being married to another queer person means students who need guidance will find us." Despite any risks associated with being one of the few out queer persons on campus, all are compelled to be visible as to express their unrelenting commitment to the LGBTQ community.

Activists and advocates. A queer activist identity was a distinguishing role many of the queer leaders claimed. They all engaged in various forms of demonstrations or lobbying that positioned their efforts differently than those of their campus allies. For example, Barbara's experiences lobbying at Capital City or pushing for policy change at RPU marked her commitment to queer activism. She distinguished the roles of advocacy and activism, sharing:

> Advocacy for me means inertia, activism for me means push. And I think advocacy is necessary, important, there's a lot of things I advocate for that I'm not necessarily an activist for. But for me, the clear difference is that activism means active. That you're literally pushing. It means you're potentially stepping on toes. It means you're potentially taking risks for yourself and maybe others. It means that you're rolling the dice in some ways that I think advocacy can be safer.

This distinction of advocacy mirrors many of the experiences of non-LGBTQ staff members who engaged in supportive behavior for LGBTQ equity but were reticent to name themselves as activists. Activism implies more risk, and for the queer activists in the study, a sense of giving more of oneself. At RPU, these queer leaders' visibility left them vulnerable to harassment and discrimination, yet they managed to work through barriers and use successful strategies for queering leadership and practice at RPU.

Nonqueer individuals suggested deferring to their queer peers for confirmation of their connection to queer advocacy. Tom and Jeremy both advocated for LGBTQ equity either through new programs, committees, or on the faculty senate; yet, they were hesitant to accept any credit. Tom relented, "with a lot of humility" would he affix that label to his work on campus. At RPU, advocates have been persistent and successful in achieving their goals on campus.

As it relates to how participants engaged with advocacy, those claiming an advocacy identity or agenda were tempered. Jennifer struggled with parsing out her role as an advocate versus an activist, as she sees her history of political engagements as a form of activism. It was important for her to claim both an advocate and activist identity, as they both were central to her professional role and her political perspective.

> I think [activism is] something that I've kind of identified with since I was a teenager. Although more so now, I would consider myself an advocate. I still have an activist part of my heart . . . I view activism as more radical than advocacy . . . I think activism tends to be something that we think of relating to students, and advocacy as more of the adult thing. And I think activism and activists, sometimes get a bad rap.

Jennifer's professional role required her to pursue change a little more carefully, particularly when working with other departments on campus who expressed some hesitation or unawareness of LGBTQ issues. Many participants cited the importance of a dip-

lomatic disposition in their approach to obtaining buy-in. Tom reflected on the distinction between advocacy and activism, surmising a tempered perspective on advocacy within the institution:

> There's almost a sadness when something becomes professionalized what used to be an activist thing, but it's a good thing. That's kind of the role of activists. They are kind of like the artists of social change, whereas the advocates are kind of the administrators. It's like an old neighborhood in the city. Who's the first people to move in, the artists. They set up weird little shops and they do their paintings and do their art stuff. And then it becomes gentrified and hip, and the other people start moving in. And pretty soon the rent is too high and the artists move out into another rundown neighborhood. The activists always seem like they're the vanguard pushing into the dangerous terrain.

Despite a sense of professionalization or temperedness as it relates to advocacy, while perhaps true at RPU, the work of these queer advocates was ultimately successful. Their strategies in navigating institutional structures led to some meaningful change in RPU's policies and practices. If advocacy was a tool that allowed participants to navigate institutional dynamics at RPU, activism was the tool that allowed queer individuals to remain persistent and find success.

Queering Leadership

Queering leadership requires leaders to center queer identities in leadership practice and necessitates a disruption of heterogendered culture embedded in institutional leadership and practice. Participants utilized a number of strategies to center queer identities in their leadership process. In addition to individual core values of LGBTQ inclusion and advocacy, participants actively engaged in educating their colleagues and worked to connect institutional values to that of LGBTQ equity. Resistance was pervasive, requiring them first to navigate varying levels of power dynamics from other departments, faculty, and campus leadership.

Power dynamics. Some of these power dynamics surfaced between faculty and staff, campus administration, and executive leadership. Awareness of these institutional dynamics was important to strategically prepare to work through any power struggles. Jennifer experienced the challenge of navigating power dynamics at a university; she noted that it is a unique setting where who you work for might not necessarily be the only structural authority who can help or hinder your cause. Jennifer reflected, "I feel like our Vice Provost, I think personally he's very supportive, but I think within his role his hands are tied a lot of the times." As an example, Benjamin explained increasing the number of gender-inclusive restrooms required engaging the academic department where the facilities are located but it also required buy-in from campus facilities. Acquiring support across different divisions was a barrier.

Although some campus units are viewed as supportive of LGBTQ inclusion, Benjamin reflected on attempts to engage the campus health center in more inclusive practices. "I was trying to clarify what they can do as far as trans health care, and they were like, 'well, we see anybody, why do we have to specify?'" The department's lack of interest in understanding why it might consider LGBTQ health concerns manifested as resistance. A resistance that could have broader implications by neglecting important factors such as transgender student health concerns and other practices that can contribute to more inclusive patient care. Simi-

larly, Jennifer struggled to obtain support from the registrar for a chosen name and pronoun policy—both which would allow students to notify campus offices/class rosters of their chosen name and gender pronoun. This was something she was able to implement within the counseling center records but remained a struggle because other campus constituents have yet to support such a change. "I think just the resistance and closed-mindedness of people saying, 'well it's not an issue here.' Or, 'we don't have that many students,' or 'things are good here.'" These justifications for not addressing issues of LGBTQ equity speak to apathy among some administrators, who see the issues as not pressing or important. By suggesting they see "all" students or need a quota to rationalize their lack of concern, these offices are creating a standard of gender blindness; and in effect, are erasing the identities of LGBTQ students and clients.

For Sheila, queering leadership surfaced as a strategy for combatting heterogendered attitudes related to professionalism in the field of student affairs. Queering leadership included challenging the status quo and actively speaking about queer lives. Her philosophy is a demonstration of how queering leadership resists normative notions of who and how higher education talks about identity, students' lives, and the spaces created on a college campus. Barbara and Sheila advocate models of leadership that not only alter practice, but honor queer identities and challenge traditionally heterogendered institutional practices. Sheila commented, "I'm out in my classroom. I don't think if you're a queer person that you can teach with authenticity if you're not. If you can't be honest about who you are and your perspective, I just don't feel it's as authentic as you could be." Their visibility as a couple often came with the consequence of harassment from peers on campus, where both Barbara and Sheila reported hearing slurs, gossip, and blatant homophobic remarks toward them over the course of their years at RPU.

Tactics and strategies. To combat some of these challenges, Jennifer spoke more on how she centers queer students through her ability to influence practices within her office.

> One of the ways that I center LGBTQ students in the work that I do has to do with things like, making the changes in our paperwork, asking the questions. I always ask, anytime I meet with a new student, I ask names, pronouns. I ask "are you in a romantic relationship?" "are you in a sexual relationship?" . . . it allows space to acknowledge that like, romantic and sexual relationships (a) aren't necessarily always the same, and (b) I'm comfortable talking about them.

Creating opportunities like these challenge previous institutional practices, which either did not create room for students to disclose their sexuality on office intake forms, or assumed heterosexuality. For Jennifer, queering leadership is using her power within her given space to shift the institutional norms of how gender and sexuality are discussed and recognized.

Participants were strategic in how they leveraged support for their work. One effective means was to label their work as supporting student success on campus. Benjamin said, "I'll always kind of pull that line, valuing or supporting all of our students . . . reminding folks that all of our work is related to student success." Whether it was supporting student organizations, advocating for gender-inclusive restrooms, or seeking accommodations for campus housing, addressing concerns as efforts to improve student success was pivotal. This was particularly effective when advo-

cating within areas of student affairs, where many student affairs administrators have educational backgrounds focused on student development and success. Using student success and retention as strategy positions others as not supporting student success if they challenge the initiative.

Similarly, another strategy was to define grassroots work as an effort to meet institutional expectations to support student retention and enrollment management initiatives. At RPU, there has been an increased focus on enrollment management, and campus leadership often asked faculty and staff to identify strategies to support student retention. Sheila saw this as an effective entry for engaging the president on LGBTQ student concerns by providing data that supports both the institution's interests as well as her advocacy for inclusion. Similarly, Benjamin leveraged the campus nondiscrimination statement that included gender identity as a protected class, and the recent Title IX *Dear Colleague Letter* as a means for advocacy. Benjamin said, "I think the emphasis on Title IX and its applicability to LGBTQ students has instilled a fear in other student affairs professionals. You don't want to be responsible for RPU getting a reputation for not being inclusive." Despite President Trump's administration rescinding these efforts in 2017, Benjamin's approach to leverage existing policy provided an important example of how other institutional leaders can also utilize similar values to center and support LGBTQ students.

Queer Policy and Practice

A final component of queer activist leadership requires a demonstrable change in either campus policy or practice. Grassroots leadership organizational phenomena emphasizes the organizational structures and dynamics grassroots leaders must navigate (Kezar & Lester, 2011). Thus, to queer leadership, normative notions of institutional practice or policy must shift toward equity for LGBTQ members of the community. Participant experiences at RPU date back to the 1980s and 1990s, when the campus was considerably more hostile and unfriendly toward LGBTQ students, faculty, or staff. As Barbara, Sheila, Tom, and Jeremy recalled, RPU is in a significantly improved space for LGBTQ equity, in large part because of their collective efforts. These stories of a collective few illustrate how grassroots organizing benefited the movement toward LGBTQ equity on campus.

Group formation. Over the last decade participants' progress in campus policy and practices speak to an improved campus climate; however, the campus's location within a rural and conservative region, continues to create some barriers for queer leaders on campus. The climate required participants to collectively organize and find support from a small fraction of the RPU community. Within the frame of grassroots leadership, group formation and organizing is a critical component for advancing that groups agenda (Kezar & Lester, 2011). According to Barbara, the climate has improved dramatically. However, the group of queer leaders is still quite small. This intimate number of individuals faced a heavy burden, but, as noted, one that has improved over time.

When Jennifer applied to RPU, she intentionally sought an environment that welcomed her queer identity. Support from Tom and her colleagues was affirming and it became a strong launching point for her to reinvigorate the campus Safe Space training. "I told [Tom] at the very beginning, I just need to know before, if I decide

that I want to work here, if I am out and vocal, if I am in support of something or against something, basically, do you have my back? And he said, 'yeah, you can do what you want, to the extent that you feel comfortable'." Outside of Jennifer's immediate colleagues in the counseling center, her primary source of support is her husband Benjamin, who works closely with Sheila to advocate for and support the campus LGBTQ initiatives. Overall, these individuals serve as a small collective, made up of mostly seasoned staff members on campus and some newer colleagues to campus that does not have the institutional history compared with Barbara, Sheila, or Tom.

Campus department support. Campus partners were important to participants' progress, and all identified a few offices or campus organizations that have contributed to recent successes. Most of these areas either have LGBTQ individuals working there or involved, or have important allies to the LGBTQ staff members. Most notable are the Counseling Center and the Student Life Engagement Program (SLEP), where a number of the participants work. The counseling center facilitates the campus Safe Space training, and through Jennifer's work, has updated its practices to be more inclusive and welcoming to LGBTQ clients. Before Jennifer's arrival, the center started the Safe Space program under Tom's leadership, creating the office as a visible support for its LGBTQ colleagues and students.

Similarly, the SLEP office is where Sheila and Benjamin work, where Benjamin serves as the graduate assistant for LGBTQ affairs. Although Sheila has recently been appointed to lead the multicultural program development, her primary role is as the diversity coordinator within the SLEP program. The strong support in her unit led to the creation of the LGBTQ graduate assistant position that is only a few years old. The position is a marker of progress for a campus that has historically marginalized its LGBTQ population.

The LGBTQ queer leaders also highlighted strengthening partnerships with residential life. Benjamin and the SLEP program worked collaboratively with residential life staff to support transgender students who sought support while living on campus. The residential life department practice is to approach student housing for trans students on a case-by-case basis, something Benjamin struggled with, but something he agreed was better than nothing. Although Benjamin reported the relationship with residential life as positive, a case-by-case practice is typical of campuses that have not engaged in writing a policy or enacted best practices for its transgender and nonbinary students (Pryor, Ta, & Hart, 2016). Residential life does provide visible support to their colleagues and queer students, but as Benjamin noted, "they aren't racing to the finish line" to completely restructure their practices.

In the last 10 years, RPU has achieved: (a) sexual orientation and gender identity/expression in their nondiscrimination statement; (b) domestic partner benefits; (c) implementation and continuous improvement of a Safe Space program; (d) expansion of gender-inclusive restrooms; (e) LGBTQ counseling support group; and (f) the implementation of LGBTQ graduate assistant position. These changes reflect the influence queer leaders have had on a traditionally heterogendered institution, slowly shifting its climate, practices, and policies toward greater equity for queer students, faculty, and staff. These participant experiences provide a model for engaging queer leadership in higher education. Queering grassroots leadership allowed for a thorough exploration of the individ-

ual and organizational dynamics that shape the RPU campus climate for LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff. Applying the lens of queer activism, centering queer identities, and the leaders' intentional application of queer centered change in policy and practice emphasized how queer leadership may function within a single institution.

Discussion

The framework for the study conceptualized queer leadership as an approach embodied through LGBTQ-centered activism, leadership, and change. To establish a queer activist leadership model, the grassroots leadership framework (Kezar & Lester, 2011) was essential, particularly because of its bottom-up approach and its accounting for higher education structural dynamics. The model is informed by previous literature that illustrated the success of queer activists in higher education and the resultant growth of LGBTQ support in higher education student affairs (Dilley, 2002; Linder, 2019; Lugg & Tooms, 2010; Marine, 2011; Martin et al., 2018; Renn, 2007, 2010; Sanlo, 2000). The participants' collective approach to address issues of campus climate, including work toward policy initiatives to support the lives of LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff on campus, demonstrates the primary ways they engaged in queer leadership.

As a theoretical lens, the queer activist leadership model provides guidance for practitioners who seek to engage queer work in higher education. Traditional approaches for recommended best practices in higher education often fall short in shifting the very structures that limit the potentials of LGBTQ students (Preston & Hoffman, 2015), perpetuating a cycle of critique without change. To advance evidence-based practices, campuses must resist heterogendered norms that limit the ways in which queer identities, and bodies, are affirmed and upheld (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). Preston and Hoffman (2015) argued for institutional practices that shift the discourse of LGBTQ communities as needing to be saved—where they are at the mercy of the institution for protection—to a discourse of unlimited potential for activism and social transformation. In practice, this may surface in not only implementing a name and pronoun policy for students, but also implementing intentional training programs for faculty and staff to shift the institutional awareness for why such programs are needed. At RPU, the LGBTQ counseling support group was the most successful and well-attended of all groups that meet at the counseling center. Although groups like this provide an invaluable form of support, there is a risk of limiting queer empowerment if the only option of organized support for students focuses on emotional support.

Expanding typical support practices for LGBTQ students is another way an institution can challenge previous practices and escape the *institution as savior* mentality. This savior complex arose most notably with the recent creation of RPU's LGBTQ graduate position. While these roles are valuable, they do not necessarily lead to systemic change (Patton, 2010). In addition to a support group or a part-time resource coordinator, can there be institutional support for a queer empowerment group, designed for empowering queer activists and leaders? What would it mean to require every department to adopt LGBTQ inclusive practices? Such ideas require practitioners to engage in self-work and to recognize that best practices must include not just the simple

short-term solution, but they must also question how the institutional climate and culture will shift in a way that does not reinforce perpetual otherness. Although RPU made strides in its policies and practice, they were susceptible to limitations reinforced by the THI.

The model for queer leadership can serve as a guide for campus leaders to move beyond evidence-based best practices, using advocacy that creates meaningful change, yet functions through a lens of practical criticality that disrupts the traditionally heterogendered institution.

Some staff and faculty at RPU had been advocating for LGBTQ equity and inclusion for nearly two decades. The LGBTQ campus climate at RPU is consistent with findings on other campuses that report unwelcoming environments for LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff (Garvey et al., 2018; Marine, 2011; Vaccaro, 2012). Only in recent years has a shift occurred, evidenced by staff who found success in advocating for new policies and programs. Up until recently, RPU lacked nondiscrimination policies that support sexual and gender diverse people, partner health benefits, and campus resources dedicated to LGBTQ support. These improvements were the result of a small number of campus leaders engaged in advocacy for LGBTQ equity, who leveraged grassroots strategies to organize and advocate for colleagues and students (Kezar & Lester, 2011). Although participants at RPU carefully navigated the bureaucratic structures of the institution, their approach to activist work was only tempered when threats of institutional authority loomed (Kezar & Lester, 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004). They found success in establishing a tight-knit network of queer and allied individuals. Recent changes at RPU are promising, but RPU participants recognize a need for other improvements and many of the leaders continue to advocate for best practices, most notably to challenge genderist practices associated with campus housing and name and gender markers (Nicolazzo, 2016; Nicolazzo, Marine, & Wagner, 2018; Pryor et al., 2016). These more recent initiatives specifically advanced trans-centered practices, demonstrating how queer leaders have been able to reshape inequitable practices perpetuated by the conditions of working at a traditionally heterogendered institution.

Queer leaders at RPU experienced significant pushback in their efforts to expand LGBTQ equity, and they were ultimately reliant on nonqueer partners on campus. The implication here is not only might queer leaders' progress be slowed, but their experience also reflects a hostile campus climate where meaningful change would not be possible without nonqueer support. This demonstrates a troubling reality of whose work and identities is privileged and most listened to. It also demonstrates the importance of allies engaging in LGBTQ equity work and captures how privileged people possess power to advance change. Despite its applicability to these cases, some important distinctions arose from the data, especially around participant activist identities. Kezar and Lester (2011) noted that grassroots leaders were less likely to be confrontational on campus because of having longer tenure at their institution. Confrontational action may create possible personal and political conflicts throughout a grassroots leader's career. Yet, participants at RPU not only claimed an activist identity, but they also maintained long-standing roles at the institution while experiencing success in campus LGBTQ equity initiatives. Further, their activist identities played an important role in their advocacy on campus but did not preclude them from also engaging tempered

approaches in their work. Participants at RPU balanced their roles as activists and as agents of the institution, which informed their roles as queer leaders on campus. The strategies used reflect important considerations for engaging in queer leadership, identifying potentially transferable strategies from participant experiences at RPU.

Recommendations for Theory and Research

As leadership scholarship often overlooks staff contributions (Kezar & Lester, 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004), findings illuminate the role of campus staff members in advocating for LGBTQ equity. Staff provide invaluable support toward student success; yet, little is known about their involvement in campus advocacy efforts (Kezar & Lester, 2011; Martin et al., 2018; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004). The study's findings address this gap. Leveraging faculty support, the staff at RPU participated in bottom-up grassroots leadership (Kezar & Lester, 2011) that led to important changes on their campus. The important role of staff, as described in this study, argues for institutions to foster environments that support staff involvement to address institutional inequities. These findings also reveal the need for future scholarship to continue to explore campus staff experiences, particularly their investment in challenging oppressive environments to support minoritized communities.

Future research must seek to understand more about the individual faculty and staff members who support social equity on campus. In this study, participants primarily advocated for the needs of students, but their work also meant they were advocating for themselves and their queer-identified colleagues. Participant efforts reflected previous scholarship that demonstrated the role of student affairs staff as mediators, those who seek to constructively respond to student needs or demands (Linder, 2019; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004). Yet, the experiences of queer-identified staff specifically, also demonstrated a need for continued exploration of LGBTQ student affairs staff support and experiences. Participants, especially queer-identified participants, demonstrated great resilience through a hostile and oppressive climate. How do these leaders take care of themselves when this work is expressly personal? Understanding their stories is necessary for educators to prepare or continue to challenge institutions that inadequately support queer faculty, staff, and students.

The proposed model for queer leadership in higher education requires further exploration, but it provides an important foundation for considering how queer leadership may operate within the context of a higher education institution. For example, queer leadership may surface differently at a large research university, a community college, an institution in the northeast, or one in the south; thus, future scholarship should explore how leaders at varied institution types and locations advocate and advance LGBTQ equity in higher education. Future research also must explore the experiences of queer leadership to continue to demonstrate and support the progress of LGBTQ equity on college campuses. The model provides a framework for considering how campus LGBTQ activists advance important work to improve LGBTQ campus climate. Future research must test and expand on how other LGBTQ advocates and activists pursue change in their particular contexts, informing new ways for doing queer work in higher education.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

In addition to recommendations for research, findings from this study point to important recommendations for practitioners seeking to navigate change on their campus. Findings illuminate the processes campus leaders used, centering queer students and experiences in their leadership and practice. Higher education scholarship has called upon researchers and practitioners to center queer experiences in higher education practice (Abes, 2008; Dilley, 1999; Nicolazzo et al., 2018; Preston & Hoffman, 2015); advocate for LGBTQ equity through policy and practice (Marine, 2011; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Sanlo, 2000); and disrupt heterogendered leadership practices (Lugg & Tooms, 2010; Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Pryor, 2018; Renn, 2007). Participants at RPU demonstrated a strong commitment to queer advocacy and activism that led to meaningful change on their campus. I hope leaders on other campuses who want to advance LGBTQ equity may find these participants' strategies transferrable to their own settings.

Particularly important at RPU, and at the root of grassroots leadership and queer community organizing, is the establishment of community and support (Dilley, 2002; Kezar & Lester, 2011; Marine, 2011; Sanlo et al., 2002). In addition to reinforcing the importance of community building, findings illuminate the value of college and university staff members to leverage their networks and personal power to advocate for minoritized communities. Participants at RPU relied on their allies within the faculty senate and other leadership roles to push forward agendas important to growing LGBTQ equity. Consistent with the group phenomenon in grassroots leadership (Kezar & Lester, 2011), community among participants contributed to much of their persistence and ultimate success. Participants at RPU often referred to themselves as the handful of likeminded queer individuals who fostered strong support for one another. Not only did these relationships provide interpersonal support, but they also expanded the reach of queer advocacy on campus. These relationships provide an important narrative for queer leaders at other campuses to consider and they demonstrate the influence a few individuals can have on transforming their communities.

Lastly, the participants advocated for clear policy decisions, most recently seeking to support the expansion of gender-inclusive restroom spaces, gender-inclusive housing practices, and a campus chosen name policy. Although policy is an important step in advancing equity, the resistance to moving forward with these policies often surfaced with responses such as, "we don't have that many [trans] students here." If institutions are to truly transform heterogendered practices, these assumptions must be challenged and critically deconstructed for continuing to center the experiences of cisgender straight communities (Nicolazzo et al., 2018; Preston & Hoffman, 2015). As the participants demonstrated, systemic change requires more than a policy or a few queer leaders, it will take an entire community to shift away from the barriers of the THI, disrupting the norms that create the traditionally heterogendered institution.

Conclusion

I conceptualized a queer leadership framework based on grassroots leadership in higher education (Kezar & Lester, 2011), to capture the nuances of queer leadership strategies at a RPU. Overall, staff and faculty participants were responsible for creating

meaningful change on campus, organizing to advance institutional policy and practice for LGBTQ equity. Their successes provided important consideration for higher education practitioners, particularly those who do not host formal programs of support dedicated to LGBTQ advocacy. Findings from this study identified gaps and successes in queer advocacy. As most institutions lack such formal programs (Campus Pride, 2019; Marine, 2011), understanding staff and faculty organizing experiences have invaluable implications for higher education scholars and practitioners, as well as for LGBTQ equity on campuses.

As scholars and practitioners continue to advance work toward LGBTQ equity on college campuses, it is imperative that their work dismantles normative practices that perpetuate heterogendered institutions (Abes, 2008; Nicolazzo, 2016; Preston & Hoffman, 2015), which includes the policies and practices identified through the work of staff leaders at RPU. Thus, critical queer policy work must not only trouble the normative histories of LGBTQ exclusion and oppression, but it must also expand the ways practitioners do queer work on campus (Bilodeau, 2009; Preston & Hoffman, 2015) by disrupting binary approaches to LGBTQ policy expansion and providing multiple ways of being queer and supporting queer identities. Scholarship increasingly finds colleges and universities as troubling sites for LGBTQ discrimination and exclusion (Garvey et al., 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016; Preston & Hoffman, 2015), and this model for queer leadership, coupled with critical queer policy work, may provide guidance to improve campus climates through these recommended higher education practices.

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