

Diversity Leadership in Practice: Examining STEM Graduate School Preparation Leaders in Their Institutional Contexts

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Black and Latino students are grossly underrepresented in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (hereafter referred to as STEM) fields (Committee on Underrepresented Groups and the Expansion of the Science and Engineering Workforce Pipeline & Committee on Science, Engineering & Public Policy and Global Affairs, 2011). Consequently, within the federal government and the professional organizations representing these fields, there have been calls and demands for more and better leadership to advance diversity issues within these fields (Aguirre & Martinez, 2007; American Council for Education, 2013; Betts, Urias, Chavez, & Betts, 2009; Fullan & Scott, 2009). To date, most of the research within this area focuses on diversity leaders such as presidents, provosts, chief diversity officers, and deans (Aguirre & Martinez, 2007; Leon, 2010; Schmidt, 2009).

While there is a new wave of research focused on probing into the strategies diversity leaders use to accomplish their goals (Bensimon, Harris, & Rueda, 2007; Williams, 2013; Williams & Clowney, 2007), there is still a gross lack of empirical research exploring the practice of diversity leadership that improves recruitment, retention, and inclusion for marginalized populations. In other words, what challenges do diversity leaders face in their daily work, how do diversity leaders overcome these challenges, and what approaches, strategies, and skills do they use to recruit, retain, and support underrepresented populations? This is especially true within the STEM fields, where the focus of research has primarily been on programmatic outcomes related to initiatives designed to bolster underrepresented students of color participation instead of diversity leadership (Williams, 2007). When diversity leadership is examined, rarely do studies seek to understand the experience of diversity leaders within their institutional environment as a way of understanding why these leaders use the strategies and tactics they do. More information is needed about what challenges, opportunities, and contextual elements diversity leaders in higher education face, and the strategies they use in response. These elements all shape the practice of diversity leadership in higher education, as well as how the goals of increasing and retaining underrepresented

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populations can be brought to fruition.

Method

Using a conceptual framework drawn from contingent theory (Donaldson, 2001), institutional change theory (Chang, 2002), and diversity leadership theory (Kezar, 2008), this study used a comparative-case analysis to provide insight into how leaders of graduate school preparation programs for STEM develop, manage, and sustain their programs and how their particular institutional context shapes and constrains the strategies they use to recruit and retain graduate students of color within STEM fields. This study examines the practice of diversity leadership by three graduate school preparation program leaders (referred to as GPLs) situated at three different campus sites affiliated with the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Alliances for Graduate Education and the Professoriate Program (AGEP). NSF's AGEP Program utilizes graduate school preparation programs (also known as GSPPs) to address all levels of the student of color pipeline, including recruitment, retention, and advancement. I used snowball sampling and a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct a total of 20 interviews. Participants included GPLs, their supervisors, and their staff, as well as faculty mentors who work with GSPPs. I analyzed the data using *Dedoose* qualitative software.

Results

The following six claims emerged based on the coded data, an individual case study analysis, and conducting a cross-case study analysis:

- (a) There are different institutional contexts for diversity and inclusion.
- (b) GPLs seek to increase diversity and inclusion for participants in their program, and they work towards increasing diversity and inclusion beyond their programs.
- (c) While GPLs hold many formal and informal responsibilities, networking, fundraising, and coordinating may be the most essential towards effectively carrying out their diversity and inclusion goals.
- (d) The amount of time GPLs invest in their responsibilities and the type of approaches GPLs take to execute their responsibilities are influenced by the institution's support for diversity and the leadership of the GPL.
- (e) GPLs use particular, purposeful tactics to increase awareness and secure continuing support for their diversity and inclusion goals and activities. These purposeful tactics are strongly influenced by the institution's support for diversity and the GPL's predominant leadership approach.
- (f) GPLs have the ability to positively change their institution's attitudes and practices in a way that can increase support and investment in institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion. However, their capacity to effect change is also limited by their institutional context (e.g., financial constraints, open support for diversity or lack thereof).

Discussion

The findings highlight the primary responsibilities—explicit and implicit—associated with the role of a GPL, various leadership approaches they use to carry out their work, and strategies they use to accomplish their goals. This study also demonstrates how institutional context influences how these leaders prioritize and carry out their responsibilities and strategies.

This study provides empirical support for contingency leadership theory and empirically tests and expands on Kezar's (2008) findings on diversity leaders. The study also operationalizes Chang's (2002) institutional transformation model. In addition, the study provides additional empirical evidence and conceptual understanding about the practice of diversity leadership while offering practical examples of transformative leadership. Other contributions include (a) new knowledge about a unique and understudied group of diversity leaders; (b) new insight into how institutions of higher education and external funding organizations can better support the efforts of these leaders; (c) a broadened understanding of leadership for increasing participation and retention for promising students of color; and, (d) ways to better support and expand the programs that seek to accomplish this goal.

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