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The Cohort Leadership Development Model: Student Perspectives

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THE COHORT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT MODEL: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

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This study examined how graduate students enrolled in a university-based cohort community college leadership doctoral program perceived their leadership development experiences. A total of 50 doctoral students enrolled in the Morgan State University (MSU) doctoral program were surveyed. A separate group of students (20) participated in a focus group. Results indicated that although doctoral students generally reported positive experiences, some students reported that certain factors or characteristics and behaviors of cohort members were not beneficial to the cohort experience. The positive results (structure, instructors, networking, and curriculum) of the cohort experience seem to support the findings of a number of works in the previous research relating to cohort learning environments. The findings further indicated that such factors such as dominant group members, lack of commitment to the cohort, failure to meet group expectations, traditional instructional modalities, and inadequate facilities negatively impacted perceptions of the cohort experience.

A central concern of community college leaders for the past decade has been the goal of replenishing the community college leadership pipeline. This is a growing realization that our community colleges, with their ever more diverse populations, cannot ultimately succeed if we fail to attract and retain leaders from all racial and ethnic groups. Shults (2001) reported that 45% of current presidents plan to retire by 2007. In the next 10 years, community colleges will need

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to replace 800 of their 1,150 presidents. Yet, the preparation of presidents and other community college leaders has declined, and the number of people prepared to step into leadership roles at higher levels, including the presidency has dramatically diminished. The number of advanced degrees conferred in community college administration decreased 78% between 1983 and 1997.

Romero (2004) suggested that leading community colleges has become more complex in the 21st century and demands a greater range of skills. She argues that while no single individual can fulfill all of these leadership needs every individual leader must be willing to coordinate his or her activities with other leaders within the institution, or the quality of decisions and the ability of the institution to truly serve its community will be hurt (p. 30).

In 2005, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) released a set of leadership competencies that indicated a framework of knowledge, skills, and values that the organization believed was necessary in order to perform effectively as a leader within a community college setting. These competencies included (a) organizational strategy, (b) resource management, (c) communication, (d) collaboration, (e) community college advocacy, and (f) professionalism. However, there is still uncertainty about the extent to which these competencies are being addressed in the curriculum of leadership preparation programs.

Over the past several decades, university approaches to offering doctoral programs for educational leaders have undergone very little change. Most of the doctoral programs in education and related fields are designed to train future researchers and university professors. Conversations about meaningful changes in these structures are infrequent. Until recently, most graduate students were young and expected to engage in a full-time program of study. Currently, a form of group learning, "cohorts," has emerged as an attractive option for administrators, instructors and participants alike (Fahy, 2000). Today, many emerging community college leaders are looking for opportunities to pursue advanced degrees without interrupting their current jobs (McPhail, 2001; Nesbit, 2001).

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: THE COHORT EXPERIENCE

We argue that the concept of leadership preparation for community college leaders has to be central to the discussion about the leadership pipeline in community colleges. During the fall of 1998, Morgan State University (MSU) joined the ranks of universities offering a doctoral program with a specialization in community college leadership.

The university designed a 3-year leadership preparation program for working professionals based on a "cohort collaborative learning model." McPhail (2001) reported that the intent of MSU's program was to design a distinctively different community college leadership doctoral program that would provide opportunities for students to develop competencies to lead the nation's community colleges. Many of the instructors in the program are local and national community college leaders, some classes are taught on site at local community colleges, and some classes are even taught on-line. Students at MSU enter and matriculate through the program of study in a cohort.

According to Reynolds and Hebert (1998), the term cohort refers to a group of learners who begin coursework together and remain together to complete a degree, certificate or series.

In keeping with the theoretical underpinnings of cohort and collaborative learning, MSU's cohort model is a structured environment that develops a perspective on leadership that attends to the learner's thinking and action in situ. The framework provides a structure for students to think about leadership as it relates to their ability to work collaboratively with others within an organization. To gain insight on the effectiveness of this approach to leadership preparation, this study was designed to capture students' voices about their leadership development experiences. It was also designed to make community college leadership preparation more transparent through an up-close examination of the participants engaged in the leadership development process.

METHODOLOGY

The following is the overall question guiding the study: How do doctoral students as a "community of learners" perceive their experience in a cohort preparation program?

Data Collection and Analytical Approach

We used surveys and focus groups with doctoral students to collect the data for the investigation. The questions on the surveys covered the basic elements of cohort learning. Specifically, we queried students on four distinct features of the cohort experience: (a) collaboration and shared knowledge, (b) learning options and connections to new information, (c) interdependence and interaction, and (d) instruction and facilitation. We also asked students to identify the most and least beneficial aspects of the cohort experience.

We administered surveys to first and second year doctoral students ($N = 50$) enrolled in the Community College Leadership Doctoral Program (CCLDP) at MSU. Two focus groups ($N = 20$) were also conducted. The first focus group was conducted with first and second year graduate students enrolled full-time in the CCLPD. The second focus group was doctoral students participating a roundtable discussion at the Council for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) (2007) annual convention in Tampa, Florida. The intent of the focus groups was to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions (about the cohort experience) in a way that would not be feasible using other methods. Since the main objective of the study was to examine perceptions of MSU's doctoral students, the observations from the round-table discussions collected at the 2007 CSCC convention were not included in the findings of the study. In addition to MSU students, the participants in the focus group in Florida were primarily engaged in doctoral studies with traditional program formats. The researchers used the April discussions as a form of triangulation of previous studies and the data collected from MSU students. We used a simple content coding and analysis process to categorize the responses from the participants. Duplicate responses were noted and the summaries for each question were organized sequentially by interview question. The summaries were grouped according to the four major themes of the cohort learning experience used in the survey questions.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Results indicated that although participants (doctoral students) generally reported positive cohort experiences, some students reported that certain factors or characteristics and behaviors of cohort members were not beneficial to the cohort-learning experience.

Cohort Experience

Barnett and Muse (1993) suggested that a cohort represents a collegial support system for improving the teaching and learning process. Significant relationships can develop as a result of the unique membership and mission of the cohort. Saltiel and Russo (2001) suggested that the defined membership and common goal and the structured meetings over time contribute to the definition and formation of a cohort. The leadership challenge, as many leaders are quick to realize,

is the acquisition of skills to work with and lead teams in the workplace. McPhail (2001) suggested that the MSU experience would inherently develop a wide-range of leadership skills among the doctoral students. Our analyses examined students' voices about their experiences in the cohort leadership doctoral program.

Student Perspectives on Collaboration and Shared Knowledge

Considering the cohort model as developing a community of learners, Lawrence (2002) examined how cohort learning groups in higher education create and sustain community. He offers that "cohorts foster a spirit of cooperation by involving the members in collaborative decision making...(and) they recognize that individual success depends on the success of the collective" (p. 86). He looked at the cohort as "co-creating knowledge through collaborative learning and experiential knowing as an outcome of cohort learning" (p. 83). Lawrence further noted how these communities develop is important to the learning:

> Communities develop over time and with intention...members of the community must come to know each other and develop a respect for one another's strengths, weaknesses, similarities, and differences. When commitment is high and contributions from all members are valued, communities have the potential to co-create knowledge, make effective decisions, and affect change (p. 84).

In this study, we asked students to share their perspectives on their collaboration and shared knowledge derived from the cohort experience. The participant's answers were revealing:

- The collaborative learning has made me a better team player.
- The cohort prepares me to work with all team players.
- Other cohort members have expanded their knowledge base.
- We profit from the collective knowledge.
- I use the cohort experience on my job.
- The cohort broadened my ability—it stretched me.
- It enhanced my desire to complete my doctoral studies.
- We share the workload with others.
- I learned to work with all types of people.
- We develop groups for projects but sometimes we lose a group member.

- We learn different information from each other.
- The workload can get heavy.
- Each person in the class brings a different perspective.
- Sometimes it is difficult to get people in the class to share information.

Reflections on Learning Options and Connections to New Information

The second area that we asked students to share their reflections on concerned the extent to which the cohort experience provided different learning options and connections to new information. Norris and Barnett (1994) indicated that the feeling of community of learners construct in a cohort grouping is described by various terms: security, validation, connectedness, bonding, family tree, fellowship, acceptance, community, close relationships, and spirit of the group. In this way, a cohort group becomes one community of learners.

We asked students to respond to this question: How did the cohort program provide learning options, and describe how you were afforded opportunities to connect to new types of information? In general, the doctoral students participating in this study reported that the cohort experience provided different learning options in a variety of ways:

- It inspired me to do scholarly research.
- The cohort increased awareness at many levels of opportunity.
- The cohort expanded my knowledge base.
- The Leadership Institute prior to each fall semester gives an opportunity to hear from national speakers.
- Research workshops identified ways to apply myself.
- I learned research.
- The seminars outside of course work were helpful.
- I have dyslexia but the program fits my needs.
- Professor's reading list was helpful for getting new information.
- The textbooks were relevant to the courses taught.

Student Reflections on Interdependence and Interaction

Since this qualitative research provided an opportunity for us to take a closer look at the relationships between cohort members (within the context of the investigation), the students were asked to reflect on the interdependent and interaction features of the cohort

learning experience. Research indicates that both individual and group development are important aspects of cohorts (Chairs, McDonald, Shroyer, Urbanski, & Vertin, 2002; Lawrence, 1997; Norris & Barnett, 1994). Cohort structure should support the personal development of its members within a collaborative, cohesive group environment. Research on cohorts (e.g., Brooks, 1998; Chairs et al., 2002; Lawrence, 1997; Maher, 2001; Norris & Barnett, 1994) reveals that successful cohorts balance the needs of the group with those of the individual members by fostering a sense of belonging, creating an environment in which mutual respect flourishes, supporting risk taking, providing a place for critical reflection and the development of shared understanding, and encouraging and sustaining multiple perspectives. We asked students to share their reflections on the interdependence and interaction features of their cohort experiences: How does the cohort experience foster interdependence and interaction among and between cohort members? In spite of the many challenges that students face in the scramble to engage in work and their doctoral studies, our participants reported that they found the interdependence and interaction aspects of the program to be rewarding and productive:

- Cohort members push each other to greater heights.
- The interaction with others has exposed my weaknesses and now it is hard to work with certain people.
- This program is definitely preparing me for leadership.
- I think the females value my knowledge and judgment.
- We share information about assets and liabilities.
- You can grow professionally.
- I'm more open to opinions by interacting with my cohort.
- I can be assertive.
- My interpersonal skills are enhanced by working with my groups.
- You have to build your confidence.
- The feedback from cohort members and professors is helpful.
- The professors do not monitor your schedules; you have to manage your own time and engage in less interaction with other students.

Reflections on Instructional Delivery and Facilitation

Research on learning in cohorts reveals that cohort members tend to have positive and a wide range of feelings about their experiences. Cohort members indicate such benefits as increased development of

critical thinking skills (Chairs et al., 2002), greater individual development as a cohort member (Chairs et al., 2002), development of an enhanced knowledge base (Norris & Barnett, 1994), opportunity to examine one's own knowledge (Tisdell et al., 2004), motivation to learn more (Brooks, 1998), and changes in perspectives on their own and others' learning (Lawrence, 1997). Norris and Barnett (1994) made this comment about cohorts:

> A cohort is more than an administrative arrangement. In fact, "to view the [cohort] structure merely as a method of course delivery, a vehicle for socialization, a convenient scheduling design, or as an upbeat, fashionable 'in' approach is to do cohort structure an injustice (p. 34).

Cohorts must be purposefully formed and structured if they are to succeed as environments that foster learning and development. In reference to the instruction and facilitation aspects of the cohort experience, we asked students the following question: Tell us about instruction and learning facilitation in the cohort program—what were your experiences? From an instructional perspective, the participants shared perspectives about competencies developed and the rewards of learning and growing. Their experiences were exemplified by the following reflections:

- Faculty provided insights to help me realign my professional values.
- The critical evaluation by the instructors has helped me to improve my writing.
- We learned to confront and resolve issues.
- My time management has improved.
- I now have the ability to prioritize work and study.
- My professors challenged me to do stellar work.
- I felt challenged to go beyond the normal—and the normal was steep.
- It maximized my knowledge base.
- I use collaborative approaches on my job—and it works for me.

DISCUSSION

Based on the analyses of data, we were able to make connections with previous research and the "lived" experiences articulated by the

participants. According to Norris and Barnett (1994), a cohort structure does not ensure that a cohort will succeed. Cohorts must be structured as environments in which individuals experience growth and development supported and challenged by the group. The form and structure of cohorts are critical to the success of the learning process, and research reveals that cohorts vary in structure and support different types of learning. The doctoral students participating in the MSU cohort were engaged in a program of study with a specialized curriculum on community college leadership development. The students participating in this study reported that they were challenged to engage in collaborative learning and shared knowledge acquisition. Through this research study, we focused on creating an opportunity for students to espouse their experiences in which they explained their

Most Beneficial	Least Beneficial
The design and instructional delivery is very beneficial	Some people do not uphold their part when preparing assignments
The program was designed for me in mind because I have to work	Some individuals want to monopolize the class with personal questions and concerns
Faculty provided insights to help me realign my professional values	Some cohort members are not totally committed to the cohort model—they cause conflict
Cohort members help each achieve their goals	Some students do not pull their weight
Life-long knowledge is gained	Facilities at the university need to be improved
We had access from scholars in the field	Some cohort members will not let go of their competitiveness and negativity
I developed new relationships	Higher achieving students may be pulled down
There was a strong sense of community among cohort members	There is a formation of "sub power" cliques
The quality of the instruction from practitioners in the field is high	The intensity and academic rigor threatens some students
The collective knowledge of other students is appreciated	Some students had no prior training in group dynamics
One or two people cannot monopolize the situation	Consequences for not carrying your weight are not clear—enforcement is not clear
The majority of the faculty are accessible	Some professors still teach in the traditional modalities—this can be discouraging
The sequencing of courses is good—you know where you are at all times	Limited choices in the type of courses
We get to meet other working professionals in various fields of community college leadership	No flexibility in when courses are taught
Year-round program is hard but you get done with it faster	Group cohesiveness is a problem
I can see theory and practice coming together	

Figure 1. Reflections on the most and least beneficial features of the cohort.

own knowledge about their cohort experiences. Based the reports from students, transformative learning occurred (Lawrence, 1977).

The Good News and the Bad News about the Cohort Experience

We observed that the structure of the cohort experience has many characteristics that may both encourage and inhibit doctoral students. According to McPhail (2001), the MSU program was explicitly designed for working professionals. We asked students to share their reflections about the least and most beneficial aspects of their cohort experiences. Figure 1 shows students' reflections of the most and least beneficial experiences of the MSU cohort program.

SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

Toward a Cohort Leadership Learning Model

Two major findings emerged from the study. First, the MSU cohort model embodies the components of the characteristics of effective cohort programming as described in the literature. Second, the analyses generally confirmed the applicability of the cohort model's curriculum and the acquisition of leadership competencies as hypothesized by AACC to be necessary to contemporary community college leaders. Participants reported that there were opportunities for cohort members to use and share knowledge, participate in dialogue, connect to new information, and promote a positive attitude. There were collaborative learning activities that surfaced in the findings. These included the provision of opportunities to share knowledge and new information with other cohort and classroom members, the promotion of higher learning higher education, and a collegial network that provides improvement of the instructional delivery (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; McPhail, 2001; Saltiel & Russo, 2001).

The participants reported that the cohort learning experience facilitates higher levels of accomplishments as well as more meaningful and effective learning among cohort members. While some participants reported disappointment with the presence of low performing cohort members, our analyses did not reveal that the quality of the learning experience was decreased as a result. The analyses did imply that persistence and development of leadership competencies were enhanced by the cohort experience. These findings are generally congruent with previous research (Bruffee, 1993; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001) on the autonomy of adult learners, peer interactions, and

collaborative and cohort learning. For example, participants reported that the cohort experience raised their professional and personal aspirations, developed their writing skills, increased their persistence, and developed their leadership skills. It is also noteworthy to mention that there were some negative perceptions about the cohort experience such as the low performance of some students, lack of support for the program, and inadequate facilities. Some students also viewed the academic rigor (too intense) and lack of flexibility in the sequencing of courses as problems. However, the majority of the doctoral students viewed the cohort's program design and quality of instruction as valuable aspects of the learning experience.

CONCLUSIONS

No one can say for certain that there is a single best way to prepare the next generation of community college leaders. However, the focus on leadership preparation as an outcome of the impending leadership crisis in community colleges has stimulated new ways of looking at leadership preparation programs. Since AACC's Leading Forward Competencies include characteristics such as collaboration, communication, and advocacy as fundamental skills for leadership effectiveness, the cohort model (based on our results) may well be a viable form of leadership preparation for community college leaders.

Perhaps, the favorable experience of sharing and networking among cohort members could become a more formal part of a leadership preparation program's curriculum. Sharing and networking's inherent link to real leadership outside the classroom has the potential to generate significant participation among emerging leaders because of its relevance to their experiences. From listening to the students in this study, we discovered that the cohort learning model enriches the learning experience at the graduate level. As Brookfield (1986) suggested, collaboration and participation may be concepts particularly useful for those wishing to influence the effectiveness of adult learning programs. Thus, connect leadership training/preparation to the practice of community college leadership. Leadership preparation should not be confined to the classroom. Graduate programs should strive to expose students to the distinctive leadership challenges at community colleges. Through practice, emerging leaders have the opportunity to connect leadership theories to what leaders actually do. Students participating in the cohort leadership learning model become engaged in technical features of transferring theory to practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The intent of this article was to generate a discussion on the experience of students in a cohort learning community college leadership preparation program. What we have done has been to describe the experiences of students in a cohort leadership preparation doctoral program. We have suggested that we need to account for leadership preparation in both theory and practice and that this integration should takes place simultaneously. Leadership preparation programs can model their instructional approaches and goals after the outcomes we expect. However, if we accept the traditional university-based structures as the only models that offer viable leadership preparation programs, then little or no meaningful transformation will take place. Overall, based on our results, students' rate their leadership preparation experience very high. If leadership preparation programs are to train future leaders, the authors suggest that a cohort environment that promotes collaborative learning may be an ideal method of leadership training and development. Thus, leadership development through a cohort model may be an effective engine to help produce future community college leaders. It provides an opportunity for learners to be full partners in the learning process as well as a learning environment that reflects the ways students will lead their lives when they assume leadership roles in a community college.

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