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Students Experience Diversity Through A Multicultural Leadership Development Project

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Abstract

This manuscript presents learning experiences of 30 college students, 13 from a historically black university and 17 from a traditionally white university in neighboring states who participated in a two-year multicultural leadership development program designed to prepare students to assume leadership positions in a multicultural society. All students were enrolled in agricultural or human sciences programs at the two universities. Four joint meetings between the two groups helped facilitate cultural awareness and interaction among the students, while monthly campus-based meetings provided reflection and critical thinking around diversity and leadership issues.

Analysis of student growth along several social dimensions suggests that the program resulted in modest improvements in social skills and diversity awareness of the students. Multicultural interaction is enhanced by the ability to distinguish between one's personal view and the views of others, and to discuss delicate issues with sensitivity and candor. Reflective reasoning, critical thinking skills, and various experiential learning activities were major vehicles used to advance social skills and diversity awareness.

Introduction

For more than a century America was the "Melting Pot" of the world. Between 1860 and 1920 more than 35 million immigrants passed through various ports of entry into the United States. Today, descendants of these 35 million immigrants account for almost 40% of the country's population (New York Times, 1996). In some instances, it took less than a generation for immigrant families to find their way into mainstream America, gradually accepting a common core of ideas and ways of being peculiar to the new environment. This acculturation process gave rise to the "Melting Pot" ideology.

Although Anglo groups comprised the vast majority of the American population during the 18th and 19th centuries, America was also home to Asian immigrants, African slaves, Native Americans, and migrant domestic workers from Mexico and Central America, who, in most instances, were denied entry into mainstream America (Takaki, 1994).

Between 1990 and 2030, the white population of the United States is projected to grow by 25%, while other ethnic populations are projected to increase between 68% to 187% (U. S. Census, 1990). Henry (1990) predicts that by the year 2056, the average U. S. citizen will trace their descent to almost any region other than northern Europe.

Realizing the impact of population change on the country's future, academicians are challenged to explore effective strategies for educating the population for the next century. Pedagogy, curricula, and classroom-management

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systems are of particular concern if future education systems will meet the needs of a highly diverse population. However, the literature is woefully lacking in studies that explore underlying differences in outlook, values and social skills of various student populations as a basis for designing appropriate curricula, instructional strategies, and learning environments.

Proponents of curriculum modification promote global awareness, the development of communication skills (Goff, 1992), experiential learning (Smith and Ingoldsby, 1992; Coye, 1997), and problem-based learning (Barrows, 1986; Cole, 1990) as appropriate vehicles for improving student outcomes. Although these approaches are important, the full array of challenges facing the educational system in building bridges of understanding between diverse groups is much broader. Specifically, how does the system respond when the cultural values and traditions of various ethnic groups are in conflict with mainstream American perspectives and views? How can the exploration of conflicting perspectives contribute to student learning? Are there mainstream perspectives and views that conflict with core value and principles of the diversity movement? And, how can school administrators and faculty recognize these conflicts? The experiences of 30 college students who participated in a Multicultural Leadership Development Program (MLD) provide some insights.

Within this context, this manuscript serves four major purposes: to describe the MLD project, to share student experiences and growth, to develop awareness of diversity issues, and to explore those issues and their potential to influence the educational environment of the future. It is not intended to provide an empirical assessment of the learning outcomes of the program. Nor is it intended to imply cause and effect relationships.

The Multicultural Leadership Development Program

Funded by a United States Department of Agriculture capacity building grant, MLD was a multicultural, leadership development program for students enrolled in the School of Agriculture, Fisheries and Human Sciences at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB), and the Colleges of Human Environmental Sciences and Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at the Oklahoma State University (OSU).

Selection of Students

Thirty students (13 from UAPB and 17 from OSU) were selected to participate in the two-year program through a competitive application process based on the following criteria: (1) minimum 2.5 accumulative GPA, (2) demonstrated leadership experiences, (3) current enrollment as a freshman or sophomore majoring in one of the agricultural or human sciences, (4) demonstrated community service experiences, and (5) perception of the role leaders must play in a multicultural society.

Fifteen of the OSU students were Anglo-American, one was Native American, and one was Latino. Twelve of the UAPB students were African-American and one was Anglo-American. The average age of the students was 19.3 years and the group included six males and 25 females. Although the project involved only two institutions, the 30 students were residents of eight states.

Project Activities

Four joint meetings between students were held during the two-year program. Conference sites were carefully selected and program content focused on the unique resources and strengths of each site in meeting expectations of the session. For each joint meeting, students from different universities and cultural backgrounds lived together to further expand their experiences. The general theme for each conference follows:

Conference 1: Historical perspective of cultural roots (May, 1995), Dallas, Texas

Conference 2: Leadership development and perspectives on Anglo- and Native-American cultures (September, 1995), Stillwater, Oklahoma

Conference 3: Hispanic family and cultural values (January, 1996), San Antonio, Texas

Conference 4: Expression of culture through art and exploring the African-American ethos (August, 1996), Pine Bluff, Arkansas and Memphis, Tennessee

Experiential learning activities included simulation games, a ropes challenge course, community service projects, open discussions, journaling, video and face-to-face lectures, and dramatic role-playing. Each student was also required to implement an individual service project to promote leadership development, increase understanding of diversity and to expand the benefits of the MLD program to their wider campus community. Other project activities included monthly discussion sessions at each institution. Overstreet, et al. (1998) detailed specific activities and qualitative assessments of the learning experiences.

Methods

MLD was designed to fit an exploratory experiential learning mode. Nevertheless, its impact on student outlook and behavior was measured along several dimensions. Assessments included written and video documentation of student experi-

ences, activities and growth; and pre- and post-assessments of their attitudes and perceptions.

Pre- and post-test assessments of student performance on three inventories (Diversity Awareness Profile, the Social Skills Inventory, and the Problem Solving Inventory) provided an indication of change in students' perspective during the MLD program. Because of the exploratory nature of the program, specific cause/effect relationships are not implied, nor are findings being generalized beyond the 30 participating students.

Diversity Awareness Profile

The Diversity Awareness Profile (DAP) assisted individuals in understanding ways in which they discriminate against, judge or isolate others. Based on responses to 40 items, individuals are classified either as naive offenders (0-39), perpetrators (40-79), avoiders (80-119), change agents (120-139), or fighters (140-160), (Grote, 1991). Scores were derived from a 40-question survey. Each question was scored on a four-point scale with the lowest score (1) representing responses that showed little or no diversity awareness. The highest score (4) represented responses showing a high level of diversity awareness. Individual scores were calculated by summing the responses to the 40 questions for each of the students.

Social Skills Inventory

The Social Skills Inventory (SSI) is a 90-item instrument designed as a short, but comprehensive, self-reporting assessment of basic social communication skills. The SSI is an extension of the Affective Communication Test (ACT) developed by Friedman, et al. (1980). The ACT is a measure of nonverbal expressiveness. The SSI, by contrast, assesses global social skills (in both nonverbal and verbal areas) in specific domains (Riggio, 1989).

The SSI consists of six scales that measure social communication skills on two levels – emotional and social. Expressivity, sensitivity, and control are evaluated in each. Expressivity refers to the skill with which individuals communicate; sensitivity refers to the skill with which they interpret the communication messages of others; and control refers to the skill with which they are able to regulate the communication process in a social situation.

Problem Solving Inventory

The Problem Solving Inventory (PSI) assesses an individual's perceptions of his or her own problem-solving behaviors and attitudes (Heppner, 1988). Problem solving, considered synonymous with coping, is defined as any goal-directed sequence of cognitive operations employed for the purpose of adapting to internal/external demands or challenges (Sternberg & Salter, 1984). The term "problem" refers to personal problems (i.e., depression, inability to get along with friends, choosing a vocation, deciding whether or not to attend college, or other situations which require choosing among alternatives). The PSI reflects the individual's awareness and evaluation of his or her problem-solving abilities or style and thus provides a global appraisal of that individual as a problem solver. The PSI assesses one's perception of problem-solving capabilities; it does not assess actual problem-solving skills.

The PSI is a 35-item instrument consisting of three scales derived from factor analysis: Problem-Solving Confidence, Approach-Avoidance Style, and Personal Control. In addition to the three scale scores, a Total PSI score is used as a single, general index of problem-solving appraisal. Unlike the other two inventories which are scored in ascending order (the higher the score, the higher the desired trait), low scores on the PSI indicate a positive self-appraisal of problem solving abilities. A brief definition of each sub-scale on the SSI and the PSI inventories and an explanation of the scores on the DAP inventory are presented in Figure 1.

Results and Discussion

Yarbrough (1992) suggested that "one of the greatest contributions higher education can make in support of diversity and multiculturalism is the ability to discuss issues with openness, candor and reason." From this perspective, the assessment of students' growth in social skills, problem solving and diversity awareness clarifies the value of MLD-type programs and experiences.

Differences in mean scores of OSU and UAPB students were noted on both the pre- and post- tests for all assessment instruments. At pre-test. OSU students scored higher on the Social Skills and Diversity awareness instruments, and UAPB students showed a higher self appraisal of problem solving skills, lower scores on the two problem solving scales. (Table 1).

Social Skills Inventory

In terms of overall loss/gain between the administration of the pre- and post-tests, the two groups of students were fairly consistent in overall improvement in total social skills (+5.0 for OSU students and +6.2 for UAPB Students); however, differences were noted in loss/gain in various sub-scales of the Social Skills Inventory. The most noticeable gain for OSU students was a 5.7 increase on the SSSS subscale scale indicating an increase in their ability to interpret the verbal communication of others. UAPB students showed the greatest gain (+6.6) on the SSES subscale.

(SSI) Social Skills Inventory	(DAP) Diversity Awareness Spectrum	(PSI) Problem Solving Inventory
1. **Emotional Expressivity (EE)** measures the skill with which individuals communicate nonverbally. Persons highly expressive emotionally and are able to arouse or inspire others from their ability to transmit feelings.	1. **Naive Offenders** do not even realize they exhibit biased behavior and are not aware that their own behavior offends others. They frequently accept stereotypical statements as facts and may even unknowingly commit illegal acts.	1. **Problem-Solving Confidence** is defined as self-assurance while engaging in problem-solving activities. Low scores on this scale indicate that individuals believe and trust in their own problem-solving abilities.
2. **Emotional Sensitivity (ES)** measures skill in receiving and interpreting the nonverbal communications of others. Persons who are highly sensitive emotionally may be susceptible to becoming emotionally aroused by others, empathically experiencing their emotional states.	2. **Perpetuators** are aware of their biases and prejudices and aware that their behavior offends others. Nevertheless, they continue with derogatory jokes, comments, and actions and act as though laws or company guidelines do not apply to them.	2. **Approach Avoidance Style** is defined as a general tendency of individuals to approach or avoid problem-solving activities.
3. **Emotional Control (EC)** measures the ability to control and regulate emotional and nonverbal displays . Emotional Control includes the ability to convey particular emotions on cue and to hide feelings behind an assumed "mask".	3. **Avoiders** are aware of biases in themselves and others. They are working on their own prejudices, but they are reluctant to address inappropriate behavior by others. The try to play it safe by saying nothing and are some-times thought of as "silent supporters".	3. **Personal Control** indicates the extent to which individuals believe that they are in control of their emotions and behavior while solving problems.
4. **Social Expressivity (SE)** assesses skill in verbal expression and the ability to engage others in social discourse. High scorers are verbally fluent and are skilled in initiating and guiding conservations. Social expressive persons with low SC scores may speak spontaneously without monitoring the content of what they are saying.	4. **Change Agents** are not only aware of biases in themselves and others, but they also realize the negative impacts of acting on those biases. The are willing to take action when they encounter inappropriate words or behaviors. They try to may a difference when there is clear evidence of discrimination or bias.	4. **The PSI Total Score** is the sum of the three scale scores. Overall low scores on the Total PSI score and for the PSI scales represent *positive* appraisals of problem-solving abilities.
5. **Social Sensitivity (SS)** assesses ability to interpret the verbal communication of others. Extremely high scores on this scale in conjunction with moderate to low scores on SE and SC, may indicate self-consciousness that may inhibit participation in social interaction.	5. **Fighters** are constantly aware of any behavior that seems to be biased or prejudiced and they confront the offenders strongly. They have played an important role in helping minorities move ahead, but they pay a price. They may get a reputation of "fighting," and after a while people may begin to discount what they are saying and even avoid them.	
6. **Social Control (SC)** assesses skill in role-playing and social self-presentation. Persons whose SC skills are well developed are adept, tactful, and self-confident in social situations.		
7. **The Total Score** indicates the global level of social skill or competence. Generally, the higher the score the higher the level of social skill development. However, possessing a balance of the various social abilities is as important as the amount or degree of each social skill dimension.		

Figure 1. Explanation of Subscales on the SSI, DAP and PSI Inventories

Table 1. Distribution of OSU and UAPB student mean scores on pre- and post-tests on social skills, diversity awareness and problem-solving inventories

Scales	OSU					UAPB				
	Pre-test		Post-test		Difference	Pre-test		Post-test		Difference
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$
Social Skills (Scoring Range 15-75)										
SSEE	46.8	7.6	50.3	7.6	+3.5	47.2	8.5	43.9	5.9	-3.3
SSES	52.8	5.7	54.4	8.0	+1.4	45.5	15.0	52.1	6.7	+6.6
SSEC	42.4	9.8	40.8	8.7	-1.6	45.3	8.4	48.6	8.7	-3.3
SSSE	51.4	13.4	50.5	12.4	-0.9	47.3	12.9	49.0	10.6	+1.7
SSSS	50.2	11.2	55.9	12.7	+5.7	44.5	10.5	45.0	11.4	+0.5
SSSC	59.7	7.6	56.4	13.4	-3.3	56.3	9.8	58.3	7.2	+2.0
SSTOT	303.3	25.5	308.3	19.9	+5.0	290.5	29.3	296.7	18.4	+6.2
Diversity Awareness (Scoring Range 40-160)	128.5	16.2	135.8	9.6	7.3	114.0	17.3	131.3	14.8	17.3
Problem Solving (Scoring Range 5-96)										
PROBCON (11-66)	23.7	6.0	27.5	9.7	+3.8	22.7	6.9	21.5	6.8	-1.2
PROBAA (16-96)	41.4	13.0	41.0	12.7	-0.4	40.2	12.6	35.1	8.3	-5.1
PROBPC (5-30)	16.1	5.1	17.6	6.1	+1.5	22.2	10.7	15.8	4.9	-6.4
RROBTOT (32-192)	81.1	20.9	85.8	26.1	+4.7	85.0	25.7	72.4	17.1	-12.6

The SSES score is a measure of skill in receiving and interpreting nonverbal communication. Although both groups of students experienced the greatest gain in skills related to communication, the OSU students showed the greatest growth in social sensitivity (ability to interpret verbal cues), while the UAPB students showed greatest growth in emotional sensitivity (the ability to receive and interpret non-verbal messages).

Diversity Awareness Profile

Both groups experienced considerable change in diversity awareness (+7.3 for OSU and +17.3 UAPB). The mean score of the OSU group was in the "change agent" category at the time both tests (pre- and post-assessment) were administered. The mean of the UAPB students was in the "avoiders category" on the pre-test but moved to the "change agent" level on the post-test.

Problem Solving Index

Noticeable differences in the two groups of students were found in comparing the loss/gain in mean scores between the pre- and post- tests on the problem solving index. With one exception, means of the OSU students increased (indicating negative growth on problem solving sub-scales and total) while the means of the UAPB students declined (showing growth) in each sub-scale and total. On the PSI subscales, loss/gain figures for OSU students showed a slight improvement in approach-avoidance style (-0.4) but an erosion of problem solving confidence (+3.8) and personal control (+1.5). These variables measured the extent to which individuals believe and trust in their own problem-solving abilities and the extent to which they believe they are in control of their emotions and behavior while solving problems. Subscale scores of UAPB students showed noticeable improvement on the overall index (PROBTOT = -12.6) with most of the growth occurring in approach-avoidance style (-5.1) and personal control (-6.4). These gains indicate more willingness to approach problem solving activities as well as the belief that they are in control of their emotions and behavior while engaged in problem-solving activities. Literature regarding conflict resolution and social discourse has generally documented the importance of meeting problems head-on. Low scores on the index suggest a greater tendency to approach problem-solving and a lesser tendency to avoid conflict. Although the gain for OSU students was very slight, both groups of students made positive gains on this variable.

Differences in loss/gain on the problem solving confidence subscale raise other questions. As structured, the expectations for problem solving confidence (self-assurance while engaged in problem solving) are consistent with core values of masculinity and individualism; these, in effect, contradict core values of the diversity movement - acceptance and tolerance of differences and a concomitant willingness to acknowledge different perspectives and ways of being. The increase in the scores of OSU students (which is interpreted as a loss in problem solving skills) may be an indication of improved tolerance for differences and more openness to perspectives other than their own. Dependence on self-thoughts and personal views as a problem-solving skill, like other acceptable standards for behavior and social discourse that have been more acceptable historically, may require redefinition in keeping with America's changing social order and multicultural perspectives.

An initial challenge to the project revealed in campus-based meetings was conflicting assumptions made by each group of students toward the other group. OSU students felt they were being blamed for past inequities and injustices experienced by African-Americans. UAPB students perceived that the OSU students minimized the impact of social isolation and injustices and did not acknowledge the continuing frustrations among African-Americans. These basic perspectives surfaced many times in open and private discussions among students and were often the focus of student journal entries.

The project was not intended to provide a rigorous quantitative assessment of students' growth. However, qualitative assessments of the program, as well as results of the pre- and post-tests, indicate that some changes did occur in the participating students. Additionally, there was a marked reduction in the standard deviation on pre- and post-test means for both groups of students on total social skills, diversity awareness and total problem-solving skills.

Conclusions and Implications

Educational systems of the 21st Century must address the many challenges created by changing demographics and population dynamics. Is the educational system prepared to address the differing perspectives, backgrounds and collective reasonings that diverse populations bring to a single classroom or educational experience? Are university faculty and administrators willing and prepared to handle open and candid discussions between and among diverse groups of students? How effective are efforts such as the Multicultural Leadership Development program in preparing future generations of Americans? And are such programs a valid use of educational resources? The MLD project did not provide definitive answers to such queries, but did provide valuable insights as Project Directors and participants struggled to explore diversity issues with candor and reason.

Both qualitative and quantitative evaluations of the MLD program document the importance of experiential

learning activities and reflective thinking in promoting student growth and development. The multiplicity of activities, discussions, and encounters served to move students through a series of changes from reflection and disconfirmation to evaluation and reassessment.

Perhaps the single most important impact of the project was the erosion of stereotypes which allowed students an opportunity to view America's history from another cultural perspective. It is not known whether the two groups of students truly empathized with the other or not. But true empathy may not be necessary for groups to live and function in society. Perhaps respect, acknowledgment of different points of view, and a commitment to an open social system will build bridges of understanding among diverse people. From student testimonies and journal entries, the MLD project created the type of open discourse and reflective thinking that help individuals see beyond their personal perspective and world view.

The MLD experience suggested that defining an appropriate mix of activities, allowing time for reflection and growth, and reducing anxieties caused by uncertainty should be given careful thought in planning instructional activities designed to prepare students for multicultural experiences. Using experiences such as those in the MLD program, students will be armed with the skills necessary to function in a diverse environment. As one student indicated, "I know I can't change the world, but based on this experience, I can make a difference!"

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