A Space to Breathe & Grow: A Women & Leadership Program Operates as a Counterspace at a Predominantly White Institution for First-Generation Women of Color

Abstract: In recent years, there have been a number of efforts created to support both first-generation college students and Women of Color (WOC), including within leadership education. However, these programs often do not account for the intersectional oppression experienced by first-generation undergraduate WOC. The researchers of this case-study demonstrate how a Women and Leadership at a Predominantly White Institution in the Western U.S. operates as a counterspace for first-generation undergraduate WOC by contributing to their validation, sense of belonging, and leadership development. As such, the researchers recommend creating and sustaining leadership programs for first-generation undergraduate WOC.

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In the 2015-2016 academic year, 56% of college students were first-generation college students (RTI International, 2019). Of these first-generation students, more than 50% were students of color with 25% being Latina/o/x and 18% being Black. However, first-generation students of color (FGSOC) still face discrimination and microaggressions at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) because of their racial and ethnic identities, socioeconomic class background and status being first-generation college students. This discrimination leads to biased incidents, stereotyping, devaluing of their backgrounds and identities, an unwelcoming campus culture, and feelings of being unsafe (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; Leath & Chavous, 2017). In particular, first-generation undergraduate Women of Color (FGWOC) report race, gender, and class discrimination, which contributes to feeling they do not belong on their college campuses. FGWOC desire to find spaces where they can be themselves and find support from others with similar backgrounds (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; Thornhill et al., 2023).

Researchers agree there are many interventions and programs to support first-generation college students (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021; Lee & Harris, 2020; Whitley et al., 2018). Several programs also support Women of Color such as sister-circles, and affinity groups (Castellanos, 2016; Croom et al., 2017; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Hernandez Rivera, 2020; Revilla,

2010; Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2016). These supportive environments often operate as counterspaces, or locations on college campuses where students of similar race, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or gender can come together to “vent frustrations and cultivate friendships with others who may share their experiences'' (Yosso, et al., 2009, p. 677).

Additionally, researchers have found that leadership education can provide a space for historically marginalized students to find support and a sense of belonging while developing their leadership identity (Guthrie & Torres, 2021; Miller & Vaccaro, 2016; Soria & Cole, 2023). More often researchers, including those focused on leadership programs, have detailed how FGSOC benefit from first-generation programming, multicultural centers and affinity groups (Croom et al., 2017; Flores & Garcia, 2009; McShay, 2017; Pendakur, 2016). Less frequently researchers have explored how campuses create spaces to specifically support FGWOC through leadership programs. In this study, we explored how a Women and Leadership Program (WLP) at a PWI operated as a counterspace that contributed to the validation, sense of belonging, and leadership development of FGWOC. We were guided by the research questions, 1) How do first-generation Women of Color experience a gender-specific leadership program at a co-educational PWI? 2) How does the intersectional nature of the participants’ identities in a women’s and leadership program influence the experience?

Literature Review

In this literature review, we provided an overview of the bodies of literature that inform our study focused on FGWOC engaging in a Women and Leadership Program that operates as a counterspace. We provided an overview of literature on the experiences of FGWOC attending PWIs. We shared how oppression compounds to impact the experiences of FGWOC. We then

provided an overview of the literature on how counterspaces provide support to historically marginalized students at PWIs. Lastly, we explored the leadership education literature, including how leadership programs have evolved to serve historically marginalized students.

Experiences of First-Generation College Students & Women of Color at PWIs

Multiple researchers have reported first-generation undergraduates and SOC at PWIs were subjected to racialized, gendered, and classed microaggressions, stereotypical comments, isolation and low-expectations from faculty and peers (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; Havlick et al., 2020; Koo, 2021; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Yosso et al., 2009). In their research, Adams and McBrayer (2020) and Ellis et al., (2019) found that FGSOC faced discrimination and microaggressions at the intersection of both identities. Adams and McBreyer (2020) also found FGSOC had safety concerns due to being subjected to racial bias incidents. FGSOC often also reported being from low-income backgrounds (Adams & McBreyer, 2020; Lee & Harris, 2020). Havlick et al., (2020) found first-generation college students at a private PWI felt like outsiders because they lacked social capital. Similarly, Ellis et al., (2019) found first-generation college students attending a large, public, PWI felt their experiences were not validated, and that there were assumptions made about their academic preparation. They reported their faculty had lower expectations of them because they were first-generation college students. Researchers have also noted first-generation students experienced microaggressions and isolation based on their class background (Gray et al., 2018; Havlick et al., 2020)

Furthermore, researchers have explored how FGSOC experienced microaggressions and isolation on the basis of their race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class and first-generation status

(Ellis et al., 2019, Gray et al., 2018, Havlick et al., 2020, Lee & Harris, 2020). The FGSOC in research by Havlick et al. (2020) noted that their otherness was exacerbated by being both first-generation and a Person of Color. Additionally, in their study on how the intersection of race and class impacted the experiences of first-generation undergraduates, Gray et al., (2018) found that race and class were often conflated. As such, FGSOC were always assumed to be from a lower socioeconomic class. Moreover, Ellis et al., (2019) found it was difficult for FGSOC to determine if the microaggressions they experienced were based on their first-generation status or racial and ethnic identities. They argued these microaggressions can be isolating and damaging FGSOC because they have more difficulty finding peers they can connect with at their PWI.

Many researchers have specifically explored the experiences of WOC at PWIs. Researchers have noted the hypervisibility of WOC at their PWIs as their race and gender stands out because they are not part of the dominant groups on campus (Esposito, 2011; Jackson et al., 2022).

In their study on the experiences of WOC at PWIs, Esposito (2011) noted, “many of the participants perceived their bodies as marked because their bodies looked ‘different’ from the predominantly White bodies on campus (p. 154). This caused them to feel like they were constantly being examined and stereotyped by their peers and faculty. Furthermore, Leath and Chavous (2018) and Corbin et al., (2018) found Black women undergraduates experienced racially hostile campus climates. The Black women in these studies were also acutely aware of the negative stereotypes their faculty and peers had about them. Similarly, Deeb-Sossa et al., (2022) and Liou et al., (2023) found Latina undergraduates experienced racially hostile campus climates, racial and gender discrimination and low expectations from their faculty and peers.

In their research with FGWOC Jackson et al., (2022) found that these experiences with racial and gender discrimination and invalidation of their place on campus, led some of the participants to develop imposter syndrome, and feelings of inferiority. Furthermore, researchers have argued how this constant exposure to racially hostile campus climates, microaggressions, invalidation, and the lack of supportive relationships adversely impacted the mental and physical health of WOC (Arbona & Jimenez 2014; Henry et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2022; Koo et al., 2021).

The Role of Counterspaces for First-Generation Students & Women of Color at PWIs

In their study with African American college students, Solorazano et al., (2000) found that experiences with racial microaggressions led the students to form academic and social counterspaces on and off their college campuses. Within these counterspaces African American students could challenge deficit notions about People of Color, establish and maintain a positive collegiate environment, vent frustrations, foster their own learning, and find validation of their knowledge and experiences. Since this foundational work, additional researchers have expanded on the role of counterspaces at PWIs, and have demonstrated how counterspaces contribute to the ability of historically marginalized students to cope with microaggressions and feelings of isolation, and find a sense of belonging (Castellanos, 2016; Croom et al., 2017; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Hernandez Rivera, 2020; Ong et al., 2018). For example, Ong et al., (2018) found WOC in STEM searched out and created counterspaces to cope with isolation and microaggressions at their PWIs. In these spaces, their participants found support from others with similar identities which contributed to their persistence and success in STEM. Similarly, Lewis et al., (2013) found Black college women coped with gendered racial microaggressions by

leaning on one another for support. Furthermore, Croom et al., (2017) found Black women joined “sister circles, ” that centered on race and gender, because they wanted to find places where they could be themselves and discuss their experiences at their PWI. Additional researchers have found Latinas were drawn to affinity groups because they operated as counterspaces where they could discuss their experiences, share resources, and find validation (Castellanos, 2016; Flores & Garcia, 2009).

In addition to finding support from others with similar identities, counterspaces have provided a place where WOC can unpack the oppression they face and heal from the dominant, white patriarchal cultures of their PWIs. For example, Revilla (2010) found a social and academic counterspace for Queer Latina women at a large, public PWI provided a safe and supportive space where the participants could unpack the oppression they faced and develop their critical consciousness. Similarly, Hernandez Rivera (2020) found a WOC retreat operated as a counterspace that provided participants a space to resist and heal from the dominant culture permeating their PWI.

Researchers have also found that WOC were drawn to counterspaces because they offered mentorship and guidance from other WOC who had successfully navigated their PWI s and were in professional careers (Castellanos, 2016; Croom et al., 2017; Flores & Garcia, 2009). Similarly, in research with Black women in student affairs participating in a counterspace, West (2019) found that Black women were seeking a community with other Black women succeeding in their field. In this space, participants discussed their professional experiences, and were motivated and inspired to seek similar leadership roles.

While not explicitly named as counterspaces, researchers have found that first-generation college students who participated in on campus programming, such as affinity groups and retention programs, had increased persistence and sense of belonging (Allen-McCombs, 2022; Adams & McBreyer, 2020; Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2021; Gray et al., 2018; Thornhill et al., 2023). In their review of practices to support first-generation college students, Castillo-Montoya and Ives (2021) found one-third of the literature on first-generation college students emphasized their desire to build community with faculty and their peers. The literature emphasized the importance first-generation college students place on interdependence.

Researchers have noted first-generation college students experienced an increased sense of belonging when they were around others who were like them (Thornhill et al., 2023). Moreover, Gray et al., (2018) found FGSOC benefitted from intersectional support networks that allowed them to connect with other SOC who were also first-generation and lower socioeconomic class backgrounds. In these spaces, they could "temporarily withdraw from 'the game' by psychologically and/or behaviorally removing themselves from interactions with more privileged individuals (i.e., Whites and/or those from higher social classes)" (p. 1242). To further illustrate this, Adams and McBreyer (2020) found FGSOC attending PWIs desired a more supportive and diverse campus environment, including classrooms, racial affinity groups, and a multicultural center, where they could connect with others with similar experiences. This builds on the work of previous researchers of counterspaces, who found Black and Latina women lean on others with similar identities and seek to build community with them.

While fewer researchers have connected counterspaces to first-generation college students, Lee and Harris (2020) found low-income, first-generation and/or working class students' also

benefited from counterspaces at their selective colleges and universities. They argued these spaces provided the students support to navigate microaggressions on the basis of their socioeconomic background and class-based practices, processes, and structures embedded within these campuses.

Leadership Education for First-Generation College Students & Women of Color

There has been greater attention on leadership development across higher education and leadership education programs have continued to increase (Guthrie et al, 2016). Furthermore, some leadership educators have realized the need to critically examine how leadership programs are providing access for marginalized identity groups (Dugan & Humble, 2018; Guthrie et al., 2016; Guthrie & Chunoo, 2021). Researchers have found that women find value in learning in women-only programs to overcome barriers of inequality which may inhibit learning (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Haber Curran & Tillapaugh, 2017). Soria and Cole (2023) also highlighted how leadership education has a significant and positive effect on the social capital of first-generation college students. While undergraduate leadership programs and interventions to support first-generation college students are widespread, leadership programs focused specifically on FGWOC are infrequent (Guthrie et al., 2016; Author et al., in press). Yet, leadership programs for FGWOC could be particularly important as these students face unique challenges in higher education and need to be further examined to understand the impact they have on providing access, support, and leadership development to these students.

Bertrand Jones et al. (2016) identified a culturally relevant leadership learning model which implements a contextual understanding of the historical legacies of exclusion for Communities of Color in higher education. The model offers a lens for leadership educators to

consider the psychological, behavioral, and organizational factors that impact the needs of SOC in leadership learning spaces. Beatty and Guthrie (2021) collected narratives across higher education in curricular, co-curricular, professional development, and alternative spaces where implementing culturally relevant leadership pedagogy allowed for broader discourse, disruption of hegemonic practices, and a more inclusive, critical learning environment. To illustrate the importance of these spaces, Soria et al., (2014) found first-generation and low-income students were less likely to hold leadership positions on their college campuses. Similarly, Linder (2011) found WOC undergraduate activists were overlooked for leadership positions within feminist activism movements. Without the opportunities to be in leadership positions, historically marginalized students may have less access to social capital (Soria et al., 2014) and their campuses lose out on the knowledge and skills of their students (Linder, 2011)

To enhance the leadership development of historically marginalized students, there have been interventions to provide access and opportunities to learning leadership. Guthrie and Torres (2021) found Latina/o/x leadership courses provided Latina/o/x students affirmation in their style of leadership based on their culture. Latina/o/x students also felt more encouraged to take on leadership roles. Furthermore, Miller and Vaccaro (2016) noted in a study of leadership development among Queer Students of Color, the need for a unique, safe space for themselves and other Queer Students of Color distinctive from the white queer student group. Mahoney (2016) clarified, in alignment with WOC feminist thought on displacement (Minh-ha, 2006), the need for leadership education to center the margins (highlight and focus on leadership knowledge and practice from Queer Women of Color) in all curriculum to disrupt the perpetuation of dominant colonizer ideologies in higher education leadership programming.

We seek to expand the research on first-generation programs, counterspaces, and culturally relevant leadership by demonstrating how a Women and Leadership Program at a private, PWI in the Western U.S. operates as a counterspace that supports and empowers FGWOC to reconceptualize leadership and develop their own leadership identity.

Theoretical Framework - Critical Race Feminism

Kimberlee Crenshaw (1997) stressed the need for intersectionality when understanding the circumstances of Black women as they were experiencing oppression on the basis of both their gender and race. Crenshaw (1997) defined intersectionality as the ways in which systems of oppression, such as racism and sexism, interlock to create a unique experience for individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities. Crenshaw (1997) argued that without intersectionality the struggles of WOC, specifically, Black women, were not adequately addressed. Building on Crenshaw's work, the theoretical framework of Critical Race Feminism (CRF), derived from Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992) which was a movement of legal scholars to address racism, was developed by Adrien Wing and other WOC. In her explanation of CRF, Wing (1997) posited WOC were not adequately served by Critical Race Theory (CRT), which addresses race and racism; nor Feminist Theory, which addresses gender and sexism (1997). Wing (1997) argued these paradigms, "permitted Women of Color to fall through the cracks, so that they become, literally, and figuratively, voiceless and invisible under so-called neutral law or solely race-based or gender-based analyses" (p.2). CRF scholars also posit that WOC are subjected to both racism and sexism and this impacts how they experience a system steeped in whiteness, and patriarchy (Wing, 1997). Like Crenshaw (1997), CRF scholars also emphasize intersectionality, defined as the belief that, "Women of Color are not merely white women plus

color or men plus gender. Instead, their identities must be multiplied together to create a holistic One when analyzing the nature of the discrimination against them" (p. 7). As such, CRF scholars acknowledge the intersectional oppression experienced by WOC and how this shapes their experiences.

In their research, Solórzano et al., (2000) connected CRT to counterspaces in their study with African American college students by identifying African American student organizations as places where they could come together to resist oppression and find academic support, cultural understanding, and emotional connections. Building on this, Rivera Hernandez (2020) connected CRF to counterspaces by demonstrating how a WOC retreat operated as a counterspace. CRF scholars argue for centering the voices of WOC in the form of counterstories because they can provide healing from oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Wing, 2003). Utilizing CRF, we centered the voices of the WLP participants and accounted for how intersectionality impacted their experience at their PWI, and within the WLP.

Methods

The ontological groundings of our research were rooted in social constructivist, critical paradigms (Harris & Graham, 1994); acknowledging the subjective nature of understanding multiple truths to understand a phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and recognizing all research is constructed within systems of power, privilege, and oppression and must therefore consider and address power inequities as part of the research (Wiggington & LaFrance, 2019). To conduct this research, we used a qualitative exploratory intrinsic case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). An intrinsic case study explores a unique case to examine the case itself (Stake, 1995).

Intrinsic case study design is the appropriate method for the study because of the unique nature of the case itself; other examples of intrinsic case studies root the interest in the internal (intrinsic) elements of a case as they key purpose of exploration, generally because data is lacking in this space (Bernstien, 2020; Teague, 2022). The bounded case was a Women and Leadership Program for undergraduate students who identify as WOC, first-generation college students, and/or LBGTQ+ at a private, PWI in the Western U.S. Our intention was to focus on the single case of the WLP and the experiences of the WLP participants within the context of the program and the institutional environment to better understand the experiences of FGWOC in a leadership program.

The Case

The WLP was born out of women's college closure at Western University [WU] and welcomed its first class of students in 2016. The curricular component of the program was designed to mirror an existing leadership minor offered at WU, where participants complete 24-credit hours of required leadership coursework across four years. Unique to the WLP is funding for scholarships and grants as well as funding to provide co-curricular programming. The financial support for the WLP is a legacy of the former Women's College, as it was earmarked to continue to educate and support leaders and women's leadership, both inside and outside of the classroom. WLP students take classes together as a cohort in their first two years of college. This totals to six classes covering topics in Inclusive Leadership, Teaming for Social Change, Leadership in Social Movements (Year One), and Leading Community Change, Crucial Conversations, and Building our World: Anti-racist, Feminist Leadership (Year Two). Students also complete six credits of electives and a Capstone course on leadership and ethics. Students

participate in co-curricular events, including annual retreats, and workshops focused on community building and leadership development.

The curriculum and co-curriculum of the WLP is framed within critical feminist/engaged pedagogy (CFP) (hooks, 1994). Critical feminist pedagogists effort to disrupt dominant educational narratives that frame learning as a linear process of pouring knowledge from the expert (teacher) into the heads of the non-expert (learner) (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). The faculty/staff of the WLP implement CFP by focusing on the women in the program as knowledge holders and integrating efforts to share power and knowledge. CFP grounds the program in its curriculum (ensuring content is representative of the students in the program, giving students voice on what to learn and how to learn it, as well as becoming teachers/mentors to their peers) and co-curriculum (students are encouraged to take ownership and leadership of the program in both formal and informal ways). Further, the program curriculum integrates cross-racial content from within Communities of Color including discussions of anti-Blackness, colorism, and gendered*racialized experiences across cultural contexts.

During 2020-2021, the program served 48 students across four-cohorts. Of the 48 students, 94% were WOC with 57% being Latina. In addition, 75% of the students were first-generation college students. WLP defines first-generation college students as any college student whose parent or guardian has not completed a four-year college degree in the U.S. For context, during this same year, 25% of the students at WU were Students of Color, and 16% were first-generation college students. During the time of the study, the program, nor the institution, was capturing data on LBGTQ+ demographics.

Data Collection & Analysis

For an in-depth understanding of the case,we conducted individual interviews and focus groups. We purposefully sampled WLP participants to provide insight on their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). WLP participants were not required to participate, and their participation did not impact their WLP membership. We collected data from 10 semi-structured individual interviews and four focus groups. We interviewed the 10 participants once and the interviews lasted 30 minutes to 60 minutes. In the individual interviews we asked eight questions that sought to understand the student's reasons for joining the program, experiences within the program, and comparison to experiences at the institution outside of the WLP. For example, we asked: "Tell us about your experiences in a WLP class compared to a non-WLP class".

We had 42 participants across four focus groups. Three of the four focus groups were conducted during a Spring retreat for the WLP program. Each of these focus groups had between 9 and 10 participants (for a total of 28) and lasted between 45 minutes to 60 minutes. An additional 60 minute focus group was conducted at the start of the 2021-2022 academic year at a Fall retreat for WLP Participants with 14 first-year students who had been part of WLP for one month. In all the focus groups, we asked ten questions that focused on the students' experiences in the WLP environment and in the college environment, as well as on their understanding of leadership. For example, participants were asked: "what is one word you would use to describe the WLP?" and "how has your understanding of leadership evolved since being in the WLP"? All WLP Participants who attended the retreats participated in the focus groups, and only those who consented to the study had their data utilized for the study. Those

who did not consent to the study had their data removed. We collected data until we met data saturation.

While participation in the WLP and the study were not limited to FGWOC, for this study, we utilized data from participants who were all FGWOC. See Table 1 for participant demographics. The research team, which consisted of the three authors and three undergraduate research assistants who were also WLP participants, audio-recorded and transcribed data. To ensure trustworthiness, we interviewed WLP participants from across all years of participation of the program. We also triangulated the data by collecting multiple forms of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, we engaged in member-checking by having the transcripts reviewed by the WLP participants to ensure their accuracy (Creswell & Miller, 2010).

[Insert Table 1]

The research team conducted a multi-level analysis process. First, each researcher read five transcipts to develop case themes related to experiences of the WLP participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We employed open coding (Saldaña, 2012) to identify high-level themes in the data. We then met to determine and clarify a coding scheme based on these themes (Saldaña, 2012) and utilized CRF in combination with tenets of counterspaces to clarify codes, definitions, and coding structure. After agreeing on our code definitions and structure, each team member coded for the first full round using the constant comparison method of data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2012) and all data were coded by two out of the three researchers in the team using NVivo 12 qualitative software (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014). In the second round of coding, we implemented axial coding to develop categories and groupings (Saldaña, 2012) and finally co-identified emergent, overarching themes.

Limitations

This study was limited in demographics due to the region and type of institution in which the study was conducted. Due to the demographics of the region of the institution, the majority of participants in the WLP were Latina. We also did not ask the participants if they identified as LGBTQ+ and could not determine how this identity impacted the participants' experiences within WLP. Additionally, this study represents the experiences of FGWOC at a private PWI in the Western U.S. A similar study conducted in a different region of the U.S., and within a different institutional context, may have different findings.

We also recognize that our focus groups may have limited our data as some students may have been hesitant sharing in a group. Additionally, one of our focus groups was with first-year students who had only been part of WLP for one month. Thus, they were limited in their experience with the WLP and the way they were impacted by it. Furthermore, another one of the focus groups was conducted by author three who was not affiliated with the program. This may have limited the information the participants in this focus group felt comfortable sharing. We also acknowledge that two of the three researchers, one of which is the Program Director, were White women, which may have limited what the participants shared. In the next section, the authors further discuss how their positionality impacts their role in the program and the study.

Positionality Statements

Author one identifies as a Queer Latina. She served as the Program Coordinator (PC) for the WLP when the research study was conducted. In this role, Author one, managed recruitment of new scholars, and coordinated and developed co-curricular programming for

WLP. In my experience as the PC for WLP, I found as a Latina I could relate with some of the experiences of the Latina students in WLP. However, I acknowledge the Latinas in WLP were not a monolith and represent a range of experiences that I did not always identify with. I also acknowledge I must continuously work to understand the racialized experiences of the Black, Asian, and Native American students in our program. Additionally, I am a continuing generation college student, and understand I have educational and socioeconomic privilege that I must constantly interrogate. Furthermore, for this study, I had to continuously check my biases to ensure we were not centering only one group of students' experiences. I also had to be aware of how the experiences of the students in WLP may be impacted by their various backgrounds and intersectional identities.

Author two identifies as a white, cisgender, straight woman. I am a Teaching Assistant Professor in leadership studies and focus my research on leadership through the lenses of gender, race, and social justice. I serve as the Faculty Director for the WLP and have been in the role for five years. In this role, I manage all curriculum development and design, teach most of the courses, and provide general visioning and advocacy for the program across complex institutional systems. In holding primarily advantaged identities (white, straight, cisgender, highly educated, third generation college student), I must consistently center the experiences and needs of the students in the program and question my learned implicit biases in systems of power in white, heteronormative, and cisnormative contexts. As I show up in the program, I must own my process of self growth and recognize it is a consistent practice (not a place to be achieved) to lead an anti-racist, feminist leadership program. In this research process, my identities as a faculty-researcher, as well as my visible social identities in race, gender, and age

influenced how students may have experienced being in the program and speaking about being in the program. This is a consistent and significant tension to doing this work while holding these identities. I will never share the same lived experiences as the students who participate in this program and noting that as a challenge, being open with the students about my journey, and seeking to share power in an open, affirming space are all efforts to recognize the limitations of not having those shared identities while I'm in this role.

While not directly affiliated with the WLP any longer, I was involved in the initial creation and development of the WLP concept in 2015-2016, and remains a very strong advocate and ally of the program. I am a clinical faculty member in the Higher Education department at WU, teaching courses in college environments, college access and retention, and organization and governance in post-secondary education. It is important to note that as a white cisgender, straight woman, I carry privilege and power in my identities that likely also impacted the study. Regardless of my role in the origins of the program and my advocacy for the program since that time, the participants of the program would not have known me as an ally in the course of the study. I might have been seen as an "outsider" to the program and participants may have not felt as comfortable interviewing with me. This may have been an additional limitation to the study.

Findings

In our findings, we share how WLP operated as a counterspace for FGWOC and enabled them to further develop their leadership identities. The themes that emerged were: WLP is A Space to Breathe; WLP as a Site of Resistance; and Reframing Leadership and Leadership Identity. We connected these themes to CRF by identifying how the WLP provided FGWOC the

ability to find a place on campus where they could unpack the oppression they experienced at the intersections of both their gender and racial identities. These themes directly contributed to how the WLP participants were able to find a space on campus that addressed their concerns as FGWOC, supported them, and contributed to their persistence. Our findings also revealed the WLP participants' development of a leadership identity that challenged dominant hierarchical notions of leadership that do not account for the strengths of FGWOC.

A Space to Breathe: Finding Belonging, Affirmation, and Tools for Survival

Coming to class and it being a space where I felt like I could breathe – Asmaa

Counterspaces offer their participants a location of belonging. From our data, we saw this sense of belonging allowed the WLP students to be themselves; to process the challenges of being within a predominately white, affluent, and patriarchal environment; and to have a place to "just breathe" in community with others who know their experience. Further, this space of belonging allowed the students to develop capacities to overcome uncertainties and imposter syndrome as a FGWOC and be validated to survive and persist at a PWI.

Fatma, a Middle Eastern woman, expressed her experience in the distinction between navigating the PWI environment as a WOC in STEM and her sense of belonging in the WLP.

I feel I wouldn't have had this space and it would have been significantly more exhausting to be going through as a WOC and in STEM, without having the space to just kind of breathe, and be affirmed.

If we consider this idea of being able to breathe, stated directly by Fatma and Asmaa, also represented in many students' responses, it is crucial to note that in the juxtaposed experience (in other spaces on campus), they feel they cannot fully breathe, a life giving and

sustaining act. In addition to being a space where FGWOC felt they could breathe, the WLP participants also described the WLP classroom as their home and a safe place where they could be their authentic selves; in contrast to other classroom spaces at WU. For example, Andrea, a Latina student, shared,

In some classes [non WLP], I noticed that I was either one the only girl or two, the only minority, and going into class with WLP scholars every quarter we have a class with each other. So, I would go to my other classes and then I go straight to my WLP class and I'm like 'Okay, now I feel at home. Okay, we can take a break'. You have to act a certain way [in non-WLP classes] and be able to get your voice out there because sometimes other people overpower your voice and your voice needs to be heard too but then when I would go into my WLP class, 'Okay, now I can relax. Everybody's going to talk and it's going to be safe'.

Frequently, the WLP participants mentioned how they felt more comfortable in the WLP than they did in other places on campus because they were in class with other students who shared their identities as FGWOC. This enabled the WLP participants to be themselves and encouraged them to speak up in class, when they did not feel like they had the same safety to do so in other classes. The WLP provided a counterspace for the students to feel at ease in an otherwise highly stressful environment where their experiences were not affirmed and validated.

Building on this experienced tension, participants further described a sense of discomfort and in some cases imposter syndrome for being at WU. A sense of unease and uncertainty arose because in the majority of their classes, they did not see other students who shared their lived experiences. The WLP participants remarked how spaces outside of WLP were

male, white dominant and led to feelings of imposter syndrome. However, the WLP students then described how the environment of belonging, safety, and understanding through shared identities assisted them in overcoming these feelings of inferiority across the campus. Ashley, a Latina described,

> Then being in WLP with all these other women, who have similar identities and also that feeling of imposter syndrome because… they [WU] preach diversity and inclusion, but we don't see that in the classrooms and WLP let me see that these are all the other women who feel the same way.

When faced with imposter syndrome and moments of doubt, the WLP provided a sense of community and validation that affirmed FGWOC. For example, Andrea shared,

You feel like an outcast. But then you learn the ropes, you have people there in groups that support you. And that's what makes you feel connected, if I wasn't connected to WLP and the other programs [First-Generation Success Program]. [They] were really the thing that made me feel like I belong. And it's hard to feel like you belong in the college that is predominantly white you being a minority.

Because they are part of the small population of FGWOC at WU, the participants described not feeling certain about their validity in being physically present or being fully viewed as a student who was capable and had a right to be there as much as their affluent, continuing-genderation, white peers. The very lack of SOC made a physical impact on the students' reality across most campus spaces, in which they questioned their abilities and belonging at WU. However, the WLP provided validation to overcome imposter syndrome and affirmed their very bodies' presence by holding space for them to feel seen and heard. For

some, the WLP assisted in preventing imposter syndrome from developing at all. Ahtziri, a Latina student, shared,

> If I hadn't joined [WLP], I would have probably fallen into the whole imposter syndrome thing, because in classes I find myself thinking, 'Oh, I don't really understand what's happening right now' and then I start lowering my self-esteem. But then when I come to the leadership class or when I come to retreats and stuff, I'm like, 'Oh no, I'm fine. It's completely normal to feel like this.'

Furthermore, some participants reflected on how WLP led to them continuing at WU when they thought about stopping out or transferring to more diverse higher education institutions. The participants felt the WLP provided a community to navigate college and feared they may have fallen through the cracks of the institution without it. Lisette, a Latina student, shared,

WLP was a huge reason as to why I decided to stay [at WU] because, at the beginning of my freshman year...the culture shock and just trying to figure out your place on campus. It was a transition for sure, so I think the support system that I got from [WLP] was helpful. And if I didn't have this program…I don't know that I would have been able to survive at [WU]...in terms of emotional support or just knowing that you have someone there. It was the reason why I decided, in the moments, where I felt like giving up or not, continuing at [WU]…I just feel like if I wasn't a part of the program…I feel it would have just taken me a lot longer to find that community.

Similarly, Kaladi, a Black woman, reflected on what might have occured if she was not part of the WLP,

> I probably would have considered dropping out or transferring, cuz, I feel outside of WLP, and programs like [affinity STEM program], I really don't find anybody that I can relate to….most of the people I encounter here don't have to work, they don't have the same upbringing and it's sometimes discouraging, you feel you're the only one working, ya know who goes through a certain thing. So I like being around other women that for the most part share the same experiences.

As an entry point to WU, the WLP provides students with an immediate community which can provide validation and support when encountering a space that is predominantly white and has few first-generation college students.. For Lisette and Kalahdi, and many other of the WLP participants, the WLP provided them the encouragement they needed to persist when they had moments of doubt and felt like giving up.

Building Power by "Feeling Seen": Sites of Resistance

I think it makes me... feel more seen – Camila

Far too often the WLP participants remarked how they experienced racism, sexism, and classism while at WU from their peers and faculty. Within the WLP, participants shared they were able to discuss these encounters, and how their WLP peers provided validation for their experiences. For example, Deboras, a Black woman and African immigrant, shared,

In WLP, like everybody said, you can definitely vent out your struggles, other people talk about their problems. And I feel it's a good stress relief and if that wasn't here, we would have all been struggling. I would have been struggling because of all the ignorant people out there, like Ashley said, even people make assumptions about where I am from. Which made me hate my accent, because they know that I am not from here and they ask me where I am from, and I say, 'From

Africa.' And they're like, 'Oh so you're poor, so you lived in cages or something', and I'm like, 'No, I lived in a city.'

During the focus group many participants shared how their identities as FGWOC were often questioned at WU, and the WLP has provided them a space to vent their frustrations with others who have similar experiences. Asmaa, a Black woman, described how the WLP also builds power and growth through the shared experience,

> We're all in the same boat of being WOC on this campus, having to find our own place, so we're able to learn from each other's experiences, grow and have that confidence and realize we have power in who we are and power in our identities. Being able to mature within that power and use it to be successful, grow, and be who we are individually as well as a group has benefited me.

Both Deboras and Asmaa found WLP provided a space where they could share their experiences and learn from other's stories. Through this, they learned they are not alone and that they have power to resist the dominant narratives often told about FGWOC within PWIs.

Furthermore, the WLP participants shared how they knew WU was not built for them and often perpetuated and upheld white and male supremacy in spaces outside of WLP. For Ashley, being in the WLP provided liberation from this dominant environment. She shared, While some races and ethnicities have it easier to be a woman within the U.S. there is this shared sense of struggle, of belonging, and you know, the patriarchy, obviously and we are pushing to get our place in these spaces that weren't built for us. And I think, especially being at [WU], it can be hard, when there's already a community that's more, white male supremacist...And then you get into this leadership program and it's liberating and empowering.

It's like I can exist in these spaces, because all these other women in this classroom in this space are also pushing against that narrative.

As a counterspace, the WLP has provided a place where participants can not only vent their frustrations about shared experiences with oppression but as evidenced by Asmaa and Ashley's quotes, the WLP has also empowered them to collectively work towards social justice and liberation at WU and beyond for others with marginalized identities.

"Women Can Help Change the Direction of Leadership": Reframing Leadership

Besides the network and my lifelong friends, [WLP] provides inner reflection on how women can help change the direction of leadership...on the basis of social change - Imani

As participants in a program that provides a leadership minor, the students noted growth and change about their definitions of leadership. They also shared about their development and shaping of leader identities. The WLP participants described important moments in learning from their peers and in re-framing their understanding of leadership away from a positional, hierarchical perspective. For example, Camila, a Latina student, shared,

> I believe it gives me different perspectives on leadership. Leadership is not just somebody being put in a linear position and telling others what to do, they can be just a mentor who gives you good advice, and that can be good leadership.

Before being part of the WLP, the participants often mentioned how they believed the dominant narrative that leadership was hierarchical and from a white patriarchal framework that marginalized and did not value leadership characteristics found in Communities of Color, such as community-based leadership. Angelica, a Latina student, shared how her previous conceptions of leadership were challenged by her cohort peers,

> With our first leadership class, they [WLP members] always challenged me because I was very individualistic with my approaches. And so, they challenged me to be more in tune with myself and more in tune with other people. And I don't think I would have ever been able to develop those skills on my own. And they would tell me kindly, like, 'Hey, Angelica, you can't take over this project, you have to be willing to work with other people.' They have definitely pushed me to be more community-oriented and challenge myself by being more open and honest about my emotions.

Due to the safe environment created within the WLP, Angelica was able to be mentored by her peers to grow in her leadership identity and reconceptualize how she defined leadership. The WLP students also shared how being part of the program helped them to develop their leader identity and to advocate for issues to impact social change. For example, Daniela, a Latina student, became active in mentoring and advocating for WOC. She shared,

> Some of the most impactful times was actually within the leadership minor. They have us do leadership initiatives within the community...being in WLP really helped me realize and find this passion...advocating for WOC who are once in my steps, who were once in my shoes.

Ashley also shared how WLP allowed her to step into a leadership role in addressing domestic violence, an issue she was passionate about, by creating her own domestic violence advocacy non-profit organization. She stated,

> Being a survivor of domestic violence to carry other women forward, to not allow other women to go through what I went through, to use my experiences to use my voice and to change the narrative for other women, to create impact to actually be the change

> that I want to see in the world and…even before coming into WLP I was so torn down I didn't have anywhere to focus what I was going through. I didn't have any idea of how I could use what I went through to help other people and when I think of WLP I think about how much I've grown and how I've become because of WLP.

By being part of WLP, which offered a counterspace for the participants to feel supported and validated, the WLP participants, like Daniela and Ashley, were able to grow in their leadership identity, and felt empowered to take on initiatives to impact social change.

Discussion

In this study, we extended the research on counterspaces by demonstrating how a cohort-based Women and Leadership Program operated as a counterspace for FGWOC while simultaneously developing their leadership identity. The participants shared how their involvement in WLP led to the ability to cope with microaggressions, validation, and an increased sense of belonging. Furthermore, our findings emphasize the importance of developing leadership programs that focus on FGWOC at PWIs.

The WLP participants noted how they felt out of place at WU because of their identities as FGWOC. Similar to previous research on WOC, their literal bodies stuck out in a space dominated by white bodies (Esposito, 2011; Gray et al., 2018, Jackson et al., 2022). In these studies, the WOC were vulnerable to racism, discrimination, stereotypes, and microaggressions because of the way their race and gender was hypervisibile (Esposito, 2011; Jackson et al., 2021). Our study participants noted similar experiences and to cope, the participants found solace in WLP. The participants noted WLP provided them a space to breathe, and be away from the dominant culture perpetuated by their PWI. Similarly, Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay (2016)

found WOC were excited to come to a class centering their experiences because it provided them a “getaway from White normalcy and the discomfort other classes caused them” (p. 56).

The WLP participants affirmed this – they shared how co-creating a space to take a break from the dominant white patriarchal environment to a program that centers their experiences provided them a safe space to breathe, grow, and listen and learn from each other. Moreover, researchers have found that counterspaces contribute to “a sense of validation and belonging in otherwise isolating and emotionally taxing exclusionary educational spaces,” (Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2016, p. 60), such as PWIs, where white dominant culture perpetuates marginalization and exclusion for FGWOC. Similarly, we found that the WLP operates as a counterspace because it provides support to cope with microaggressions, where FGWOC feel comfortable sharing their experiences with microaggressions because they believe the other women can understand (Castellanos, 2016; Lewis et al., 2013; Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2016), which then created an increased sense of belonging at a PWI (Croom et al., 2017; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Hernandez Rivera, 2020; Ong et al., 2018; Vaccaro & Camba-Kelsay, 2016, Yosso et al., 2009).

Furthermore, counterspaces are sites of resistance where deficit notions about WOC can be challenged (Solorzano et al., 2000), “actively resisting mainstream perspectives, particularly those that uphold white supremacist, imperialist, patriarchal, heteronormative, and citizenist ideologies'' (Revilla, 2010, p. 39). The WLP participants confirmed the program operated as a counterspace where they could come together with others with similar identities and challenge the dominant narrative told about FGWOC. The environment gave the students confidence to overcome imposter syndrome fears and provided them a deep community to fall back on in

times of struggle. This led to WLP participants to disrupt imposter syndrome and allowed them to grow in resilience to remain in college when doubt crept in.

Previous researchers argued for leadership learning that acknowledges how historical exclusion of Communities of Color and systemic barriers can result in leadership education that is not affirming or relevant to SOC (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). The WLP participants shared how WLP, operating as a counterspace, acknowledged these barriers to leadership learning and provided them a place to gain confidence to enact leadership by identifying opportunities for resistance and efforts to change inequity and injustice in a broader context. The women noted learning to see and push against dominant, hegemonic narratives and enact change in their environments because of the foundational space of growth and learning about inclusive, community-oriented leadership practices from the WLP. Further, they broadened their understanding of leadership and clarified their leader identities because of collective learning and growth within the program.

In the WLP, the participants challenged the dominant white patriarchal heteronormative ideologies embedded within the institution, found validation, and a sense of belonging. As a result, the counterspace enhanced WLP students' college experiences; enabled them to develop their leadership identity; contributed to them staying enrolled at WU; and provided them with skills and experiences they could utilize in their futures beyond the WLP and WU.

Implications

T hese findings confirm FGWOC still experience microaggressions and hostile racial climates at PWIs. Many PWIs have made strides in recent years to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion programming on their campuses with the goal of increasing compositional diversity

and improving campus climate (Bristow, 2021; Koo, 2021). Examples of this can be seen through the development of multicultural centers (McShay, 2017); increased attention toward first-generation student success programming (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2023; Pendakur, 2016; Whitley et al, 2018), and the creation of various identity-based affinity groups and programming (Croom et al., 2017; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Hernandez-Rivera, 2020; Revill, 2010), some of which include leadership programs and classes (Guthrie & Torres, 2021; Miller & Vaccaro, 2016). Unfortunately, these spaces may be under greater scrutiny following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on removing race-based affirmative action as a tool to make higher education more accessible and diverse (Knox, 2023).

As evidenced by this study, there is still a great need to carve out counterspaces at PWIs because of the support and validation they provide to historically marginalized groups. Through our findings, we demonstrated how racial, gender, and class microaggressions and hostile racial climates can lead to imposter syndrome, a lack of sense of belonging, and feeling unsupported by the institution. In their study with WOC engaging in an academic counterspace, Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay (2016) note that microaggressions lead to an "unequal educational experience" for WOC, which does not allow for an affirming and validating college experience (p. 45). This can also lead FGWOC to leave the institution altogether. As such, we encourage higher education professionals to create and support counterspaces while also working towards making PWIs more equitable for FGWOC. In their research, Ong et al., (2018) notes that counterspaces for their participants were not limited to one space, and can be found within peer-to-peer relationships, mentoring relationships, conferences, and classrooms. With the increase in undergraduates' desire to connect with others and find support in virtual spaces,

social media platforms may also be a space for historically marginalized students to counter institutional oppression, find solidarity, and affirm their identities (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Lopez-Leon & Casanova, 2023). We recommend higher education professionals to not limit the environment in which counterspaces can occur, and consider multiple places where students from similar backgrounds can come together.

Further, and more specifically, we recommend leadership education as a site where counterspaces are needed. Within these counterspaces, historically marginalized students would be able to more deeply develop their leadership identity in spaces that support their growth and value their conceptions and enactments of leadership. We understand that FGWOC represent myriad experiences and identities, which impact how they experience counterspaces. Thus, we encourage those creating counterspaces for students who hold multiple marginalized identities to purposely address how oppression, including Anti-Blackness, colorism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and ableism, may persist within these spaces. As such, we recommend programs ground themselves in critical frameworks (hooks, 1994; Wing, 1997) and critical leadership pedagogy (Pendakur & Furr, 2016; Author, 2018) that allow for open discussions on intersectionality and biases. We agree with leadership scholars who argue that higher education institutions must incorporate diversity, inclusivity and power-consciousness within leadership learning so that historically marginalized students, including FGWOC, have the opportunity to engage in leadership education that is culturally relevant and socially just (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Guthrie et al., 2016; Guthrie & Torres, 2021; Mahoney, 2016).

From our findings it is evident programs like WLP have a significant impact on the leadership learning and development of FGWOC and should be prioritized at PWIs for the work they are

doing to support and uplift historically marginalized students in their leadership education journey.

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