Preparing Pluralistic Urban Superintendents[*]

Tod Allen Farmer

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Abstract

The United Nations projects that the United States will have the highest migration rates of any nation in the world between 2000 and 2050. As American society becomes increasingly diverse, it is paramount that superintendent preparation programs produce pluralistic urban superintendents capable of synergistically energizing an increasingly heterogeneous work force. Inherent in this charge is the egalitarian approach to graduate program design. Pluralistic leadership development is premised upon egalitarian principles that transcend individual cultural norms. Graduate programs seeking to enhance pluralistic leadership development must permeate egalitarianism through the amalgamation of both acquiescence and expectation. Students must feel welcomed into the pluralistic professional learning community yet be simultaneously challenged by the high expectations of a progressive superintendent preparation program.

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1 Introduction

"The belief that all residents of our land can be socially and economically enhanced through education remains a strong national value" (Shom, 2006, p. 13). This belief is core to the development of pluralistic leadership. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2002) reported, "Over the past decade, public four-year institutions have become more racially and ethnically diverse at the student, faculty,

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and leadership levels" (p. 3). Great progress has been made in diversifying racial representation at various types of universities. However, Trower (2002) stated, "Despite 30 years of affirmative action, the full-time tenured professoriate, especially at research universities, is comprised almost entirely of white males" (p. 3). This dominant group is in a unique position to shape the graduate leadership program agenda and thereby meet the needs of an increasingly diverse society. Caldwell et. al. (2005) noted, "In a pluralistic society, members of the dominant group may be particularly limited in their understanding of other groups" (p. 2). As America becomes increasingly diverse, American educational institutions need to produce urban superintendents with expansive mindsets capable of maximizing the opportunities associated with a pluralistic society.

Cultural influences are an important factor when considering the development of pluralistic urban superintendents. Young and Snead (2005) shared, "Teachers and students alike are expanding monocultural views of history and everyday happenings including an increase in awareness with regard to heretofore-unconscious prejudices" (p. 2). This view also extends to the leadership ranks. Growe, Schmersahl, Perry, and Henry (2001) stated, "At the acceptance level, administrators acknowledge the origins of their own ethnocentric views and attain impartiality in their perception of other cultures" (p. 7). Personal conditioning and bias, coupled with firmly established institutional traditions, limit the development of pluralistic urban superintendents. Such factors inevitably impact the climate of an organization. Milem (2001) stated, "The climate of an organization can influence people's behavior, and thus may be linked to teaching practices" (p. 5). Changing societal demographics will further highlight the need to identify and modify such ethnocentric views that influence the behavior and teaching of the graduate professoriate.

2 Demographic Changes

As international migration to developed nations such as the United States continues to increase, pluralistic leadership will become increasingly important. According to a United Nations report on international migration (2004), North America surpassed Europe as the destination of choice among international migrants during the period from 1960-2000. More specifically, the report stated, "The United States, whose foreign-born population more than tripled—from 10 million in 1960 to 35 million in 2000—accounted for most of the regional increase" (p. 26). The United States remained the country of choice during this same period. In 1960, the United States had 9.7 million migrants accounting for 12.8 percent of total international migration. By 2000, those numbers had risen to 35 million migrants accounting for 20 percent of total international migrations. Historical data would suggest that the United States will continue becoming increasingly diverse. Decreasing American birth rates coupled with increasing international migration to the United States would further strengthen this position. The United Nations projects that the United States will have the highest migration rates of any nation in the world between 2000 and 2050. Nowhere will the trend of increasingly diverse communities be more evident than in the population centers served by urban school superintendents. Such demographic trends highlight the need for pluralistic leadership. Effective employment of the skills associated with pluralistic leadership will increase the likelihood of attaining organizational objectives in the increasingly diverse and complex society of the near future.

3 Responsive Graduate Programs

3.1 Program Admission

The process of developing pluralistic urban superintendents begins with graduate program admission. According to Browne-Ferrigno and Shoho (2002), "the reconceptualization of administrator preparation programs requires reconceptualization of selection criteria that ensure graduates [sic] able to meet the challenges and complexities of leading 21st century [sic] schools" (p. 17). Many programs include candidate interviews that are used to help identify the students who are most likely to effectively contribute and successfully complete the program. The Admission Policy Impact Study (1993), conducted by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, found that "predicting student success in not an exact science that may be reached exclusively by using quantifiable data" (p. 10).

Traditionally, measures such as grade point averages and standardized test scores have driven the admission process. Admission points are frequently established by using a numeric combination of these and other admission criteria. Micceri (2001) found no difference in what was defined as meaningful student outcomes, retention and graduation rates, for over 97 percent of the students directly above and below these points. Conley, Brownbridge, Dungan, and Hilgersom (1994) developed the Proficiency-based Admission Standards System (PASS) in an effort to improve higher education in Oregon. As part of PASS, prospective students were tested in six content and nine process proficiency areas. The Oregon State System of Higher Education (1996) established the program to "reduce remedial education needs and increase completion rates" (p. 1). An admission system needs to foster a sense of equity and fairness in graduate programs that leads to mutual respect between and among students and ultimately toward the development of pluralistic urban superintendents. The quality of graduate program outputs is directly impacted by the quality of graduate program inputs.

3.2 Program Design and Curriculum Content

"Honest dialogue about the significance of race in this country must be central to and infused in the coursework required by educational administration candidates" (Davis, 2002, p. 11). Program design and curriculum content are fundamental to the development of graduate programs that produce pluralistic urban superintendents. Turk (2001) found value in a field-based principal certification program with an inquiry focus centered on the student outcomes of acquiring knowledge of research and the development of the skills necessary to conduct effective action research. Wilmore (2001) described a principal certification program that fostered collaboration between universities and partner school districts with a "grow-your-own" philosophy aligned with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. Klotz and Daniel (1998) addressed principal certification program reform by focusing on four areas:

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(a) a move away from a managerial to a human-centered perspective and from the macro-level of a smooth-running organization to the micro-level of the learning needs of the individual student.[sic], (b) a continued orientation on the importance of a "knowledge base" that is best learned via traditional academic preparation, (c) a strengthening orientation on learning by doing, and finally, (d) a renewed orientation on the importance of personal professional characteristics of the administrator. (p. 10)

A movement toward embedded real world problem solving activities was emphasized in the study.

According to Woodrum (2002), "The model in which most administration students are trained, and intellectual paradigm that grew out of a belief in empiricism, predictability and "scientific" certainty, fails to address the complexity that many interns encounter in schools and communities" (p. 33). Interracial interaction is a key component of program design. Antonio (2000) found, "...Leadership Ability [sic] appears to be enhanced by socializing and studying with students of a different race or ethnicity, but especially so for those students who are the least likely to have close, interracial friendships" (p. 17). Such embedded program elements viewed through the lenses of our culturally rich democratic society will facilitate the development of pluralistic urban superintendents.

3.3 Implementation Phase

Once the program design and curriculum content issues have been resolved, focus can be shifted to the critical stage of implementation. In order to effectively implement a pluralistic leadership program, both university leadership and teaching faculty have to be committed to the institutional objective. Faculty members must shun the shackles of ethnocentricity if they are to effectively weave the fabric of pluralistic leadership. "Cultural values are strong predictors of leadership behavior" (Slater et al., 2006, p. 158). Endemic ethnocentric views and seemingly benign prejudices must be identified and purged before they

contaminate both the classroom setting and the graduate program culture. Such a cleansing process is central to the implementation phase of a pluralistic leadership program.

The use of conceptual lenses highlights various cultural perspectives and helps graduate students to move beyond the realm of personal experience. Allen and Estler (2002) found that "readings and subsequent discussion related to the concept of privilege seemed to mark a turning point in both a collective understanding of diversity issues and how they fit into thinking of curriculum and leadership" (p. 19). Such exercises help move students away from the universality mindset of any single ethnocentric cultural bias and toward a comprehension and internalization of the efficacy of various cultural perspectives. This paradigm shift is paramount in the development of pluralistic leadership.

The effective implementation of a pluralistic leadership program impacts institutions at the student, faculty and university levels, and can ultimately impact institutional effectiveness. According to a 2005 report by the Institute for Educational Leadership, "Culturally competent leadership develops over time and needs to be supported from preparation through practice" (p. 7). To be highly effective at developing pluralistic urban superintendents, a graduate program must facilitate a cognitive disequilibrium during which students identify and question their ethnocentric views, consider the efficacy of other cultural perspectives, and ultimately, modify their leadership behaviors. Developing and implementing a comprehensive pluralistic leadership program is a continuous process that must be persistently revisited and refined.

3.4 Program Evaluation

Both objective and subjective feedback must be attained in an effort to thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of the pluralistic leadership program. Early feedback provides critical information that can be utilized to keep minimal problems from becoming more significant. Furthermore, providing early feedback opportunities increases stakeholder input and ownership in the program and thereby increases the likelihood of successful implementation. According to The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2006), "The results obtained from an evaluation can suggest ways to modify the implementation of a practice or uncover a need for more professional development to support its implementation" (p. 2). Both internal and external graduate program reviews provide useful information that can be used to refine both structural and delivery programmatic issues.

4 Discussion and Implications

An open exchange of information and ideas is both a hallmark of a democratic society and a prerequisite of an informed citizenry. Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education*:

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A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have the type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. (p. 99)

The changing demographics of our culturally rich democratic society necessitate the readjustment of our educational institutions in an effort to enhance the development of pluralistic leadership. Shom (1993) stated, "Higher educational leaders have, with some justification, pleaded that the colleges and universities of our nation should not be held solely accountable for achieving the economic and social equity to which all Americans aspire" (p. 8). That being said, no one is in a better position to prepare pluralistic urban superintendents than the educational institutions of America.

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