

The Cost of Courage: Emotional and Identity Negotiation Among Black Student Leaders During A Redefining Era in Higher Education

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Introduction

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the perspectives of Black Student Leaders (BSLs) as they navigate higher education and negotiate their leadership identities during the recent national refinement process. According to Beatty et al. (2025), the recent rolling back of federal initiatives that were aimed at providing access for marginalized people in American society have BSLs reporting high levels of exhaustion and confusion. Grounded in the theory of Leadership for Liberation and the Social Change Model of Leadership, this study will examine the lived experiences shared by BSLs, using their qualitative data to point out the constraints on their capacity to thrive at an HWI during this redefining era. In addition, this study will highlight the impacts of identity negotiation as these scholars prevail during legislative changes in higher education.

Aims of the Research

Many leadership models fail to consider the ideation of liberation, which Jordan Harper (2024) defines as “the push and pull away from dominant and oppressive status quo systems that have long prioritized dehumanization and subjection and, instead, creating and demanding life-affirming futures built on collectivity, mutuality, care, and justice” (p. 72). While observing Black student leaders, it is essential to recognize that hidden curricula and systemic barriers pose a significant threat to their development. Without equity in mind, Black student leaders may not feel valued or understood, and may fall into cycles of overextending themselves to make adequate contributions to their group’s efforts. Thus, the aim of this study is as follows:

- (1) To examine the emotional support and mental demands associated with leadership for Black student leaders navigating a redefining era in Higher Education.
- (2) To contribute to leadership education and student development scholarship by illuminating the lived experiences of Black student leaders in politically and socially constrained institutional contexts.

Research Questions

- (RQ1) In what ways do Black student leaders negotiate their leadership identities in relation to institutional resistance to DEI initiatives?
- (RQ2) How do the emotional and mental demands of leadership in anti-DEI contexts affect students’ motivation or sense of efficacy?

Method

Research Design

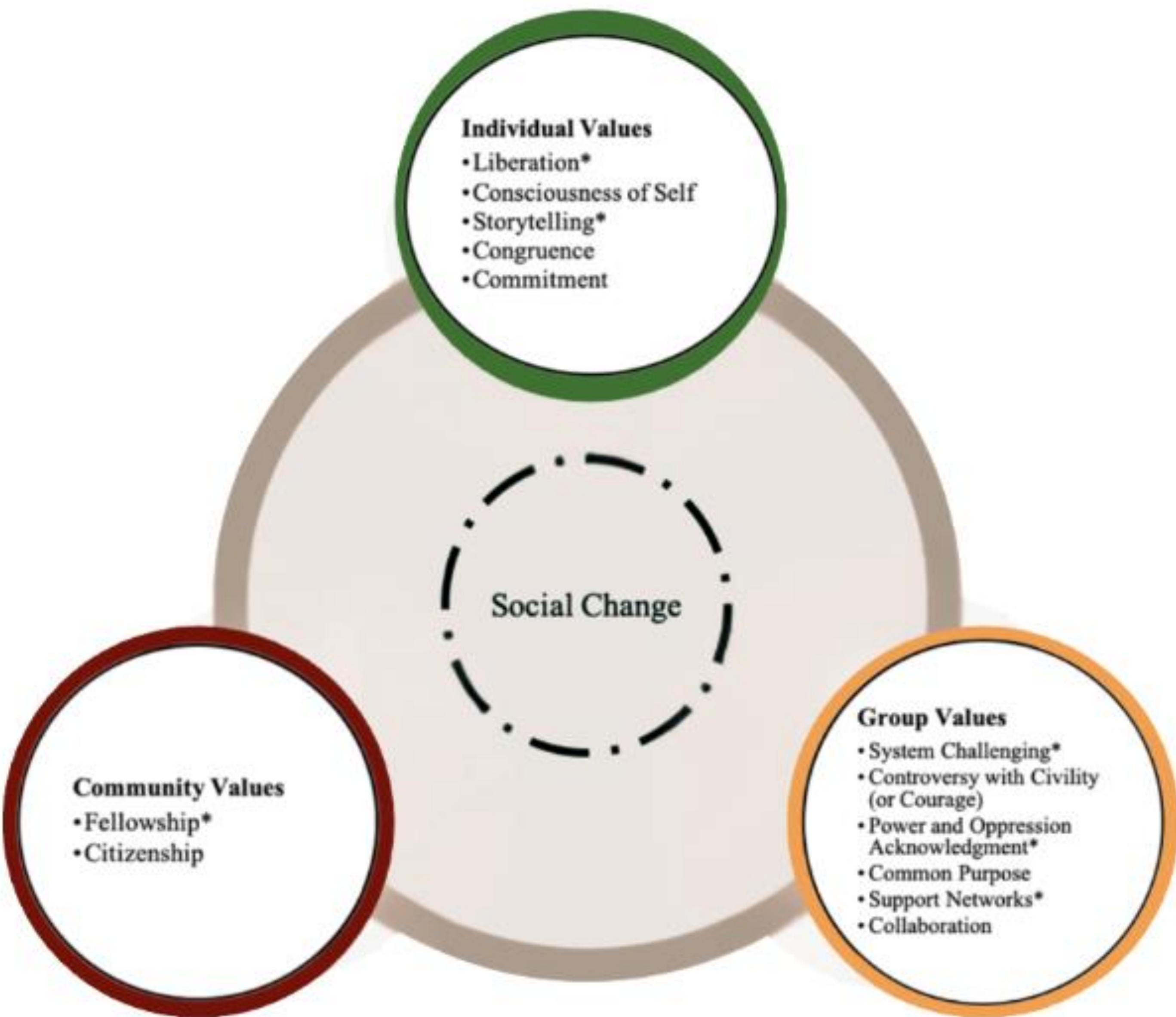
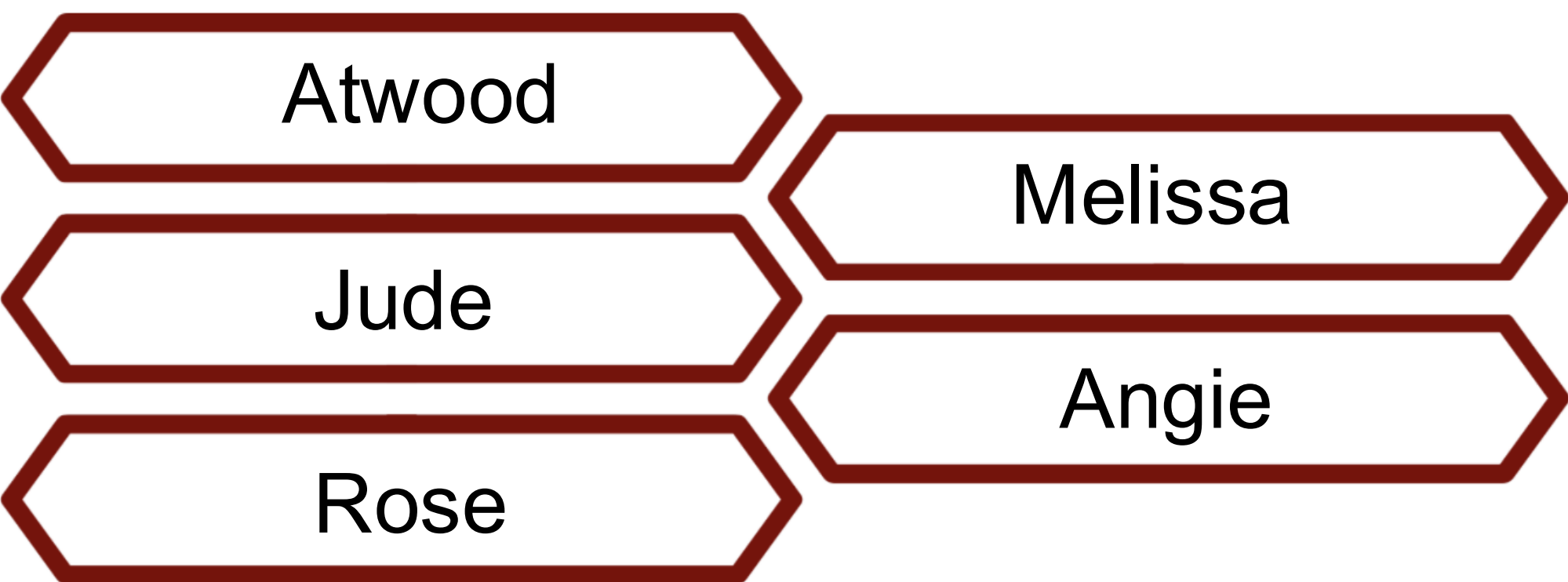


Fig 1. New configuration of Social Change Model for Leadership (SCM) (asterisk* denotes new value)

Participants



This study builds upon a larger research project by Beatty et al. (2025) by focusing on a subset of student participants from that original sample.

Data Collection and Analysis

Black student leaders participated in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose for qualitative analysis. Using an inductive coding approach, the research team independently coded transcripts to identify recurring ideas and patterns. Codes were then compared and refined collaboratively to develop overarching themes related to leadership efficacy, self-perception, and the influence of institutional contexts.

Findings

Conclusion & Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight that leadership for Black student leaders is not merely a role, but an emotionally charged and mentally demanding experience shaped by institutional climates that often fail to affirm their full humanity. Consistent with Harper’s (2024) framing of liberation, participants revealed that navigating leadership in higher education requires constantly pushing against norms and expectations that were not designed with their identities in mind. Their experiences illustrate that the work of leadership becomes taxing when students must simultaneously advocate for their communities and challenge oppressive structures.

(Recommendation #1) **Work on Socialization and Serving BSLs** Supported by Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement (1984) and Tinto’s Theory of Integration (1993). Both frameworks highlight the powerful influence of faculty-student interaction as a mechanism for engagement and integration.

(Recommendation #2) **Implement Identity-Affirming Leadership Development Spaces**

Workshops, retreats, and ongoing cohort-based programs can provide BSLs with tools to navigate racialized stressors, understand hidden curricula, and cultivate leadership practices grounded in care, justice, and mutuality.

Key References

- Beatty, C. C., Allen, J., Jr., White, L., Baptist, W., Jr., & Woodard, D. (2025). “It’s Still There, but It’s Not the Same”: Black Student Leadership in the Wake of Anti-DEI State Policy. *Education Sciences*, 15(7), 890. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070890>
- Harper, J., & Kezar, A. (2021). Leadership development for racially minoritized students: An expansion of the Social Change Model of Leadership. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 20(3), 156–166. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V20/I3/T2>

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