Setting the Stage for Character Development through Culturally Specific Advising Practices

Toby Jenkins, Penn State University and Clayton Walton, Rutgers University

Abstract

In an ever increasing global society, today's students are challenged at much greater levels to broaden their repertoire of understanding and conceptualization of both themselves and the world at large. With this personal evolution, comes the necessity for student affairs practitioners/advisors to provide increased opportunities for cultural development that will contribute to the overall personal, ethical, and civic development of students. This article offers forth a model for cultural practice to serve the personal development of culturally diverse student communities.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the evolution of the traditional age college student is influenced by multiple mediums. Whether it is politics, popular culture, advances in technology, or the expectations of an increasingly competitive job market, today's students are challenged to broaden their repertoire of understanding and conceptualization of both themselves and the world at large. With this personal evolution, comes the necessity for student affairs practitioners/advisors to become critically aware of the culturally specific needs of our students and how increased opportunities for cultural development can contribute to the overall personal, ethical, and civic development of students.

The preeminent question is how do we serve an ever-changing and diverse student community? This question is particularly salient for student affairs practitioners, administrators, and faculty who work with college students in a co-curricular capacity or that educate future student affairs practitioners. In their 2000 ACE Report on the *Benefits of Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Education,* Kenji Hakuta and Jeffrey Milem define structural diversity as the numerical representation of students from different racial/ethnic groups in the student body and diversity interactions as student exchanges with racially diverse people, ideas, and information. The increases in both of these levels of diversity must also be accompanied by a similar increase in the education of higher education professionals. We cannot assume that student development practices that traditionally worked with majority populations will have the same result with diverse student populations, nor can we assume that simply hiring professionals from culturally specific communities is the answer.

Toby S. Jenkins is the Director of the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Penn State University, and Clayton L. Walton is the Assistant Dean of Student Life & Leadership at Rutgers University, Newark Campus. Jenkins and Walton are both graduates of the College Student Personnel program at the University of Maryland College Park.

This article will explore the role of the student affairs practitioner as a co-curricular cultural educator and offer forth a model of cultural program development that practitioners can use in establishing a cultural programming framework. This model was initially created and utilized during our tenure at a university Black Cultural Center [thus the programmatic examples focus on students of the African Diaspora]. However, we have also used its framework in our broader service to multicultural communities. The model provides a viable structure that can be adopted to implement university cultural programming for both individual cultural populations and multiple cultural communities of students. With a strong portfolio of culturally focused identity, leadership, and social experiences, institutions of higher learning can ultimately promote and contribute to the cultural leadership development of today's student population. That is, we can make inroads in growing student cultural agency, cultural identity, and more importantly cultural connectedness and service to underrepresented communities as social change agents (Karenga, 1966; UCLA, 1996; Finkesltein, 1998).

The Tri-Sector Cultural Practitioners Model (TCP) provides a multi-layered approach to creating institutional programming that focuses on challenging students to explore and to develop the multiple facets of their identity and in turn understand how their culture impacts their personal and professional character. The model identifies three sectors that may be critical in the holistic development of the student leader of color. These sectors include the Cultural Education Development Sector [focusing on cultural history and identity], the Culturally Focused Personal Development Sector [focusing on cultural leadership and civic engagement], and the Cultural Engagement Sector [focusing on culturally reflective forms of social and artistic expression].

The advisor or practitioner is the centerpiece of the model as a programmer and is connected to all three of the sectors keeping them in constant motion. The advisor must continually draw from these sectors to keep pace with the constant evolution of the student community. We consider an "advisor" to be any professional, faculty, or staff member who serves as a co-curricular resource to a student organization or whose primary university charge is to serve multicultural communities outside of the classroom and within the student activities, multicultural affairs, cultural center, or leadership development arena. The most critical aspect of the model is that it encourages an active role on the part of the institution and the advisor as an institutional agent. In our practice, we have used the TCP model to develop multiple programs within one department. The model, in essence, urges advisors to transcend their "advising" role to become cultural educators outside of the classroom. Our students of color need more than our advice and opinions. Students need our sharing of cultural knowledge and our expertise in the development of their cultural leadership. Considering the significance of the role of the advisor, it is vital that practitioners increase they're cultural knowledge base and understanding of the critical orientation of culture in the value systems of some students of color. This approach to advising encourages the practitioner to motivate the student to actively engage their own character development through programs that leverage the very important role that culture may play in their lives. In sharing both the model's programming conceptual framework as well as examples of campus programs that we have implemented utilizing this model, we hope to provide a viable and adoptable framework for student affairs cultural practitioners.

The Tri-Sector Cultural Practitioners Model
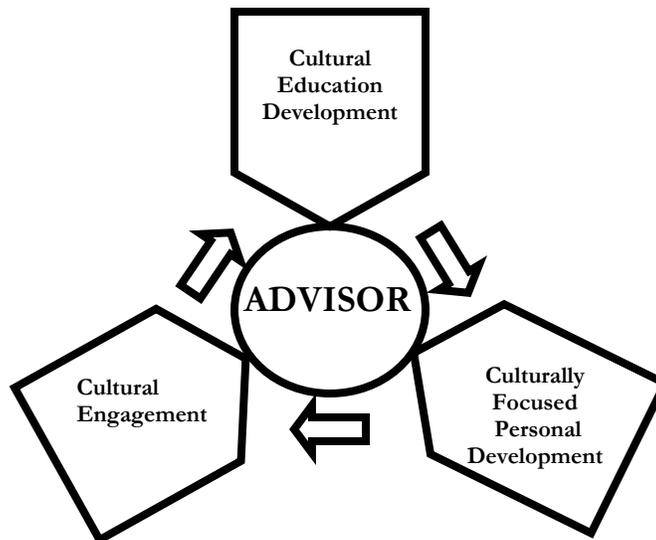
The Model

Sector I: Cultural Education Development

It is first important to understand and acknowledge intra-cultural diversity, particularly when considering service to individual cultural communities. For example, in our past service specifically to black students, we respect and acknowledge the fact that the black student community is broad and includes several cultures within the African Diaspora [people of African descent].   Coming from a continent with over fifty countries and hundreds of cultures and ethnicities, African students are multicultural. The West Indian community includes cultures from various islands throughout the Caribbean and West Indies, all with different cultures. And the African American community includes a population with both different and similar lived experiences from the above mentioned black populations. The black student community is a multicultural community. Diversity is present throughout all cultural Diasporas and programs need to be constructed that allow students to learn the vast cultural, historical, and social differences within any Diaspora community [African, Latino, Asian, European, Middle Eastern, etc.] as well as to learn more deeply about in learning about their cultural selves. Students' cultural perceptions and values are primary tenets that allow students to examine and to conceptualize their connections to the campus community. Therefore, opportunities that allow for an immersion in and education on their culture can be a meaningful college learning experience.

Below are only two examples of several programs that we created for students that illustrate what this cultural educational immersion could look like:

Cultural Journeys:

"I cried when we visited the plantation. It was so real. I'm an African American studies major and I have read a lot about black history. But the plantation was so real."

Each year students had an opportunity to participate in an educational immersion of their cultural or racial history. Journeys have included a program entitled "Get on the Bus," which was a cultural immersion trip to South Carolina. This program was constructed to provide additional opportunities for students to learn about Black history in the South, particularly as it relates to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Students participated in a two day program that allowed them to experience life on the plantation, participate in a Gullah Tour of the city, and engage in dinner discussions on Black history and culture with educators within the city of Charleston, SC.

Another journey took place as part of an Alternative Spring Break Collaborative program with Hillel. Jewish and Black students went on a sponsored trip to Tennessee to provide a cross cultural immersion program designed to educate students on Jewish and Black history in the South. The program focused not only on providing students historical learning through museum visits, local history tours, synagogue visits, and discussions, but also to introduce them to contemporary issues affecting both communities through daily community service activities.

Local Cultural History Tours: Culture in the University's Home & Surrounding City

African-centered Tours of Washington, DC were constructed to provide undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff an opportunity to learn local history from an African context. The tours were facilitated by the Institute of Kharmic Guidance and focused on the African influences in the layout and design of the District of Columbia. This local focus served to make students feel more historically connected to their surrounding communities. The educational and personal growth outcomes of these programs have been overwhelming. We have found that we have been able to uniquely provide an academic supplement for students outside of the classroom as our trips make real what they are taught in their courses.

Sector II: Cultural Engagement

The Juke Joint was created in the tradition of the "Juke Joint" social venues created for and by African Americans during the American period of social segregation. This program was designed to encourage Black students who continue to experience isolation at predominately white institutions a cultural safe space to network, socialize, and express their creative and literary talents. The primary component of the social program was an open mike poetry hour, which was accompanied by a DJ and free food. What made this program not simply a social occasion, but also a learning experience was the incorporation of historical facts, pictures of Juke Joints, and historical information on African American entertainment. The goal of the program was not only to provide students of color with a present day social outlet, but to also link their present need for social inclusiveness to a very similar history of social exclusion outside of the institution. This program has been an overwhelming success with several hundred students attending and highly rating the series. What is important about our approach to social programs is the deep role that cultural stimulation plays in the design of the program. Culture is considered in all aspects of the program including the catering, décor, music, and content/focus of the program concept.

Sector III: Culturally Focused Personal Development

For many of our students, their co-curricular experiences play a significant role in their ability to further engage their classroom learning. Theory to practice application is a skill that most of our students will need as they move into the work force. The program calendar of our colleges and universities offer students an opportunities to freely test and apply some of their classroom education to topics that they are connected to and passionate about. Leadership training experiences serve as a perfect example. Opportunities for students to understand how their cultural experiences and values impact their leadership practice are critical to the healthy

leadership development of students. Additionally, learning strong leadership practice through studying leaders that physically reflect and culturally embody the values of culturally specific students is also essential. We have created multiple culturally based leadership development programs under this sector; here we highlight a few particularly successful programs.

Cultural Leadership Institute

"I was surprised to see how many African-American students I did not know. I have developed long-lasting relationships with most of them. I learned about their organizations and even got involved…it has helped my adjustment to this campus."

"The interaction with this group [leadership series], and learning about them, and learning to love them, was the best thing about [the program]. "

The Cultural Leadership Institute is a semester long culturally based leadership experience that is theoretically based on the leadership and cultural theories of the University of California's Higher Education Institute's Social Change Model of Leadership (1996), Karenga's Principles of Kwanzaa (1966), Finkelstein's approach to evaluating cultural education programs (1998), and the leadership praxis and theories of several leaders of color. Through sessions participants are exposed to leadership models and practices of past leaders and are provided opportunities to explore current challenges for college student leaders, current leadership needs of various cultural communities and participate in broad culturally focused leadership experiences outside of the campus community. The institute critically examines the theoretical dimensions and practical applications of culturally based leadership. It is comprised of five core modules: Culture's Influence on Leadership, Servant Leadership, Cultural Value Oriented Organizational Management, College Connectedness, Cultural leaders on Campus & Beyond. The participation outcomes of this program have been outstanding: the series grew from a small group of about 10 students in its first year to 58 only two years later. The leadership growth outcomes have resulted in the presidents of almost every major student organization of color participating in the series prior to their acquiring such a leadership role. From honors organizations to cultural organizations, from professional societies to Greek-lettered organizations, student government members and students not belonging to an organization, the leadership series attracts a variety of student leaders.

The Joint Service Project

This project united students interested in performing service in culturally specific communities to engage in a holistic civic and cultural learning experience. Students not only engaged in service, but also participated in workshops that taught the historical, political, and social issues affecting the communities in which they were serving. They also brainstormed on long-range strategies for how they can affect community change. As part of the Joint Service Project, students were also provided an opportunity to participate in both one-time service activities as well as ongoing programs. The Lost Rites Retreat was an ongoing pipeline outreach program pairing local middle school girls with undergraduate women for a weekend of cultural exploration. The program focused on introducing the concepts of ritual, myth, symbolism, and African culture to youth. The overall goal of the Joint Service Project is to groom culturally tied and communally connected leaders in our undergraduate students.

Campus Conversations

"Campus Conversations is an important program because it has allowed me to meet important people on campus that I never knew. I feel important when I attend the meetings. I like that its set up like a boardroom and it's serious. I feel like I'm making a change on campus."

This series was constructed to provide students an opportunity to meet and to develop relationships with administrative leaders on campus [President, Provost, Vice President of Student Affairs, Student Affairs Directors] as well as to practice their leadership skills. Facilitated by a professional staff member, the program allowed student leaders to be informed of new and changing campus diversity initiatives and resources as well as an opportunity to provide administrators feedback and suggestions on the needs of students of color. Campus Conversations was an essential university-driven program that proactively involved students in the institutional change process which is their cultural leadership legacy.

Conclusion: It Takes a Village

As many of us are aware, it really does take a village to contribute to the success of a college student—campus community members from academic colleges, student activities offices, cultural centers, residence life, health and wellness centers, career centers, parents, and the list goes on. The campus is a physical village, what we must continue to grow is our multicultural spirit in educational practice. Remembering the spirit of community education present in the cultural histories of so many populations is a valuable act of Sankofa [to look back] as it reminds us that in these communities there was a time when pupils were more than just students—they were the children of the community. And educators were more than just practitioners they were cultural servants to the community. It will be the merging of the past to complement the present, the incorporation of cultural values into concepts of leadership and organizational development, and the integration of cultural agency into student affairs programs that provide a fresh approach to professional practice.

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