Collaboration Rebuilds a Sense of Belonging for Students of Color Using the Sanctuary Model® as a Framework

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Introduction

In this article we describe the power of collaboration among faculty, staff, and students to respond to a challenging and stressful event in a midsize, rural, predominantly white institution (PWI) in the north east. The institution has 16.6% of underrepresented minorities. When faced with an extreme budget crisis, our campus experienced the abrupt loss of the Multicultural Affairs coordinator in the summer of 2013, which indicated a loss of the Office of Multicultural Affairs as well, as resources were realigned. Students reacted strongly to the sudden loss and to the lack of communication about the decision. A group of concerned faculty and staff realized that what students were experiencing was trauma. The Center for Social Justice describes trauma as experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people's ability to cope, leaving them powerless.

The loss of a space for connectedness and a mentor who provided a critical bridge between their world and the larger university community affected their emotional well-being, academic progress, identity, and a sense of belonging.

It became apparent to the researchers that the issues that emerged for students resembled those of trauma. One of the researchers was trained to use The Sanctuary Model®, which provided a helpful framework for the parallel process of rebuilding the organization and the individuals. Unfortunately, little is written in the literature about how a "collective disturbance" can be traumatic outside of a clinical setting, thus the application of the Sanctuary Model® in higher education might not be considered. Yet, the model aligns so well with the Frederick Douglass principles, which were our guiding principles for working toward positive change. While the Sanctuary Model® would call for the organization to transform, we used the model for reflection purposes to help us to make meaning of the experiences and use the existing university units to meet the needs of students, faculty, and staff.

The Sanctuary Model® is designed to foster an atmosphere of safety and promote positive change. We recognized that the dilemma we faced was to create an emotionally safe process that allowed students and others to share their experiences and perceptions. The Sanctuary Model® enabled us to promote this vision while simultaneously building a supportive community culture. Although this is a trauma-based model that is specifically designed to address trauma and abuse in clinical settings, the principles are relevant to the broad experiences that many can relate to when dealing with loss, safety, and parallel process.

The Sanctuary Model®

The Sanctuary Model® is an "evidence-supported, trauma-informed, evolving, whole system organizational change process that is comprised of…a clear set of interconnected values" ("The Sanctuary Components," 2014, p. 1).The model challenges an institution to heal itself while simultaneously healing those who have experienced trauma. The parallel process informs constituents about the complexity of the trauma experience and provides a framework for change that leads to sustainable well-being for the individual and institution. We decided to start the process of healing by using the existing units of support on campus. Several units on campus are committed to honoring and nurturing a welcoming climate for all campus community members, yet to date had not coordinated their efforts. As we brought together the units to respond to the immediate need for a safe and welcoming climate, each unit was strengthened in the process. This enabled each of the units to function to their highest capacity, and it also created a new synergy among the organizations. As a result, each member of the organizations found renewed energy for the important work they had hoped to do by joining the organization.

The university is a member of The Frederick Douglass Collaborative, which is a partnership in a State System of Higher Education that seeks to create and nurture academic communities that will support the growth, development, and success of all students and faculty members in the system. It promotes academic excellence, civic engagement, and the understanding and appreciation of human diversity. The seven commitments of the Sanctuary Model®: nonviolence, emotional intelligence, social learning, open communication, democracy, social responsibility, and growth and change ("The Sanctuary Model Components," 2014), are also aligned with the Frederick Douglass principles, such as social learning, open communication, democracy, and social responsibility, which were used as a guiding framework during the transformative process. It was critical to understand the minority/majority relationships that the students may have experienced prior to matriculating on the campus and how they might be internalizing events that were rapidly occurring on campus. While the work began as a response to a deeply

disappointing experience, what emerged was a renewed commitment to respecting and preserving the richness diversity brings to a campus and a structure of sustainable collaboration among campus organizations with similar missions.

Strength in Diversity

The literature acknowledges that having diversity initiatives has positive advantages over homogenous environments (Cox, Lobel, & MacLeod, 1991) and that higher education has the "profound ability to increase social and economic capital and serve as a tool of social mobility" (Stulberg & Weinberg, 2011, p. 107). Organizations that are committed to diversity strategies and initiatives may benefit most from being able to attract and retain high-performing and high- quality staff and students. The greater the diversity of community within an institution, the more likely its constituents will feel enabled to establish social and intellectual membership. A critical mass of minority groups helps to establish ongoing supportive communities that reproduce and re-structure themselves over time. Additionally, these organizations are better suited to serve a diverse consumer population that then enhances its broad base of talents generated by a gender-and ethnic-diverse organization (Morgan, 1989). Organizations with these attributes are found to be better problem-solvers, better at developing shared meanings, and are more likely to be better able to navigate complex dynamics. Lastly, these institutions tend to be more organizationally flexible, and are better able to adapt to change (Rotter & O'Connell, 1982).

Healthy organizations acknowledge that there are differences in race, gender, and other cultural dynamics that create a unique pluralistic organization. Schein (1992) defined organizational culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions wherein the group learns to solve its problems by external adaptation and internal integration" (p. 12).

Organizations function best when administrators are sensitive and responsive to the needs of such an organization. When these needs are not acknowledged, organizations experience a significant amount of turmoil, such as a loss in productivity and effectiveness. Having an awareness of the cultural differences in the work environment, and the skills needed to manage those differences, are two essential components that reflect the focus and performance of the organization. Thus, diversity as a strategy promotes the development of new skills and practices that encourage interdependent, collaborative, and effective cross-cultural relationships. Organizations that demonstrate such a culture display congruent behaviors, attitudes, norms, and policies that come together within the organization and enable it to work effectively within and across cross-cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Cultural competence, therefore, is demonstrated when the organization's employees are effective and feel emotionally safe without outside assistance.

Need for Continuous Support of Diverse Needs

When applied to the university setting, a PWI that does not acknowledge the differences in experiences nor provide the necessary support structures for safety for all of its members can be considered an unhealthy organization. Research suggests that students of color enrolled in a PWI "often experience a lack of support and an unwelcoming academic climate" and may hold more "nuanced perceptions of…discrimination" (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000, p. 180). A sense of belonging is critical to academic success, including persistence, and can be developed through intentional systemic support, such as social support, faculty support, established

institutional agents, and programs that contribute to academic efficacy (Edman & Brazil, 2007). Developing relational support systems is critical to the reduction of feelings of isolation, disconnection to one's personal experiences, and recognition of the unique challenges that students of color face on a PWI campus. Failure to provide necessary support may have devastating consequences for persistence and success rates for students of color, and, ultimately, for the economic stability of the nation. Research indicates that many underrepresented minority students continue to lag behind in completing their degrees. Dowd and Bensimon (2015) cited a 41% bachelor's degree completion rate for White students, a 28% rate for Latino students, and a 20% rate for African American students who started in a 4-year institution even in light of increased efforts by federal and state governments and national foundations to narrow these gaps. The authors suggest that in order to reduce the retention and completion gaps, institutions must approach the process from an equity-minded perspective. Witham, Malcom-Piqueux, Dowd, & Bensimon (2015) explained that

> [b]eing equity-minded thus involves being conscious of the ways that higher education—through its practices, policies, expectations, and unspoken rules—places responsibility for student success on the very groups that have experienced marginalization, rather than on the individuals and institutions whose responsibility it is to remedy that marginalization. (p. 2)

Institutional economic instability, however, can challenge the priorities and perspective of an institution. Eliminating positions not deemed "essential" based on the number of students perceived to be impacted by the services rendered is a common response.

The belief existed at our institution that the responsibilities of the coordinator would be reassigned to other positions within Student Affairs. The previous Multicultural Affairs coordinator was charged with developing programs, services, and strategic initiatives that focus on the outreach, retention, and integration of students of color and other underrepresented groups into the fabric of the university. Since the organization was in a state of financial crisis, the expected support systems did not emerge. While some of the programming continued through the efforts of other staff within Student Affairs, the students noted the lack of a designated gathering space, a visible welcome, and an advocate who understood the unique needs of a student of color in a PWI. The students were left feeling abandoned, adrift, and, in a sense, traumatized. Museus and Quaye (2009) noted that students who have high levels of distance between the dominant culture of the institution may need to connect with subcultures to successfully persist through college. Equally important is the need to establish connections with cultural agents that include informal peer groups and cultural centers (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

In the fall of 2013, following the summer in which the Multicultural Affairs Offices were closed, student leaders sought the assistance of the Office of Social Equity director who they saw as the logical individual to address their concerns. The Social Equity director immediately invited them to attend the already-scheduled Frederick Douglass Institute Town Hall meeting in October 2013, which included a panel of FD directors from the other state universities in the system. The panel was scheduled to share successful experiences and diversity resources on their campuses. In turn, students were given an opportunity to share their own experiences and ask questions of the panel and the university representatives. It was in that open dialogue that they revealed their concerns, which included the lack of a Multicultural Office and coordinator, the Black fraternities known as the "Divine

Nine," which promote camaraderie and academic excellence for their members and service to the communities they serve, and other opportunities to network and receive mentoring with both local and national organizations.

Response to the Challenge: Using the Sanctuary Model as a Framework for Change

As a result of the positive outcome of this event, leaders and co-leaders of the University Diversity Council Recruitment and Retention Committee, the Frederick Douglass Institute, the Equity Scorecard Evidence Team, and student leaders started to meet regularly to coordinate efforts and continue the momentum gained at the Town Hall. Grier-Reed, Madyun, and Buckley, (2008) cited several themes in a pilot study in which faculty and staff of color met regularly with Black students. They noted that students acknowledged such a place provided "(a) a safe space, (b) connectedness, (c) validation, (d) resilience, (e) intellectual stimulation, (f) empowerment, and (g) a home base." We decided to begin our conversations over lunch in the fall 2013 semester immediately following the Town Hall to replicate the success of the lunch groups in this study. The students reported later that these lunches in which they could "relax," "not have to dress up," and just talk to professors and staff provided a safe space for conversation and problem-solving. They could share their pain, their concerns about attrition of students of color by the spring semester, and learn more about how university structures and protocol work, and could work, for them.

We realized that there were existing structures on campus designed to support the strategic goal of diversity; however, these structures were not working together to meet the real needs of students. Those who were aligned with the Frederick Douglass Institute felt compelled to address this gap between

services and need through a collaborative effort of all existing support structures using the Frederick Douglass principles. Upon reflection, it became evident that the Sanctuary Model® served as a framework for the work we had started and still needed to complete.

When an organization is unable to demonstrate cultural competence or, more extreme, demonstrates cultural incompetence, it may leave some of its members feeling the effects of trauma. The Sanctuary Model® (Bloom, 2010) is an organizational change model structured to address the effects of trauma. It is the belief that the impact of adversity, toxic stress, and trauma can disrupt the basic operating systems of organizations. If we see organizations as living systems that adapt to changing conditions in complex ways then we can easily extrapolate a trauma perspective to organizational change. In the Sanctuary Model®, the notion of parallel process explains the need for active and conscious development of a sense of safety.

When a person or group experiences a lack of safety and sense of loss, feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, hyper arousal, depression, confusion, and aggression may be simultaneously felt by the clients (students) and staff. As a parallel, the organization may become mission-less, crisis- driven, valueless, directionless, and punitive, leading to an authoritarian structure and organizational aggression (Bloom, 2010).

In order to heal the individuals, the organization must also be healed. Using the Sanctuary Model® to review our response and to develop a future plan is useful. As our university experienced the loss of a touchstone for students of color, faculty and staff felt the loss as well. While there were no indicators of impending violence, students did experience hyper arousal, fear, and distractibility from their studies. An energy built among the students when they did not feel that their frustrations were heard. The administration was

focused on budgetary concerns and assumed that existing structures would respond and provide the support created by the vacancy.

However, because the structures were not coordinated in their efforts, students could not develop an attachment to the university and therefore may have experienced marginalization within the university.

Faculty and staff, largely from professional programs and administrative offices, reacted by trying to provide a sense of safety and stability to reduce the effects of trauma. We assumed this sense of social responsibility as a result of our own previous experiences and our own professional ethics. This revealed a commitment to creating a climate of moral safety, which describes an institution that addresses responsibility, accountability, communication, regulation equity, trust, and the welfare of its constituents (http://www.sanctuarymodel.com). In all organizations there are actors and bystanders. When our colleagues, supervisors, and those we serve are experiencing dehumanizing acts, we have a responsibility to protect them, as well as ourselves and the organization (www.sanctuarymodel.com/commitments-social-responsibility, 2014). At times, those who make the most impact are those who act when they witness something dehumanizing even though they do not have official responsibility for addressing the issue. While our campus organizations did not have official responsibility, the moral imperative prevailed.

As a result of our informal lunch meetings, it became evident that we needed to submit a formal proposal to the president outlining concerns of under-represented students and possible solutions. As a coordinated team of students, staff, and faculty, we reviewed the data on retention of faculty, staff, and students of color over a 5-year period, which revealed a decline in enrollment for African American students and retention of African American faculty. Enrollment for Hispanic/

Latino students declined as well, though not to the same degree. We identified key support systems that could be strengthened or created to increase students' sense of belonging. As faculty and staff we modeled the importance of using existing structures, aligning our goals to the university's strategic plan, using a guiding framework, and preparing a plan thoroughly before presenting it to leadership. Together we developed recommendations, supported by literature and data, to present to the University Diversity Council (UDC). The UDC approved the report for submission to the president and we submitted the report in April, 2014.

Examining this process through the lens of the Sanctuary Model®, we acted as bystanders by noticing that something was amiss, we provided a space and time to actively listen to concerns and validated that we heard what they said in meetings (open communication), we interpreted the situation as one in which people needed help (emotional intelligence), assumed responsibility to offer that help (social responsibility), chose a reasoned form of help (nonviolence), used resistance within the boundaries of respect for authority (democracy), modeled the principles and framework for students that they needed to help themselves (social learning), and implemented the changes needed to move us toward a safe, empowered state by unifying existing structures and using the language of the listener (growth and change).

As a result of this combined effort, students report feeling safer, more empowered to advocate for their needs, and more focused on their academics. Simultaneously, each of the organizations has been strengthened, communication among campus groups committed to issues of diversity has improved, a space on campus for multicultural affairs has been secured, and administration has shown a receptiveness to recent suggestions proposed by the Frederick Douglass Institute for some institutional structures to support

diverse students, faculty, and staff. While we still advocate for a Multicultural Coordinator and Office, we have been able to institute a Commission on the Status of Faculty and Staff of Color, a Frederick Douglass Living/

Learning floor, and during the summer of 2014 approached the provost to request a concerted university effort to host a Frederick Douglass Scholar position during the summer of 2015.

Conclusion

This experience, although not unique, has taught us some lessons. The lessons come from the abandonment the students experienced when a critical support structure that serves a minority population in an institution with a majority of the dominant culture is removed. When a person or space that creates an atmosphere of support and emotional safety for students is removed, the loss felt can seem traumatic. However, we learned that if existing structures created to support the goals of diversity work together, they can support students in meaningful ways. Though an institution may respond to crises by increasing an authoritarian approach to decision-making, those at the grass roots level can counteract it by responding collaboratively. Once students found that their voices were heard by faculty and staff, they felt empowered and their own leadership emerged. Our students learned how to negotiate the protocols of higher education with the help of supportive faculty and staff. They knew that they would likely not be the beneficiaries of their efforts, but felt strongly that committing to this work for the next generation was their moral obligation. Our institution has only just begun to heal, but we are intentional about the parallel process of healing ourselves and the institution. We are in recovery and hope that by sharing this experience others will feel encouraged and empowered to start the recovery process as well.

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