

# BURNOUT & COMPASSION FATIGUE AMONG STUDENT LEADERS IN HELPING POSITIONS: A CASE STUDY

Guided by Social Cognitive Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, which recognize that both individual and environmental factors contribute to burnout and compassion fatigue, as well as to their prevention, this case study sought to hear directly from student leaders about their experiences navigating college life as a leader and support person to their peers. It also aimed to identify prevention and coping strategies to help mitigate these phenomena as an individual, and leadership strategies to support the well-being of the groups these students lead.

## AUTHORS

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This case study was conducted at Occidental College as part of the researcher's dissertation for Arizona State University.



## THE ISSUE

Burnout and compassion fatigue are both connected with stress and exhaustion, and are job- or role-related phenomena frequently associated with people in helping professions, which provide care or support to others. This case study explored the experiences of burnout and compassion fatigue among a group of student leaders in helping, supportive positions at the college, acknowledging their potential increased risk for stress and burnout due to their unique roles as leader-helpers in addition to their roles as students themselves.

Previous cycles of research found that the line between being a colleague to fellow students and also being a support person for those same students can get blurry fairly quickly, especially at a small institution.



## INTERVENTION

A series of three workshop sessions were held in a group meeting room in the student wellness center over the course of the spring 2024 semester. The space itself was comfortable and encouraged group discussion and interaction among participants.



### Session 1: Mindfulness and Self-Compassion for Student Leaders in Helping Roles

- Focused on individual self-compassion skills-building and mindfulness practices



### Session 2: Communication and Boundary-Setting for Student Leaders in Helping Roles

- Focused on individual skills-building around setting boundaries and practicing assertive communication



### Session 3: Management Strategies for Student Groups to Address Member Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

- Focused on servant-leadership strategies for managing groups and promoting member well-being

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How does a professional development workshop series reduce student leader/peer educator/peer mentor burnout and compassion fatigue?

RQ2: How does a professional development workshop series influence student leader/peer educator/peer mentor knowledge and skills related to individual prevention and coping strategies?

RQ3: How can peer groups and student organizations support the prevention of burnout and compassion fatigue amongst their members?

## METHODS

This was a qualitative, descriptive case study

### Data Collection:

- Pre- and post-intervention interviews, held/recorded/transcribed via Zoom
- Group discussions held during the three in-person intervention workshop sessions
- Student group artifacts, including a peer group handbook, student org constitution, internal student group transition-of-leadership document, tips for chairing effective meetings
- Researcher journal of observations, reflections

### Data Analysis:

- Inductive analysis of 22 documents, and codebook created using HyperRESEARCH
  - Two cycles of coding: Values Coding elicited 139 codes; Pattern Coding resulted in 10 pattern codes

## FINDINGS

Findings presented according to four themes that emerged from data analysis, and their corresponding assertions. Pattern codes led to identification of themes: (1) identity and self as a leader, (2) nature of the work, (3) experiences of burnout and compassion fatigue, (4) workload and commitments, (5) finding balance and setting boundaries, (6) learning experiences, (7) valued leadership qualities, (8) coping and prevention strategies, (9) ideas for future student leaders, and (10) challenges to prevention.

### IDENTITY AND THE STUDENT LEADER

Student leaders, especially leaders of cultural or affinity groups, see their individual identities intrinsically linked with their work supporting others.

- Student leaders expressed great passion for their work supporting their peers
- Cultural/affinity leaders discussed their groups as 'community', and their work in terms of duty to their community
- Student leaders take group/ work failures personally

### POSITIONALITY OF STUDENT LEADERS

Student leaders face a double leadership responsibility, needing to both manage their group's members and to serve the greater community of their peers, while also prioritizing being students themselves. This may be especially challenging for those in unpaid leadership roles.

- Student leaders often have difficulty setting boundaries or differentiating the line between their 'student' and 'worker' selves
- Student leaders in unpaid positions face different challenges than leaders in paid positions
- Students want their work to be important and meaningful to their groups and audiences

### SHARED EXPERIENCES

There is value in creating institutionally supported mechanisms for students in leadership roles to share their personal experiences with burnout, compassion fatigue, and strategies for prevention with each other in a learning environment.

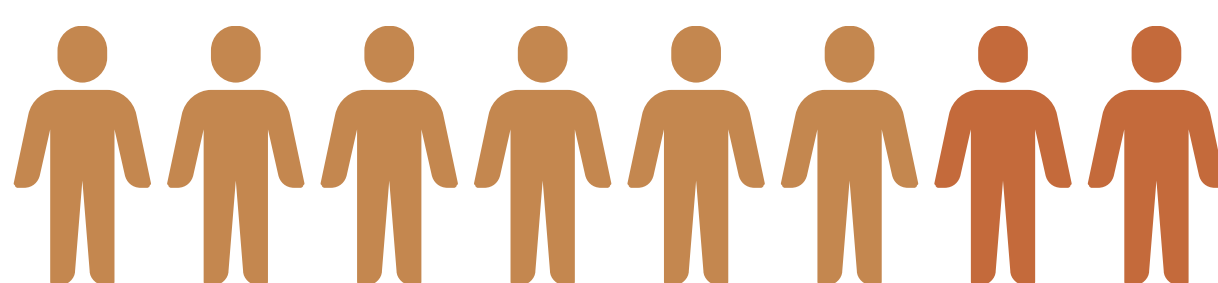
- Student leaders appreciated learning together in the small, in-person workshop sessions
- All of the student leaders had experienced some form of burnout, compassion fatigue, and group management challenges, and all of them practiced various forms of coping
- Student leaders valued being able to hear from other students in similar roles about their own experiences with burnout and compassion fatigue

### FOUNDATIONAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

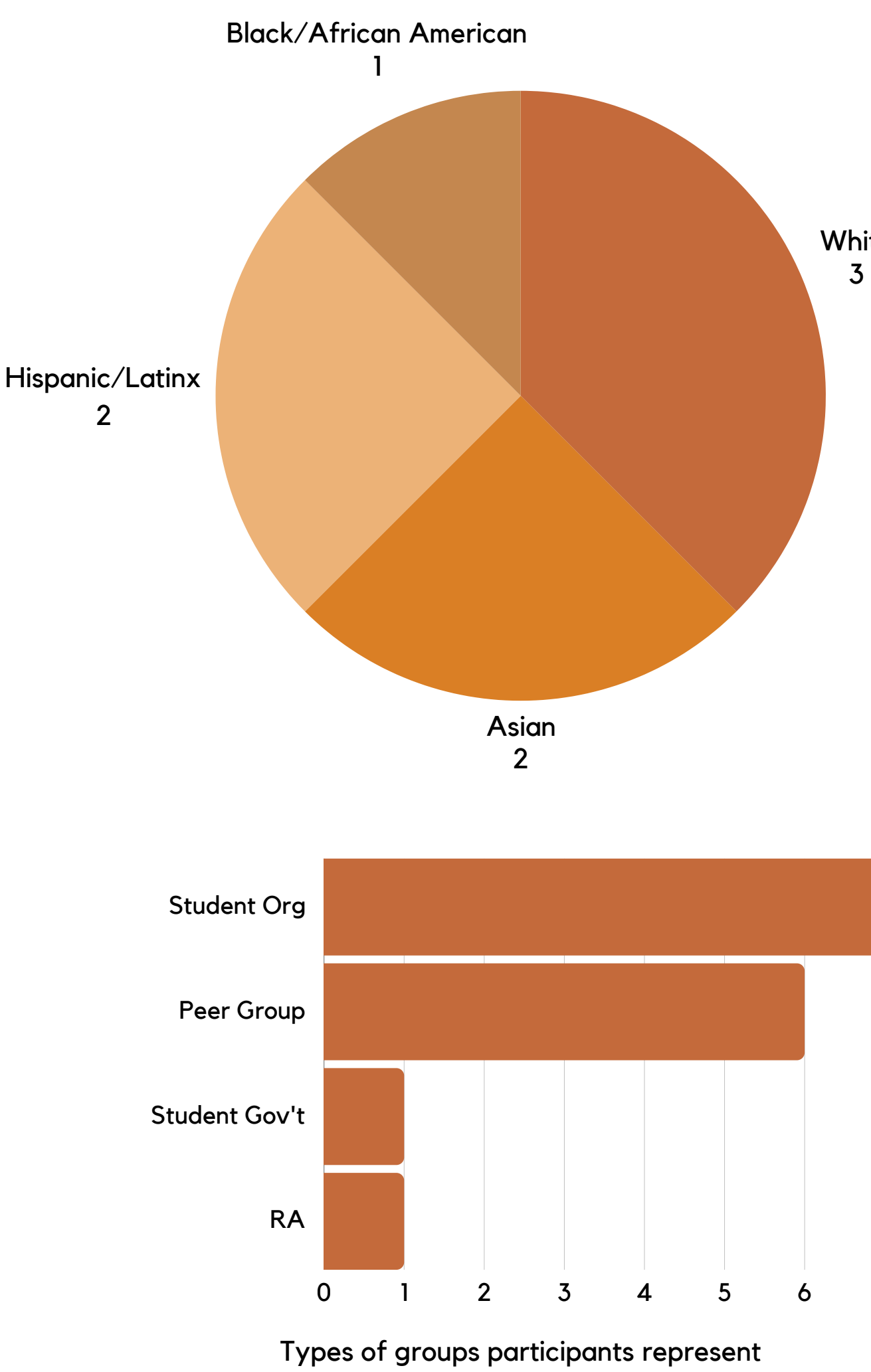
Fundamental, timely, institutionalized management training, including an emphasis on servant-leadership skills, would help student leaders feel more prepared to lead their groups and to deal with potential burnout and compassion fatigue proactively.

- Student leaders often found delegating and shared decision-making to be difficult in their roles
- Student leaders expressed the need for more institutional resources and support for student leader mental health
- Student leaders expressed a desire to hold future training about burnout and compassion fatigue prevention early in the academic year, and to find ways to incorporate it into existing leader training

## PARTICIPANTS



(n=8) 6 female, 2 male student leaders



## OUTCOMES

- The intervention increased participants' understanding of how their identities and behaviors as student leaders can affect their experiences of burnout and compassion fatigue.
- Resulted in positive behavior change and had a positive effect on participants' knowledge related to coping and prevention skills:
  - Reported learning new coping and prevention strategies from the workshop content and from each other.
  - Reported continuing to practice coping and prevention strategies post-intervention.
- The research period was too brief to study levels of burnout and compassion fatigue pre- and post-intervention, or to gauge the intervention's effect on these experiences.
- Student group leaders are already implementing some servant-leadership skills, and are interested in learning about and implementing leadership skills to help prevent burnout and compassion fatigue in their groups

## WHAT PARTICIPANTS HAD TO SAY

### About how their roles tie into their sense of self:

"the work is connecting you to an integral part of your identity. [It] feels like a failure if it's not going as well as you want." -HB55

### About the boundaries between work and school life:

"the blur between student leaders gets messy sometimes in the way that you live both lives, and sometimes it's hard to separate them." -DD79

### About learning to take care of their well-being proactively as leaders:

"we get talked to about how to, after we're burned out, do self care and stuff like that. It's kind of an emphasis on when you're already stressed out, and not necessarily prevention." -MM79

### About having a space to learn with, and from, each other:

"...[I appreciated] seeing other people that are burned out, so that I'm not alone. And we got to have a place to talk about it, which has never happened before." -IM63