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2012

Inquiry Methods for Critical Consciousness and Self-Change

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The Review of Higher Education, Volume 36, Number 1, Fall 2012
Supplement, pp. 69-92 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rhe.2012.0049



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The Review of Higher Education

Fall 2012, Volume 36, No. 1, Supplement, pp. 69–92

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Edlyn Vallejo Peña

More than ever, institutions of higher education in the United States face a crisis of escalating inequities in educational outcomes across racial groups. Despite tremendous efforts to increase the enrollment of underrepresented groups in postsecondary institutions and marked success in some cases, this access has not translated into equity in outcomes (Kugelmass & Ready, 2011), particularly for African American and Latino students (Bensimon, 2007; Harris & Bensimon, 2008). When only four out of 10 students of color who gain access to a four-year institution graduate (Engle & Theokas, 2010), it means that the *majority* of students of color still never realize the dream of earning a baccalaureate degree. Increasing access to higher education alone does not pave the way for minority students' educational success. As a consequence of inequitable educational outcomes, the capacity of students of color to fully participate in higher education, society, and the economy is hampered.

This article proposes that faculty members play an important role in mitigating inequitable educational outcomes. What follows is an exploration of

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how faculty members experience a change in perceptions and in their relations with minority students¹ as a result of participating in a unique faculty development activity designed to advance the cause of achieving greater student equity. This article answers two questions: (a) To what extent can faculty involvement in a sustained, inquiry-based professional development opportunity stimulate an understanding of students who experience inequitable educational outcomes? and (b) To what extent do faculty members develop a critical consciousness and commitment to changing their own practices to be more responsive to the needs and interests of students of color?

The intent of my analysis is twofold: first, to contribute to conceptual understandings about how faculty members develop a critical lens and experience self-change when they use structured inquiry methods to learn about students of color; and second, to inform in turn the ways in which institutions can engage faculty members to become aware of and responsive to closing the equity gap.

THE IMPACT OF FACULTY ON MINORITY STUDENT SUCCESS

Researchers have gone to great lengths to understand and explain why African American and Latino students are not succeeding in institutions of higher education. Historically, researchers have concentrated on the ways in which students successfully or unsuccessfully adapt to postsecondary institutions given their academic and social characteristics (Pascarella, 1985; Tinto, 1993). More recently, researchers have taken a reflective turn to include institutional responsibility toward minority student success. Bensimon (2007), for instance, contends that institutions of higher education and their educators have a professional responsibility, even a duty, to students to whom they grant access. Faculty, in particular, play an important role in this endeavor. Faculty-student interactions affect students' cognitive, psychosocial, and attitudinal outcomes (Cox et al., 2010), particularly for students of color (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Kim & Sax, 2007; Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995). A study by Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) found that "faculty interaction contributed more to student learning for students of color than it did for White students" (p. 557). Thus, initiatives to support the educational success of students of color are most successful when faculty members become involved in interacting with students.

The literature reveals that retention approaches that target students of color generally consist of academic support programs such as tutoring, academic advising, and supplemental instruction, as well as student affairs

¹I use "minority students" and "students of color" interchangeably in this article to refer to African American and Latino students.

and diversity-related initiatives. These efforts, however, rarely involve faculty members (Stassen, 1995). In fact, “the majority of faculty members in American higher education continue to cast a blind eye to diversity as an important social force in their institutions” (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006, p. 37). Consequently, faculty members—the very constituents who are responsible for engaging students in their curricular learning and with whom students have regular contact—have not been central to the discussion on redressing inequitable student outcomes.

Meaningful interactions with faculty make a significant difference in the lives of students of color. What does it take, then, for faculty members to become equipped to interact with students in substantive and significant ways? Studies by Cotten and Wilson (2006) and Golde and Pribbenow (2000) found that faculty members who demonstrate higher levels of out-of-class interaction with students tend to possess a student-centered philosophy and believe that teaching is an important part of being a professor. Yet little knowledge exists about how faculty members become critically conscious of their roles in creating opportunities for equitable outcomes. Even less is known about factors to create the conditions to transform educators’ attitudes and behaviors into those that increase the likelihood of success among underrepresented students. To date, few studies have focused on institutional and professional development opportunities that encourage faculty to make critical shifts in their assumptions, about and practices with students of color (Bensimon, 2007).

THE FACULTY-STUDENT INTERVIEW PROJECT: A THEORY-BASED INTERVENTION

The Faculty-Student Interview Project came to fruition at a four-year, liberal arts college as a result of the institution’s participation in a larger project called the Equity Scorecard project, which had the aim of improving minority student success in postsecondary institutions (Bensimon, 2007; Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004). The Equity Scorecard and Faculty-Student Interview Project were founded by Dr. Estela Bensimon, Co-Director of the Center for Urban Education, and funded by The James Irvine Foundation. In the project, a team of faculty members and administrators examined institutional data on student outcomes disaggregated by race and ethnicity. In reviewing the data, it became clear that students of color at Mountainside College (a pseudonym) experienced inequitable educational outcomes. In particular, Latino students at this Predominantly White Institution achieved lower grade point averages compared to other students. Furthermore, a little over half of African American students successfully graduated within six years. While the data revealed clear disparities

between students of color and other student groups, they did not reveal what experiences or circumstances explained the outcomes.

To inquire deeper into inequitable outcomes, a team of faculty and administrators at Mountainside College volunteered to begin the Faculty-Student Interview Project. A central premise of the project was that unequal outcomes for minority students can be understood as a learning problem of education practitioners (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004). Faculty members are influential actors whose practices, often without their awareness, have an effect—positive or negative—on the outcomes of students of color. The project required faculty members to (a) interview minority students about their educational lives and campus experiences over their freshman and sophomore years, and (b) meet together as a collaborative inquiry group to discuss and reflect on the findings from interviews and the implications they had on their own practices with students. In my examination of this project, I sought answers to this question: “When faculty members interact with students of color, what do they learn about them and how does their learning impact their practices and approaches with students?” I was interested in the understandings—about how students experience a campus and a classroom that are predominantly White, for example—that faculty members develop as a result of interacting with students of color. Particularly compelling is the idea that these interactions can transform both perspectives and approaches with students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of change underlying the project draws on two bodies of scholarly work. The first is Polkinghorne’s (2004) articulation of practice theory and its application to the “caring” professions such as teaching, nursing, and counseling. The second body of work is Landreman, Rasmussen, King, and Jiang’s (2007) model of faculty members’ development of critical consciousness—the knowledge, concern, and investment in social justice issues (for the purpose of this project, inequitable educational outcomes) that lead to action for social change. While Polkinghorne’s ideas focus mostly on the discrete, day-to-day interactions and judgments between a professional caregiver and her charge, Landreman et al.’s work centers on a broader social consciousness that propels these daily decisions. I explore these two bodies of work collectively to conceptualize ways in which faculty members can respond to the needs and interests of students of color at micro and macro levels.

Polkinghorne (2004) asserts that helping professionals continuously review and reconsider their practices on a daily basis. More pointedly, Landreman et al. (2007) suggest that a critical consciousness must undergird these daily decisions if they are meant to support students of color. Paulo Friere’s influential work in the 1970s informed Landreman’s conceptions of

critical consciousness. According to Landreman et al., critically conscious individuals are aware of:

- (a) the historical, political, and social implications of a situation (i.e., the context); (b) his or her own social location in the context; (c) the intersectionality of his or her multiple identities (e.g., race, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation); and (d) the inherent tensions that exist between a vision of social justice and the current societal conditions for all people. (p. 276)

Landreman et al.'s research found that faculty members who cultivate a critical consciousness and make a commitment to students of color experience similar sets of circumstances and events in their lives. First, faculty members' awareness was raised through (a) exposure to students and other individuals different from faculty members' own culture, and (b) a "critical incident" related to these differences. Critical incidents are "significant events, interactions, and experiences that served as catalysts for self-reflection and subsequent meaning-making, as well as for the decision by individuals to seek continued or additional engagement in diverse experiences or environments" (Landreman et al., 2007, p. 283).

Exposure and critical incidents with a diversity of individuals can influence moment-to-moment decisions because, as Polkinghorne (2004) notes, practitioners draw from a reservoir of understandings formed by past experiences. Having little contact with historically underserved students at a predominantly White institution can place educators at a disadvantage when trying to relate to minority students who are in need of support. The faculty member has fewer experiences and understandings upon which to draw in making appropriate judgments in the moment of interaction. Faculty members who create opportunities to interact with minority students more purposefully can cultivate a richer understanding of the students being served. In particular, they can begin to understand how students experience their relationships with faculty members and other students, both in and out of the classroom, especially in predominantly White institutions. Faculty members can recognize that an African American student in a classroom with no other African Americans is likely to have a different learning experience than students who are not burdened by a history of racism and exclusion.

According to Landreman et al. (2007), reflecting also contributes to the development of faculty members' critical consciousness. Both Landreman et al. (2007) and Polkinghorne (2004) agree that educators must use reflection in order to make responsive decisions. Reflective thinking is "a dialogic engagement with a situation in which a practice is being carried out" (Polkinghorne, 2004, p. 163). Polkinghorne drew upon the work of Gadamer (1991) to highlight the process of reflection: "a) a problem occurs with a practice; b) one questions the prior understanding of the situation;

c) new understandings are considered and deliberated about; and d) a new understanding is appropriated and serves to inform practice” (p. 164).

Landreman et al. (2007) also found that, after reflecting, critically conscious faculty members experience an “aha” moment. The “aha” moment typically occurred with the convergence of past pertinent experiences—being exposed to diverse others, experiencing critical incidents with others, and engaging in self-reflection. The “aha” moment represented an instant of self-discovery in which faculty members understood the broader social significance of their interactions and practices with ethnic minority groups. Such insights resulted in a raised awareness about themselves, their position, and how they fit into the social order. Sustaining these pertinent experiences over time led faculty members in Landreman et al.’s study to develop critical consciousness, engage in actions of social justice, and continue intergroup relationships.

THE PROJECT

Polkinghorne and Landreman et al.’s conceptions of cultivating responsive practical judgments and critical consciousness, in concert, informed the design and implementation of the Faculty-Student Interview Project. Project activities were orchestrated to provide educators in higher education with: (a) meaningful exposure to and interactions with students of color, (b) critical incidents of learning about students of color that prompt reflection, (c) structured opportunities to create conditions for “aha” moments in which educators question assumptions, beliefs, and ideas about students’ educational experiences and their own role in student success; and (d) the cultivation of a critical consciousness that informs changes in educational practices with a larger social change agenda in mind, namely, ameliorating unequal outcomes for students of color.

The project involved a team of faculty members in developing a deeper understanding of individual African American and Latino students’ lived educational experiences by conducting student interviews and participating in collaborative inquiry meetings. Over a 20-month period, the team interviewed students of color three times during their freshman and sophomore years at Mountainside College. Interviewing students outside of their daily teaching and advising practices provided a distinctive approach for faculty to understand how students viewed their experiences on campus, including their beliefs and attitudes about the institution and about themselves as learners. The process of interviewing gave faculty members experiences in interacting with students, requiring faculty to attentively consider students’ experiences and the implications for their educational lives.

Equally important to the interviewing process were the collaborative inquiry meetings held bimonthly to discuss and reflect upon the interview

findings. At these inquiry meetings, faculty participants gathered around a table, debriefed on their interviews, read through students' quotations, and discussed questions, assumptions, and existing understandings about students. As they analyzed student interview data, faculty members considered such campus issues as institutional structures, policies, and practices that might contribute to (re)producing inequities. The group sought to understand the ways in which inequitable educational outcomes were "manufactured" (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 6) at Mountainside College by considering stories and specific quotations from student interviews and by reflecting on them as a team.

Purposefully attending to the stories of students and discussing more effective approaches to assist students of color in the inquiry meetings provided opportunities to cultivate understanding, experience, and a critical consciousness toward redressing inequities. I investigated whether the interviews of students of color coupled with the collaborative inquiry meetings promoted the development of a richer body of experiences and understandings about students of color from which participating faculty members could draw in their daily practices with students.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I aimed to answer two research questions: First, what do faculty members learn about students' lived classroom and campus experiences by participating in student interviews and collaborative inquiry focusing on equitable educational outcomes for African American and Latino students? Second, in what ways does this learning inform faculty members' practices and approaches toward students and/or prompt them to change those practices?

To answer these research questions, I employed a case study methodology. Case studies concentrate on rigorous descriptions and analysis of an entity or bounded system (Patton, 2001) and are useful in studying temporal or longitudinal processes. The research questions I posed called for a method that allowed me to trace changes (e.g., in learning, in practical decisions) that occurred during faculty members' involvement in the 20-month project. Accordingly, I examined data that were gathered in parallel with the temporal course of the social process investigated (Katz, 2001). I considered faculty members' experiences interviewing students of color, meeting as a collaborative inquiry group to discuss interview findings, then interviewing students, and so on. The case study approach proved suitable for gathering intimate details of faculty members' understandings, perceptions, and behaviors. In addition, the approach was informed by my critically oriented position as a Latina researcher who endeavors to challenge existing socially constructed assumptions about students of color.

Participants

The original Faculty-Student Interview Project team comprised five faculty members and three administrators. Because I sought depth in understanding faculty experiences, I focused on the five faculty members, all five of whom had volunteered to participate in the project after receiving a campus-wide email from Mountainside College's president that explained the project and called for project volunteers. Faculty participants' gender, race, academic discipline, and tenure status are outlined in Table 1.

Setting

Founded in the late nineteenth century, Mountainside College is a small, liberal arts institution nestled within a semicircle of mountains and hills. Though the college is only several miles away from a busy city in the western United States, Mountainside is characterized by a small-town atmosphere. The college's mission plays a salient role. Two decades ago, the mission statement was revised to place greater emphasis on diversity and equity. Today, Mountainside College is nationally recognized for its commitment to cross-cultural interactions, diversity education, and equity for all students.

Data Collection

The primary source of data collection was interviews. In an attempt to collect detailed information, I interviewed four faculty members four times for one hour each. Each interview was conducted once after each faculty member completed a round of interviews with his or her students and once more at the end of the project. I interviewed the fifth participant only three times because she joined the project six months after its inception. While I began by employing a semi-structured approach, as I completed each round of interviews, I found the interview format becoming more conversational with fewer predetermined questions. The transition from structured to less-structured interviews allowed me to ask questions particular to each case.

In addition to interviewing, observations comprised a secondary source of data. According to Stake (1994), in a qualitative case study the researcher "spend[s] substantial time, on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting [and] revising meanings of what is going on" (p. 242). Observations allow the researcher to collect descriptions of the context that frames participants' lives, including aspects that participants take for granted (McCall & Simmons, 1969). As a result, I conducted participant observations of all 10 collaborative inquiry team meetings held over a 20-month period. In my field notes, I chronicled everyday routines of faculty members in the project and the ways in which dialogue during team meetings spurred new understandings about students.

The third form of data collected in the case study was a final journal entry, which offered one last opportunity for faculty members to reflect on their experiences in interviewing the students. The open-ended questions were:

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN
MOUNTAINSIDE INTERVIEW PROJECT

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Status</i>
Barbara	Heterosexual	White	Biology	Tenured
Grace	Heterosexual	White	Biology	Granted tenure during study
Jack	Heterosexual	White	Comparative literature	Tenured
Dafne	Heterosexual	Asian American	Religious studies	Tenured; Special Assistant to the President on Diversity
Matt	Gay	White	Mathematics	Tenured Deputy to President

- Did you find participation in this project of value? If so, in what ways?
- How have you benefited from interacting with your student interviewees?
- What needs to be done to facilitate the process of sustaining this [project at Mountainside College]?
- How do we make this kind of collaborative inquiry project possible without outsiders [researchers/facilitators]?
- Any other reflections?

This third and culminating method of data collection added new data that supplemented and enhanced my analysis.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the interview transcripts, observation field notes, and written journal responses, I conducted a content analysis of texts for recurring and core meanings in each faculty case (Patton, 2001). This preliminary analysis allowed me to create a rough map from the emerging picture of each case. During a second round of content analysis, I pulled relevant quotations and excerpts from the raw case data and organized them broadly under overarching themes. When noteworthy patterns or themes emerged within these themes, I organized the corresponding quotations or text into sub-themes.

Because I was interested in tracing changes in conceptions over time, I paid attention to how each individual spoke in one way about students at the beginning of the project and how his or her language shifted toward a

more critically conscious perspective as the end of the project approached. Though the analysis was inductive, my theoretical sensitivity to Polkinghorne (2004) and Landreman et al.'s (2007) ideas about changes in consciousness and practices helped me to make sense of emergent findings.

NARRATIVES OF FACULTY PARTICIPANTS

The Faculty-Student Interview Project impacted faculty members' critical consciousness and practices in different ways. Before presenting the narratives of change, it is important to note that the degree to which individuals changed seemingly depended on participants' willingness to discuss issues of race and their prior exposure to diversity and equity efforts. The two faculty members who changed the most in this project were Grace and Barbara—both White, heterosexual members who taught biology and who had not previously been involved in campus initiatives that focused on ethnic diversity and equity. Their lack of awareness about the implications of race on life experiences and initial resistance to engage in dialogues about race meant that they had the most to gain from participating in this project.

Jack, who was more aware of the role race played in students' lives, fell in the middle of the change spectrum. He had been involved in diversity initiatives for more than 20 years but had been less involved in recent years. His level of knowledge and awareness, from the beginning, allowed him to be open to learning from students and changing his practices.

Matt, a gay, White male, and Dafne, a heterosexual, Asian American female, were both highly involved in campus diversity and social justice efforts. Dafne was Assistant to the President on Diversity and viewed herself as "in some sense overseeing just about anything that has to do with diversity, gender, [and] race" at Mountainside College. Though Matt was a White male, he intimately identified with issues of social justice and equity because of his sexual orientation. Of the faculty participants in the project, Matt had been one of the most involved in leadership roles pertaining to diversity and equity initiatives during his tenure at Mountainside College, both on and off campus.

Though both Dafne and Matt had already reached a degree of critical consciousness, the project appeared to confirm and reinvigorate their commitment to supporting students who experienced inequitable educational outcomes. The narratives of change presented in the sections that follow suggest that the project's implications are far-reaching and varied, benefiting the campus community as a whole.

"Aha" Moments about Race and Whiteness

These faculty members who engaged in the project encountered critical incidents of learning about students' racialized experiences and reflected on their own deeper, underlying assumptions about race and ethnicity that

unconsciously guided their decisions. Interviewing students of color pushed some of these unconscious thoughts to the surface for faculty participants, creating “aha” moments. In the beginning of the project, Grace and Barbara in particular experienced difficulty in engaging in conversations with students of color about their race. Grace and Barbara, by virtue of their Whiteness, had difficulty recognizing the relative privilege that being White afforded them. While interviewing students, strong feelings of discomfort and guilt emerged for both women. Grace’s first interview with a Latina student from Texas evoked feelings of anxiety and guilt. She said:

I think that being a 50-year old White woman, why in the world would they want to tell me what it’s like to be a minority student? It makes me uncomfortable to ask the questions. I think that I could seem patronizing.

Grace also mentioned that “it’s very hard to hear” about incidents like blatantly racist remarks that one her interviewee’s roommates made to the interviewee: “That’s a huge open sore.”

In her first and second interviews with students, Grace was more concerned about potentially offending students and feeling embarrassed than gathering critical information about how race played a role in students’ educational lives. Toward the end of the project, Grace acknowledged the importance and implications of discussing race in this educational endeavor. She came to understand that silence and avoidance only serve as a “barrier” to progress. Grace shared, “It isn’t a color-blind society. And we can’t just pretend it is and wish it were, and behave as though it is. And so part of is, yeah, it’s good to discuss it.”

Barbara shared similar feelings: “I was really concerned about a White person asking those kinds of questions.” At the beginning of the project, she thought, “That’s a little weird for me, a White woman to be asking [questions about race because] I don’t know how they’re going to react.” Toward the end of the project, Barbara admitted that asking such questions became important. She came to understand that discussing racialized experiences “established the reason for even doing this [project].”

In fact, Barbara made an important breakthrough in her thinking about interacting with students. She “realized through this process that some of the barriers to reaching students aren’t just on their side.” Barbara previously felt that the lack of relationships she had developed with students of color had to do with students’ backgrounds or personal differences. Barbara believed that the onus for connecting rested on the students. Over the course of her interactions with student interviewees, Barbara experienced a significant shift in her thinking, recognizing that *she* had to make an effort to connect to students. Barbara admitted that, before the project, it was “much easier for me to engage with students that have a background similar to mine.” She

described her new insight as recognizing the need to take “the time to listen to students and to hear their concerns, which we don’t often do. This has given me specific ways in which I can improve my teaching, and improve the classroom environment.” Though Barbara may not have initially believed she had much in common with the students she interviewed, “the process of interviewing them provided a structure for me to figure out who they were and what I could talk to them about outside of any sort of classroom stuff.”

Matt, Jack, and Dafne conversely understood that speaking directly about race was a necessary and central element to the project from its inception. Matt and Jack knew that to address students’ experiences of marginalization and subordination, they had to acknowledge their own place within that experience as White males, including the inherent privileges of Whiteness. Jack perceived the Mountainside Interview project as an important process in fostering change in White faculty participants’ perceptions about approaching issues of race. Through the interview project, he became more acutely aware of issues of power and race. Specifically, when speaking about “Anglo, mainstream, upper middle-class, . . . male faculty,” like himself, Jack said:

I think we need, first of all, to be honest and to recognize that racial, ethnic, economic differences really are very significant—that they’re not, you know, matters of indifference to our students. That your color, your family background, your economic background, your cultural background, have tremendous consequences for who you are in the classroom, and for those things that the professor sees. And I think, you know, because there’s a lot of work involved in acknowledging that, or in doing something about it once you’ve acknowledged it, I think that we often want to shy away from it.

Jack expressed that acknowledging these issues was particularly difficult for White faculty, especially those who wanted to believe that racism was not a problem in higher education. He stated further:

It seems to me that that’s a problem that particularly Anglo faculty have. We don’t want to talk about this, partly because we didn’t talk about it when we were in college. And, you know, we want to say education doesn’t really make these kinds of discriminations. Of course it does, and we do it all the time.

“Aha” Moments about Personal and Institutional Responsibility

As faculty members gained knowledge about students through interviews, they experienced critical incidents and “aha” moments about institutional contexts, structures, and processes at Mountainside College that enabled and challenged students’ ability to accomplish academic goals. Faculty participants discovered that Mountainside College sometimes fell short of fulfilling its mission to provide an enabling climate in which diverse student groups could succeed. Students spoke about varying forms of racism experienced

in the dormitories and classrooms. Barbara acknowledged that, until she began interviewing students, she “was unaware of the degree of racial tension in the dorms. This was pretty mind-boggling to me.” Dafne, an Asian American professor of religious studies, took a self-reflective turn, “Okay, so we try to attract a diverse range of students. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that we’ve gotten it together as far as making it a good place for them to be.” Grace agreed that the institution should take responsibility for delivering on its promise to support students of color: “Maybe we need to work more on the substance and a little bit less on the window dressing here.”

Faculty members became critical about their place and role in advancing equitable outcomes. For instance, listening to students tell stories about professors who created an uncomfortable space in the classroom, thereby inhibiting student learning, made an impression on Barbara. Her new awareness of faculty insensitivity caused her to think about her own operating assumptions in the classroom. Barbara remarked, “I’ve been thinking about . . . assumptions that I might make about students.” She continued, “So [I’m] learning to be more aware and sensitive to those issues. And I can think of a case where I was aware of my own classroom behavior that I might not have picked up on before this.”

Students’ stories about challenges with financial aid, family circumstances, and campus climate also prompted critical reflection for Grace. For the first time, Grace became aware of how important it was for her to make changes in her daily practices in an effort to support students of color and their academic endeavors:

The most concrete benefit has been to make me a better advisor to and teacher of students of color—or, if not better, at least more aware. I pay more attention to possible “background issues” such as family ambivalence about a student’s attending college, etc. I try to listen more closely and carefully to what is and *is not* being said.

Just as Grace became more attuned to the structural and personal barriers students experienced, Matt also made attempts to reflect on critical questions as he learned from students’ experiences. He reflected:

As I weave the personal stories of three of our students of color and their perceptions of the institutions with my perceptions of the institution, our policies, and our structures, it helps me gain a deeper sense of difficult questions about equity that must be asked and must be addressed. It helps me think about how I bring my own experiences and, yes, prejudices, to the shaping of my teaching and the other work I do in this institution, and how this may or may not resonate with all of our students.

What makes the critical reflections and “aha” moments from faculty members so compelling is that their raised awareness inspired changes in the ways they approached students of color inside and outside of the classroom.

Critically Conscious Practices in the Classroom

Of the five faculty participants, Jack, Grace, Barbara, and Dafne described developing more critically conscious practices with students of color in their role as teacher. Jack thought about the ways he could reach students of color who were particularly quiet and at the margins of being successful in his classroom. In this respect, the Faculty-Student Interview Project enlightened Jack, even though he had been a professor for a number of years with long-time involvement in several diversity and equity initiatives. He saw the potential of applying what he learned from having conversations with student interviewees to students in his own classroom. “This [interview project] suggested to me some ways in which I might be able to talk differently with my regular students and advisees,” Jack remarked. Interviewing two Latino males moved Jack to reflect on his relationship with two other students in his class whom he described as being very quiet Latino men:

I have thought about my conversations with [the two student interviewees] and now I feel that what I really need to do is to have the kind of conversation I’ve had with them with the two Latinos [in my class]. . . . So I’ve been thinking sort of vague[ly] about how can you modify that kind of interrogation [the student interview] so that it’s appropriate to the situation of a class itself.

The structured conversations with student interviewees in the Faculty-Student Interview Project helped Jack to better connect with students in the classroom. Indeed, Jack chose to reach out to two Latino male students who sat at the back of the classroom and who sometimes appeared disengaged. Jack’s intention was to reengage the Latino students who he knew were part of a segment of the student population who needed support.

In addition, to making changes to personal interactions with students, Jack also reconsidered ways to make changes at the institutional level. For instance, when Jack learned from students about the ways in which small class size affected student engagement in the classroom, he recalled his involvement in designing general education courses at Mountainside College. He considered students’ narratives in a new light:

Now, I know that this is sort of conventional wisdom, but we tell our students that we value small class situations. But it was interesting to see it mirrored back to me quite as forcefully as it was. Because I have been involved for many years in the general education program, in its design, in its organization—it made me think that this is something we need to look at a lot more carefully in the future.

As a result of interviewing students, Jack also began to reconsider curricular issues in the Literature and Composition Department where he taught. Jack learned from several students the importance of offering diverse classes and course content. For example, Latino authors included in class readings were typically from Mexico. Students suggested the inclusion of literature from South American authors and perspectives in order to “broaden the sense of what ‘Latino’ means as we teach it.” Jack took this request seriously, and he later met with a group of Latino students to discuss suggestions on expanding Mountainside College’s curriculum. Not only did he want to make sure students’ voices were heard when he met with them, but he also wanted to make sure that students knew they were part of the decision-making process of revising the curriculum.

Barbara was also affected by what she heard from students regarding classroom experiences and gave similar thought to improving the dynamics in her own classroom. Barbara learned that, when professors failed to discuss nontraditional populations and perspectives, students felt disappointed and marginalized. Two students Barbara interviewed in the project took a class from professors who curbed minority students’ points of view. One student interviewee “felt that there was a lack of willingness by the professor to [look] to alternative perspectives. That they hadn’t created a space that made those viewpoints welcome or at least on the table,” recounted Barbara. Hearing about professors who restrict students’ ability to feel welcome and comfortable in the classroom made an impression on Barbara. She admitted to being less aware of these problems before participating in the Faculty-Student Interview Project. One way Barbara believed the institution could improve was by developing faculty members’ capacity, including her own, to create a space in the classroom whereby “difference in learning style, difference in background, [and] cultural differences” are accepted. She said, “What it made me think about is that I need to make sure that I leave a space open in the classroom for people that may not think the same way that I think.” Barbara made an effort to keep this concept in mind as she taught subsequent classes.

Perhaps a more concrete change in Barbara’s decisions to support students of color was reflected in her choice to become involved in a residential pre-collegiate program that enrolled students of color in core general education courses at Mountainside College before they entered their freshman year. The program was called the Multicultural Summer Institute. Barbara learned a great deal from a student interviewee about her participation in the Multicultural Summer Institute and the ways in which the student developed a solid community of support. This source of support carried the student into her freshman year and became invaluable to her persistence at Mountainside College. This report made Barbara “think how important that sort of precollege experience can be to some of our students.” She realized that

students in the program made critical academic and social networks with peers, faculty, and administrators at Mountainside College. As a result of this new awareness, Barbara decided to teach a biology class in the Multicultural Summer Institute the following summer due to her deepened commitment to ensure the success of students of color.

Grace also experienced critical incidents and “aha” moments with regard to her role as teacher. By interviewing students, she learned that expressing enthusiasm for subject matter and for the students themselves enhances student engagement. She explained that she “actually thought . . . a great deal in the classroom about making eye contact, making certain that I call on quiet people.” Grace felt that making eye contact with students of color in her class let them know they were visible and an integral part of the classroom community. This concept was especially important in larger classes, where students may feel lost in the crowd. After Grace learned that students wanted to feel connected to faculty members, she decided to make “an effort to really make sure everyone knows that I know who they are personally and [that] I’m personally interested in what they have to say. I know it’s making me more attuned to what an individual student might need.” Grace felt that in making this effort, the rewards of student engagement were clear: “Students of color might respond in a kind of a personal interest, particularly when they don’t expect one from, say, in a large biology class.”

While Dafne, a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, did not explicitly describe instances of having changed her practices in the classroom during the project, she did take the initiative of inquiring further into effective teaching practices to inform her own approaches. Dafne elaborated, “One student [interviewee] in particular talked in detail about the kind of classroom setting that enabled her to learn.” The student compared a class entailing lectures, memorizing of material, and little critical thinking “to an education class that she has where everything was interactive. . . . And that just made her engage in everything. So it wasn’t kind of memorizing, but she thought about it and had conversations outside of the classroom.” Dafne decided to open up a conversation with the education faculty member to improve her own practices. Dafne described her motivation to meet with the education faculty member:

It’s a wonderful class. And I’m really committed to the interactive stuff. But sometimes it’s such a struggle to figure out how to do it. And so [I’m] just wanting to know more about the strategy . . . and the different tools that she has for doing that.

Though Dafne was a professor seasoned in social justice issues and interactions with students of color, she knew there was more to learn about reaching out to students in the classroom. Having learned from the other professor’s

distinctive and effective practices in the classroom, Dafne “appreciated the chance to expand my thinking about pedagogy.” These new conceptions would carry forward into her classroom practices.

Critically Conscious Advising Practices

At Mountainside College, faculty members paired with student advisees to guide and assist them in selecting courses, choosing majors, and working through other academic-related issues. Before participating in the project, faculty members viewed advising as a one-way procedural and bureaucratic conversation in which the student was simply given course information and made to sign an advising form. As a consequence of the student interviews, faculty participants became more cognizant of the relational side of advising, learning that students yearned for, and benefited from, more engaged advising sessions. As faculty developed a critically conscious perspective to support students of color, they began to reconceptualize their roles as advisors and their responsibility to be responsive to student advisees.

A simple but important lesson that faculty learned was to spend time engaging in more meaningful exchanges with student advisees. Barbara offered a suggestion: “A role we can play is to really pay attention and listen carefully to them [students] about what they are interested in and try to help generate that spark that would keep them [at Mountainside College].” Jack echoed this sentiment, “It occurred to me, also, that I should probably just spend more time talking, one on one, with my students, period.” Grace realized that other sources of information could not substitute for listening to students first-hand. She reflected, “You know, of course we read this [about students’ experiences]. You know, they give us articles and give us talks and things like that. But really, when you listen to somebody’s story, it brings it home.”

The stories that emerged from student interviews themselves shaped faculty members’ ideas about advising. Grace unequivocally expressed that “the way [interviewing students] affected my behavior most was as an advisor.” The stories Grace heard from students about varying faculty advising approaches greatly impacted Grace’s ideas about the role advisors should take with students. She explained the distinctions among the three students’ experiences with faculty advisors:

The one girl who seems to be sort of disaffected with [Mountainside College]—she said she just goes to her advisor to get a signature, whereas, the other two actually got advice. Now, when I say advice, I mean somebody sat down with them and talked about all kinds of things.

The two students who had a richer advising experience appeared to be more engaged and connected with Mountainside College. “After the first interview, [I learned that] my personal involvement is a big component about how

they feel about school, how they feel about themselves,” said Grace. After realizing the variations among advising experiences and their impact on students, Grace reflected, “I think that’s the one practical repercussion from these [interviews] that has really made me see that the advisor has a pretty powerful role.”

In the midst of the Faculty-Student Interview Project, Grace made an effort to know students during advising sessions and attempted to follow up with advisees via email. “I bent over backwards to keep in touch with [a Latina advisee] and the African American student. They are two great relationships.” In becoming more responsive to the needs and interests of her advisees, Grace encountered a common barrier reported by students in the Faculty-Student Interview Project—financial aid and work study. This concern was especially true for an African American advisee. Grace stated, “I am doing a much better job, I think, of advising him than I would have otherwise. . . . Because I’m trying to keep on top of his work study commitment and I never would have thought of that before.” By the end of the project, Grace said she went “to bat for [her advisees] a bit more—make phone calls, write letters, etc.—when they need a bit of advocacy.” As Grace became more critically conscious of the ways in which students of color experienced barriers when interacting with faculty members, she said, “It just made me realize, one, okay, I have to take this advising seriously. And, two, I should take it even more seriously with students of color.”

Jack also found himself thinking about the interview process in relation to student advisement. Jack began to think about how the student interviews created a structured conversation that facilitated his learning about under-represented students and could, in turn, be used to help him be a more effective advisor. He stated, “I thought maybe I should do this with my advisees. I should just sit down and spend forty-five minutes talking through a set of questions like these.” Before the Mountainside Interview Project, Jack took for granted the impact he had on students as an advisor. Toward the end of the project, Jack believed that integrating a more structured conversation into advising might be useful for all faculty and students. He reflected:

I would like to have something like this built into the way that [Mountainside College’s] faculty and students interact with each other . . . It’s not just having a, you know, dinner with your advisees, or an opening reception for the first year of minority students. It is, in fact, a long-term relationship, even if an infrequent one. I would love to see that happen for all minority students.

In his reflections, Jack not only imagined ways he could personally make changes to his advising approaches, but he also tried to conceive of ways to make changes at an institutional level.

A Deepened Commitment to Institutional Change

By the end of the project, Grace, Barbara, Matt, and Dafne met with the provost to advocate for the institutionalization of the project. Jack had already left for a sabbatical, though he enthusiastically offered his feedback on the report being presented to the provost at that meeting. In the final meeting with Mountainside College's provost, the faculty participants offered compelling reasons to require academic departments to interview students of color. The Faculty-Student Interview Project had changed their ideas about students, deepened their commitment to redressing inequitable outcomes, and inspired them to make more responsive decisions to support students of color. They proposed interviewing students and meeting as a collaborative inquiry group by academic department to similarly raise awareness about the needs and interests of students of color among the college's faculty on a broader scale.

DISCUSSION

What can be learned from the narratives of change that emerged in this study? The elements identified by Landreman et al. (2007) and Polkinghorne (2004)—exposure to diverse others, critical incidents, self-reflection, and an “aha” moment—can be structured into a professional development format to successfully mobilize change in consciousness and action among faculty members. The study contributes knowledge about the role these elements play in a professional development context. First, sustained and meaningful interactions with students of color were rewarding and enlightening to all faculty participants. This was especially true for Grace and Barbara who had not previously participated in equity and diversity initiatives, suggesting that they probably had not had many purposeful discussions about race with diverse others. These lost opportunities hamper faculty members' ability to experience critical incidents and “aha” moments.

Through direct interactions with students of color, faculty members learned about students in a more personal, relational, and enriching manner. Noddings (2005), an expert on the ethic of care, states, “Knowledge gained in relation is more powerful and reliable than that gained through second- and third-hand reports” (p. 122). Matt, Jack, Grace, Dafne, and Barbara reported establishing important bonds with their student-interviewees and offered their continued support long after the project ended. Grace reported, “I truly value my contacts with them. When I see and speak with them on campus, I feel a bond—it's like a secret handshake. The process made me feel more like a member of the community, and not just a member of the faculty.”

Second, faculty members experienced critical incidents as they learned about student experiences of discrimination, racism, and marginalization.

These are the unfortunate realities for many students of color who were often at the breaking point of academic success. Experiencing critical incidents depended on faculty members' willingness to openly talk about issues of race with student interviewees and other project participants during collaborative inquiry meetings and their willingness to do so. Grace and Barbara initially shied away from discussing race with both their student interviewees and also during collaborative inquiry meetings. What encouraged them to move beyond this hesitancy over the course of the project?

The field notes from collaborative inquiry meetings suggest that other project participants who openly discussed race and equity issues modeled the courage to speak up about race. Matt, for instance, presented equity-minded explanations about why students experienced inequitable educational outcomes by acknowledging social-historical forces that shaped the experiences of students and by proposing that the institution was responsible for redressing inequities. In the first collaborative inquiry meeting, he suggested to the project participants that they needed to uncover issues of "power and authority" when interviewing students. Later, in the fourth inquiry meeting, Matt challenged Barbara after she mentioned that she was "struggling" with the idea of not having a student control group as part of the project's methodology. Barbara essentially questioned that race played a role in student interviewees' experiences and felt that their stories could have "come from the fundamentalist Christians on campus," for example. Barbara contended: "Part of what we have to tease out is what [in] the experience of these students is because they are students of color." Matt intervened by asking Barbara: "Would you agree that there are some instances here—like [the student] says, 'I'm Black. When I speak, I have to speak polished English'—that it really is race-based?" In presenting such ideas, Matt modeled critically conscious ideas and perspectives for other faculty participants to consider.

This third element of reflection was important in the change process. Findings from this project suggest that dialogic exchanges during inquiry meetings depend on the participation of already critically conscious faculty participants like Matt and Dafne in encouraging others to question their assumptions about students of color. As students teetered on a seesaw of educational success on one end and failure on the other, faculty participants collaboratively made sense of the ways in which their own beliefs and actions added weight to either end of that seesaw.

The collective experiences of exposure to diverse others, critical incidents, and reflection led faculty members to a deeper awareness of the local contexts, structures, and practices in which minority students' experiences took shape. As depicted in the narratives of change, this newfound awareness became the "aha" moments for faculty members to develop critical consciousness. They came to a more critical understanding of student outcomes, one that concerns the depth and magnitude of the ways in which experiences—of stereotype,

for example—impact student outcomes locally and more broadly. In turn, faculty members developed a deepened and, in some cases, new awareness about their responsibility to become more responsive in their practices with students of color.

Although the changes in practices that faculty members reported were not always large in scale, smaller changes—such as making more eye contact with students of color in the classroom—were still significant. John (2003) aptly depicts the impact that such nuanced behaviors can have on underserved students. When faculty members adjust “behavioral nuances, from eye contact to other forms of body language, . . . for the astute student in search of fair and humane treatment, little goes unnoticed” (p. 380). Moreover, faculty members understood that becoming responsive in how they relate to students of color had larger implications for social change that went beyond supporting students in the immediate context. In other words, every time faculty members successfully supported one student of color, they effectively compelled change toward redressing inequitable educational outcomes on a broader scale.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As a form of professional development, the Faculty-Student Interview Project is markedly different from the typical annual one-day workshop or retreat held at many institutions. Professional development for faculty members seldom encourages engaging processes such as sustained experimentation, inquiry, and dialogue about practice (Shulman, 2004). In addition, because of pedagogical isolation and lack of discipline in documenting and reflecting on one’s own practice, educators oftentimes fail to incorporate their learning into their daily practices (Shulman, 2004). Institutions should consider designing sustained inquiry opportunities in which dialogue and reflective activities are structured to create conditions—such as critical incidents and “aha” moments—that can foster a critical consciousness among faculty members.

Faculty members’ initial unwillingness to engage in dialogues about race with student interviewees and with other project members could have created a barrier to change in consciousness. While faculty members enthusiastically volunteered to participate in the project, Bok (2006) contends that they typically can be resistant to researching and raising questions about existing teaching practices and, in this case, about how race plays a role in shaping the pedagogical environment. I argue that this resistance can result in missed opportunities to support students who need it most. Institutions must develop thoughtful approaches to encourage faculty members to engage in self-reflexive activities in an effort to better understand the effect of race on student experiences and inequities in academic outcomes.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In this study, I examined a single implementation of the collaborative inquiry project. Thus, the data I collected do not address the extent to which the project could be as successful at any other postsecondary institution. Should a similar collaborative inquiry project be implemented at another campus, an evaluation of the project could provide more information about the processes and contexts that can facilitate a successful faculty development experience on a much larger scale.

Though the driving force behind the Faculty-Student Interview Project was to redress inequitable educational outcomes by providing a space for faculty members to learn about students, develop critical consciousness, and reconsider their practices, I did not measure the extent to which minority students taught and advised by faculty participants in the project actually improved their academic performance. In the end, does a project like this actually have an impact on the academic performance of African American and Latino students? Researchers interested in issues of social justice and in redressing inequitable educational outcomes for students of color should investigate further the educational progress of students who come into direct contact, through teaching and advising, with faculty members who participate in such an awareness-building project.

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