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THE MISSING CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

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Leadership

The United States is diversifying rapidly. It is estimated that people of color will comprise more than 57% of the U.S. population by the year 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Accordingly, few would deny that institutions of higher education have a responsibility not only to produce graduates who are prepared to lead but also to foster the development of leaders who are equipped to serve increasingly diverse cultural communities throughout the nation and world.

Absence of Culture in Leadership Development Discourse

Despite the realities discussed above, cultural diversity is often not meaningfully included in conversations about leadership development. Researchers have offered several leadership models to help educators better understand and facilitate leadership development (e.g., Higher Education Research Institute, 1996; Posner, 2004). These models have made significant contributions to student leadership programming and understanding of leadership

development. However, these frameworks do not explicitly address how the cultural diversity that today's college students bring to campus might shape leadership development programs and processes.

The absence of culturally diverse perspectives in leadership discourse is problematic for at least two reasons. First, research suggests that programs that are relevant to students' cultural backgrounds and identities are more likely to strengthen those individuals' connections to their institutions, increase their engagement in learning activities, and maximize their likelihood of success (Museus, 2014). Thus, it could be argued that leadership programs must engage their students' diverse cultural backgrounds and identities if they seek to maximize positive outcomes among them. This point is especially important for educators serving students from minoritized ethnic populations whose voices are often not reflected in mainstream curricula and programs (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012).

Second, common sense suggests that individuals who hope to be leaders and effectively advocate for their own cultural communities must exhibit an understanding of them. Therefore, campuses aiming to equip students to be effective leaders for their own communities must offer those students opportunities to develop general leadership skills (e.g., collaboration skills, civic responsibility, ability to work toward common goals) and learn how such skills can be used for the betterment of their communities. To facilitate the latter, leadership programs must provide students with opportunities to understand how history and culture shape experiences within their communities, gain an awareness of the most urgent social and political problems affecting these communities, and acquire skills that equip students to address these problems. Indeed, scholars have documented the value of programs that infuse cultural relevance into (co)curricula to prepare diverse students to advance their own communities (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Museus, Lam, Huang, Kem, & Tan, 2012).

Toward a More Culturally Relevant Leadership Development Discourse

The Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) Model of College Success can be used to demonstrate how the concept of cultural relevance can contribute to leadership discourse that reflects the diversity of today's college students (Museus, 2014, p. 210). The CECE Model is based on three decades of research and outlines the nine elements of environments that allow diverse populations to thrive in college by facilitating a variety of positive outcomes, such as learning and development. The indicators can be divided into two subcategories of cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness. Herein, we focus on the five indicators of cultural relevance, which describe the ways that environments (e.g., curricula, spaces, programs, and practices) can be constructed so that they are relevant to the cultural backgrounds and communities of diverse students:

- **Cultural familiarity** is the extent to which college students have opportunities to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers who share and understand their backgrounds and experiences.
- **Culturally relevant knowledge** refers to opportunities for students to learn and exchange knowledge about their own cultures and cultural communities.
- **Cultural community service** refers to the extent to which students have opportunities to engage in projects and activities to give back to and positively transform their cultural communities.
- **Meaningful cross-cultural engagement** involves students' access to opportunities to engage with peers from diverse backgrounds in interactions that are focused on solving real-world social and political problems.
- **Culturally validating environments** refer to environments that validate students' cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities.

Although not common in mainstream programming, examples of how such culturally relevant concepts are embedded in leadership opportunities do exist on college campuses:

- The Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs (http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/black_cultural_center/about_us_services.shtml) at the University of Southern California provides several culturally relevant programs that can serve as critical leadership opportunities. These include programs that allow students to spend time at partner historically Black colleges and universities to explore diversity within the Black community, participate in think tanks to analyze issues in the Black community from various disciplinary perspectives, and engage in several community service and outreach opportunities to positively impact their communities.
- Supported by the American Indian College Fund, several tribal colleges and universities around the nation provide Native American women's leadership development programs (http://www.collegefund.org/students_and_alumni/content/leadership) that offer students opportunities to be validated as critical members of their local cultural communities, strengthen their connections with leaders within their communities, learn about problems within their communities, and learn and apply leadership skills to address these problems.

- Student affairs professionals also organize multicampus culturally relevant leadership initiatives. College educators who realized the need for culturally relevant leadership programming for Pacific Islander students created Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC) (http://empoweredpi.org)—a coalition of professionals across multiple postsecondary institutions—to address this need. EPIC offers a weeklong leadership program that includes workshops on Pacific Islander history, networking sessions with Pacific Islander professionals and community elders, and spaces for students to share their own personal narratives and reflect on their developmental journeys.

While such leadership opportunities are invaluable, they are often isolated in ethnic enclaves and have the capacity to serve a limited number of students on college campuses. Consequently, many students from minoritized ethnic backgrounds never have the opportunity to access curricula or programs that intentionally underscore the relevance of their communities (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Thus, it is also critical for student affairs educators constructing mainstream leadership programs to consider how they might make their own programs more culturally relevant if they seek to maximize the engagement and nurture the passions of future leaders for a diverse society.

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