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The motivation of students of color for pursuing leadership positions at faith-based universities

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Abstract

As faith-based universities increasingly diversify the culture of their student body, student leadership roles also diversify. While there is literature on barriers and challenges students of color experience in these roles, there is little to help understand their motivation in pursuing these roles. Using conversations, interviews, and surveys this research was conducted to start such a conversation. The researchers' goal was to go beyond conventional wisdom and begin gathering data reflecting the experiences of students of color on our campuses. While compensation is definitely a motivation, this research suggested there might be a variety of reasons to pursue these roles.

Preamble

Recently, a prominent speaker affirmed until there is broad research done in all areas of diversity within Christian higher education, there will be challenges in establishing momentum for institutional commitments to culturally diversify Christian campuses. This was reminiscent of the challenge heard elsewhere for the need to record the stories of students of color in general (Bradley, 2015). Until there is data tied to experiences of students of color at faith-based institutions, diversity initiatives will gain limited traction—an admonition affirming this particular project.

Goal

The researchers' goal was to go beyond assumptions and conventional wisdom to gain a more nuanced view of the motivation of students of color for pursuing leadership positions on their Christian campuses. Considering the many values articulated by evangelical schools, the researchers assumed students would not encounter hostility in pursuing these roles. However, statements of students were anecdotally concerning. They felt vulnerable in the scrutiny and risks of candidacy for pursuing these roles (Bleikamp et al., 2014). Even with peers noting these concerns, the authors still had students of color pursuing leadership positions, which begs the following questions, which serve as the basis of the current research:

- Why?
- What sparked their imagination?
- What motivated them?
- What kept them tenaciously pursuing these roles?

Theoretical Lens

There is an abundance of material on leadership and college students; however, there is little material on the motivation of college students pursuing leadership roles. Much of the existing data is anecdotal or based on observations formed by professionals from personal experience. Students pursue leadership roles for a variety of reasons, leaving researchers to discern motivation by inferences and anecdotes in the literature base. While there is a growing body of literature on the student of color experience at university, research tends to focus on access, retention, and support.

The current study evaluates experiences of students of color within leadership paradigms. The researchers started with Greenleaf's servant

leadership model (1977). Though focused externally in terms of relationships and service to others, Greenleaf's model was still heavily individualistic. Greenleaf chose to look at models that had a broader relational element. At risk of being fragmented, the researchers borrowed elements of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Astin & Astin, 2006), and two particular elements of the Critical Race Theory (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). These elements, discussed below, allowed the researchers to place their data into perspective, draw conclusions, and discuss implications.

The Higher Education Research Institute began to develop the Social Change Model (SCM) in 1994 (Astin & Astin, 1996). Designed specifically with college students in mind, SCM states leadership involves "collaborative relationships that lead to collective action grounded in shared values of people who work together to effect positive change" (Astin & Astin, 1996, p. 16). SCM identified eight values and activities a leader pursues in order to effect change. While all had some relevance, three values stood out as fundamental to the current research.

The SCM asserts, "Leadership is a socially responsible, values-based, collaborative process that is inclusive and accessible to all people, and that community engagement is powerful pedagogy to learn leadership" (Astin & Astin, 1996, p. 23). Compared to leadership perspectives focusing on the individual, SCM provided a collaborative focus. The model suggests leadership is shaped by relationships, in contrast to leadership definitions leaning heavily on personal attributes (p. 23). The values most pertinent to the current research include: consciousness of self, understood as an awareness and development of one's talents, beliefs, and values; citizenship, recognition that all people involved in a given enterprise are interdependent and affected by one another's efforts; change, understood as the ability to transform the world for the benefit of all. While these values seem personal, SCM suggests they develop in individuals as those individuals relate to others. Using the three values as a paradigm through which to view the current study, the values emerged frequently in the data.

Including elements of Critical Race Theory (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) adds to the theoretical values-based framework, particularly in discussing motivations of student leaders from minority communities. Critical Race Theory suggests that racism is embedded in American society (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 6-7). Such thinking assumes racism is often unrecognized, thus requiring movement beyond personal and

relational interactions in favor of challenging systems that intentionally or unintentionally promote racial biases.

Two aspects of the Critical Race Theory were important to include in the research. First, the idea of counter-narrative suggests students of color have a stories that stand out in contrast to the prevailing stories of majority students (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Often, students of color represent narratives different from that considered normative or typical within society or even a campus's culture. This theory also emphasizes the need for and power of experiential knowledge (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). When tied together, story and experience lead to a recognition of the power of experience and the personal nature of stories.

Initially, the researcher sought to understand whether the researcher's own systems had biases or racial barriers. However, as the research progressed and developed, the researchers decided to utilize a different approach. While maintaining an interest in and concern for barriers, the research aimed at understanding why students of color seek leadership positions and roles. Overall, the aim of the study was to gain such understanding in order to encourage peers and colleagues in how they might effectively recruit students of color into campus leadership positions.

Methodology

The researchers built a simple survey and originally approached five private, faith-based institutions associated with the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) located on the West Coast of the United States. While identifying as evangelical Christian institutions, four did not require students to sign a statement of faith. The researchers contacted 12 professional staff members at these institutions, explained the study's aims, and requested that the survey be forwarded on to current and past student leaders of color. The researchers asked staff member only to send the surveys to alumni from the previous three years. Three participating institutions helped generate 51 survey responses and reflections. Due to the survey being submitted in the busy first month of the academic year, many staff members were hesitant to participate at that time.

After several months of low responses, the researchers determined the sampling was too small. Therefore, snowball, or convenience sampling, was utilized to gather more participants. The study's rationale, goal, and request was placed on three networks—both professional and social—

asking peers to forward the survey to students meeting the criteria which generated another 65 responses from 12 additional CCCU-affiliated institutions across the United States. Responses from three other non-faith-based institutions were also included in the sampling. Because these respondents acknowledged their own personal faiths, the researchers included their responses. In total data was gathered from 116 survey responses.

The following spring, face-to-face focus groups were conducted with 12 current students of color to determine why they had or had not pursued leadership positions. The additional data generated not only affirmed survey findings, but also provided reflections that were more expansive.

We began coding the results in terms of themes, and disaggregated the data in terms of both gender and ethnicity. The disaggregation in terms of ethnicity became complex because students were provided with the option of listing multiple backgrounds. A large percentage (32.76%) of students responding (38) listed themselves as being multiracial.

Results

The data did not provide clearly defined explanations to survey and interview questions. Student answers revealed many nuances and exceptions. However, the researchers noticed several trends.

In the initial scrutiny of the data, trends coinciding with SCM values, as discussed above, emerged. Considering “consciousness of self,” the first trend recognized the simple reality that many leadership roles provided some level of compensation. Compensation was significant for all students, particularly students with lower family incomes. The second trend, related to “citizenship,” was the desire, particularly for first generation students of color, to be models for their home communities (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyam, 2012). Many respondents desired to benefit their families and communities and to provide more options for other members of their communities to also attend college. Often, these student leaders would see themselves as pioneers or trailblazers for their younger siblings or others in their community. The third trend was desiring to be agents of change. Many leadership roles include opportunities to participate in shaping and influencing campus cultures and values. Consequently, leadership roles foster in students of color increased confidence in their abilities to effect positive change in a campus community as a result of their unique voices and perspectives.

Of 116 respondents, 75 identified as women, 29 reported as men, and 12 chose not to report their gender. Additionally, 38 respondents identified themselves as being multiracial or having multiple ethnic backgrounds with 25 identifying as black or African-American, 30 as Pacific Islander or Asian, and 18 as Hispanic or Latino. Other backgrounds, including International, Native American, and Caucasian, were present among the respondents, but were counted among those who identified as multi-racial.

Consciousness of self

One element of the values SCM lists is what the authors call “consciousness of self” (Astin & Astin, 1993, p 23) and what practitioners describe as an awareness of one’s self. Consciousness of self involves a discernment of personal motivation, values, strengths, and needs and is discerned through observations from others and self. Sometimes such consciousness is fostered through the affirmation of others who observe leadership characteristics in students. At other times, self-perception and understanding is part of a more natural trajectory students move along in terms of their own growth, competency, and awareness of needs.

A fairly significant part of higher education involves encouraging students to increase their understandings of why they do things in certain ways, discern their needs, and understand how the world around them impacts them. At one level, consciousness of self involves identifying basic provisions such as financial needs, or complex needs such as understanding one’s own significance. In surveys and interviews, many students identified the utilitarian benefit of the compensation tied to formal leadership roles. While some thought compensation might bring status, others noted the altruistic possibilities of becoming an example and model for others. One African-American woman wrote, “I saw there was a missing element in leadership roles on campus that I possessed.” Many students saw value in developing their own leadership skills. Still others discerned the benefit of support provided by the relationships found in their leadership teams.

Many students were encouraged by parents, faculty, mentors, and peers to pursue different roles due to benefits to both those individual students as well as others and. One Latina student noted, “I had a great mentor . . . who encouraged me to take part in roles most students were intimidated by.” Multiple students explained how advisers and mentors observed traits and characteristics in students’ lives and anticipated the benefits of

a particular role for students' maturation and growth. Moreover, some students were able to identify the need for development of skills and challenges for themselves. One Pacific Islander student observed, "I don't want my collegiate experience to be one dimensional. I have the capacity to serve." Another student noted, "I wanted to get the most out of my college experience, find a place where I felt like I was part/ belonged."

Interestingly, some students expressed feeling that their pursuits of different leadership roles were responses to God's direction. One student explained,

I became interested because I think God was pointing me in that direction. I actually wanted nothing to do with [that diversity program] because I have had negative experiences with some of its members in the past, so to lead it was not in my agenda. It was God's agenda, and I am so blessed to serve in this position.

This sense of divine direction was reported by numerous students. One student brought clarity to understanding this divine direction as he explained that students' desires seemed to stem from aspirations to participate in something much "bigger" than themselves.

Citizenship

The altruistic element of leadership responsibility exists at all levels of formal leadership, particularly if a leadership position involves leading within a community. The surveyed students of color had a comprehensive understanding of their influence even before they entered these roles. They were often aware of the impact they could have, and did have, on their community at home and on campus. Commitment to this responsibility and a desire to serve often compelled them to pursue different leadership roles. The notion of community as a value was often observed as an important reason for pursuing leadership roles.

One Latina respondent noted she "wanted to be a voice for my student body to the administration." Another wrote, "I wanted an inclusive place where students of color and non-color could have community." An Asian student described the compelling nature of her responsibility: "When my friend who is Asian American decided not to apply because she did not fit the mold, I felt like it was my duty to apply because students need to have diverse leaders." One Latino student identified the impact his leadership role had on him personally: "After completing a very

challenging first semester and receiving support from my RD and RA; I felt encouraged to give back what had been given to me.” One African international student acknowledged the depth of personal responsibility that some students experience as a compulsion for pursuing leadership explaining, “I realized the importance of being a leader, which is to bring along someone [along] as far as you have come. I saw [leadership] as how Christ showed the way to the kingdom; it was an obligation for me to do that.”

Change

Many students who responded to the survey had a clear understanding of what they wanted to achieve by their participation in student leadership. Some wanted to be change agents on their campuses while others desired to be voices for those in their communities who were unable to advocate for themselves. A Latina sophomore stated, “I believe this campus needs a leader to spread the word.” Their reflections illustrated a desire to influence their peers in positive ways. One biracial woman noted, “I experienced hardship my first couple of years as student of color. I wanted to bring change to the school to improve the experiences of other students.” Another Latina student observed, “I wanted to be a voice, change for those who feel they cannot speak up.” Still, another similarly noted, “I wanted to make sure that everyone felt heard. In addition, more than anything I want to ensure that people feel welcomed, loved, and encouraged throughout college.”

Students saw their impact as much broader than just meeting their own needs and interests. One student articulated, “I wanted to be part of something bigger than me while at college. Being in leadership has allowed me to be a part of a team, be challenged, and have a voice.” An Asian male observed, “I feel that I have been blessed with the opportunities to speak up and the ability to cause positive change within the institution of my university.” Meanwhile, students also noted their presence was significant for other students of color on their campus. One student expresses this in saying, “I applied to be an RA because I was told the university expected cookie cutters RAs (white, extraverted) and I did not fit the mold. I wanted to be a different face for students of color to be able to go to.” Some of students even discerned the value granted to their campus as a result of having culturally diverse personalities on student leadership teams.

Counter-story/experiences

Students of color noted the reality of attending a predominantly white institution and the many associated complexities and challenges. They further noted how their experiences and heritages often formed stories different than those experienced by most of their peers and larger campus community. The common narrative among their peers was not reflective of their own experiences or the experiences of other students of color. One of the primary motivations for students of color in pursuing leadership roles was to represent and to be able to tell their unique stories and experiences. Students expressed desires to help “shift perspectives”, to “educate” peers, and to have an “impact” on campus. Participants wanted to help empower “others to be proud of who they are.” One Asian student realized she “didn’t fit the mold,” but “wanted to be a different face for students of color” to come to for assistance. Respondents intuitively longed to provide additional narratives on their campus.

Discussion

Some of these trends are not particularly surprising for practitioners. Many of these reflections reinforced anecdotal experiences and observations many practitioners have been privileged to share with students. Students of color are very conscious of the importance of their role in making it easier for those coming after them, sensing their own pioneering role for classmates, future students, or family members and home community. Moreover, participants tended to demonstrate gratitude for those of the same cultural heritage having gone before them in pioneering roles. Respondents frequently cited a sense of being lead by God seemingly congruent with their own senses of significance and their community’s values.

While students often acknowledged compensation as part of an initial interest in pursuing their roles, their perceptions changed as they realized the significance and impact of their positions on themselves and on the lives of others. They began to note the “change agent” role they played on their campuses. While students were often able to identify individuals who noted something in their character or challenged them to consider taking a leadership role, participants occasionally were prompted to consider leadership roles by advertisements, marketing, or information meetings. However, most students reported that they were encouraged to consider these roles by a peer, faculty, family member, or

other person in their life. Respondents noted these men and women had taken time to observe aspects of their lives and stories that would benefit others. These observers also noted the benefits of leadership challenges and experiences for the student.

Implications

Inherently, practitioners—and many others—value having diverse student leadership teams for many reasons. One of the most significant reasons is the benefit of diversity of thought, background, and experience in tackling problems or concerns that arise on a campus. Having diverse perspectives allow for more creative and robust responses that may not be considered with a homogenous team.

In terms of recruiting students of color, the reality of the felt needs of compensation needs to be validated by recruiters. However, the motivation of the respondents were more complex and varied. In understanding the motivation of students in pursuing leadership roles, recruiters will be benefitted by inquiring deeply about motivations and hopes. Neglecting to ask further questions related to motivation risks limiting the student candidate and potentially diminishing the depth provided by a diverse team.

Further Research

Recruitment is the first step in a student's formal leadership journey. It is helpful to know both the motivations as well as barriers to these roles. Research on student leaders of color at CCCU schools who encounter systemic and personal barriers was minimal, though Young (2015) does address general barriers and experiences.

Anecdotal reflections abound and much conventional wisdom holds that research tied to specific aspects of the experiences of students of color—gender, geography, specific ethnicity—would prove valuable for practitioners. However, research on student leadership has mostly centered on leadership roles within athletics and fraternities (Cuyjet, 2006; Sutton & Terrell, 1997). Because populations of students of color on campuses are not homogeneous samplings, deeper and more specific studies would be welcome. Assessing the specific demographics of gender, faith, geography, and economics would provide more nuanced understandings concerning student motivations.

Beyond demographic and logistical practices, understanding how others influence imagination and inspire students to consider leadership

roles would be extremely valuable. Understanding such influence may be related to the notion of “counter-story.” More data concerning the importance of understanding a student’s personal story, particularly when that story is different from the perceived common majority-culture narrative, might benefit educators.

Conclusion

Returning to the initial reflection about the need for recording the multiple experiences of students of color, the hope is that this article might serve as a primer for continued development of a neglected part of the field. Practice needs a foundation upon which to act, a foundation the current study is helping to build with the hope of encouraging further reflection and conversation on how best to support and inspire all students. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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