Culturally Responsive Leadership
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As a professor of literacy instruction, I often incorporated tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy into my teaching, most specifically those touted by Geneva Gay in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2000). In her book, she stated that to teach culturally responsively, a teacher must be validating, comprehensive, empowering, multidimensional, transformative and emancipatory. Now as dean of the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa and as an African-American, my navigation into the community had to be intentional and discerning; therefore, I embraced what I knew best and embarked on leadership that was culturally responsive.

To engage with my faculty, I needed to focus on who they were as people and to validate their cultural knowledge, prior experiences and performance styles. I started my term as dean with the phrase, "In order to launch our future, we must honor our past." As an outsider to this culture, I needed a contextualized understanding of the people and the programs. I wanted to know how each person was invested, their ownership and history. I opened my doors to everyone and asked them to tell their stories.

In listening to the stories, I focused on the next tenet of culturally responsiveness, which was comprehensiveness. I wanted to know each person as they were connected to the college, but also any personal anecdotes. I, too, was free to tell my story as it paralleled events in their lives. I asked them to avoid discussing problems or concerns. I didn't want my first personal interface with my faculty to be one based on negativity or discussions about other colleagues. I did set up a mechanism for those problems to be vetted, but not at the initial encounter. An element of comprehensiveness is that a culture operates as an extended family -- assisting, supporting and encouraging each other. As I listened, I was discovering the cultural keepers and brokers of solutions and relationships that would support my understanding of, access to, inclusion in and navigation throughout the organizational culture.

Multidimensional means that a culture isn't finite, but intricately woven across copious aspects of the people involved in the culture. Although I was hitting the ground listening to my colleagues, I was aware that their stories connected to their programs, the curriculum, content, the climate, student-centered relationships, instructional techniques and performance assessments. I recognized that my faculty members were highly invested in the effectiveness of their teaching and the success of their students. I learned they were seeking a leader that was directional, not directive. They wanted a person who understood the complexity and multi-faceted aspects of teaching and learning, and who could lead without derailing their progress or intent with initiatives not steeped in their cultural values.
I learned my faculty already had a cohesive sense of mission. They wanted to empower their learners to educate, serve, and lead. The faculty had their own sense of empowerment, which was engaged motivation of perseverance and resilience in times of economic unrest and diminished capacity. This diminished capacity was based on early and phased retirements without sufficient replacements. As former educators, they knew how to maintain high quality and expectations during lean times. They wanted leadership that recognized their tenacity and determination, and paved a way for their continuous progress by removing barriers to effectiveness and productivity. I immediately championed their cause by re-appropriating funds for travel, research and graduate assistantship support. To embrace empowerment as a leader, I had to be invested in the support of all faculty through fiscal as well as affective means. The faculty had to recognize what they accomplished was viewed as valid and valued. My own empowerment statement I wanted them to embrace was that we needed "internal solidarity in order to generate better external positioning."

Transformative leadership that is culturally responsive doesn't rely on traditional practices; therefore, I had to share a clear, intentional, consistent message about our future. During my interview, my transformational goal was highlighted, "In order to serve all learners, we needed to produce candidates who are culturally, linguistically, developmentally and technologically confident and competent." Our white pre-service teachers could indeed become effective teachers of students of color if they were taught culturally responsive techniques that were imbedded across the curriculum and not just taught in an isolated multicultural course. I expressed that in order for us to teach these competencies, we must transform our practices and participate in professional development opportunities to enrich our knowledge, skills and dispositions. I'm willing to appropriate funds for professional development, curriculum mapping and strategic planning, provided they were willing to engage. Collectively, we realized that to transform our programs and instructional practices, we needed collaboration and not coercion. Currently, we are strategically planning for these transformational processes that will enhance our candidates’ abilities to become social critics who can make effective decisions that lead to personal, social, political, economic and educational action.

Emancipatory leadership allows for multiple perspectives. As a leader, I want to listen to all and honor these myriad voices by channeling what is conveyed into action. I think faculty feel emancipated when their voices are heard and they can identify demonstrative outcomes based on their input. I want my faculty to speak their truths, but to recognize there may be no single version of the truth, which is total and permanent because multiple lenses germinate multiple realities. Emancipatory leadership encourages clear and insightful thinking and the acceptance of knowledge as something to be continuously shared, critiqued, revised and renewed. For emancipation to promulgate, opportunities such as forums, symposia, blogs, round tables and other interactive dialogues are to be established as conduits to connectivity between ideas and actions.
As a culturally responsive leader, I must move beyond my mental board of directors and collaboratively embrace the cultural cadence of the people (faculty and students) who are the lifeblood of the college. I want to seek understanding constantly and consistently as I launch this inaugural year, which will lead to a sustained direction that embraces an intentional and discerning vision that doesn't outpace our capacity.