Cultural Competence in Pathways to Results

Community colleges provide access to a high quality education and economic opportunities to citizens who may not otherwise have the chance to pursue a college education. As open access institutions, community colleges serve as points of entry to higher education for students who are seeking to transfer to the baccalaureate, gain a degree or certificate and seek employment, or have an interest in a specific course or courses toward a licensure or employment (Kane & Rouse, 1999). In recent decades, community colleges have experienced growth among ethnically diverse students and other special populations. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2013) reported that in fall 2013, among all undergraduates in the United States, 56% of Hispanic students, 49% of Black students, 44% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 42% of Native American students attended community colleges. In addition, 42% of all community college students are first generation college students, 13% are single parents, 6% are non–U.S. citizens, and 12% are students with disabilities (AACC). It is critical that practices that impact diverse communities are considered when working in education.

Focus on Equity Driven Decisions

Pathways to Results (PTR) is an equity–guided, results–oriented continuous improvement initiative that aims to reduce disparities in educational outcomes for students who participate in programs of study. The PTR process is utilized by teams that are dedicated to addressing institutional practices that inhibit student recruitment, retention, and completion in P–20 education. Bridging the gap between institutional policy, research, and practice, PTR "begins with team members and partners focusing on critical problems and policies that get in the way of student success" (Bragg & Bennett, 2012, p. 1). Included in PTR are five processes: engagement and commitment, outcomes and equity assessment, process assessment, process improvement and evaluation, and review and reflection. PTR teams are made up of partnerships that have a vested interest in improving programs of study that extend from the secondary level to the postsecondary level and to employment.

Critical to PTR is the outcomes and equity assessment process. It is the backbone of improvement within the program of study because it identifies where disparities occur in student performance in programs of study. This process includes an exploration of disaggregated data according to student groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, age, enrollment status, etc.). A primary emphasis of PTR is to analyze data utilizing an equity lens, including strategies that heighten team members' awareness of how inequities affect student outcomes. Using a collaborative process, PTR teams retrieve and analyze data to ensure that problems with practices and policies that get in the way of student success are addressed. Teams also consider the ways in which interactions with diverse audiences can foster a greater understanding of equity, social justice, and cultural understanding. Critical to meeting this challenge is to increase the capacity of faculty, staff, and other stakeholders to understand how the diverse backgrounds of students may influence their educational experiences and outcomes.

Cultural Understanding

Educators are called upon to teach and support students from diverse backgrounds. Having an equity focus that centers on cultural understanding is critical to working with the vast numbers of diverse students who attend community colleges. Rueda (2012) identified numerous student–related factors

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that contribute to inequities between student groups, such as inadequate prior education, socioeconomic status, and language. When practitioners attribute differences in performance to personal (and group) deficiencies and in turn reduce expectations, negative consequences occur for students. Stereotypes are hurtful to productive student behavior (Green, 2006). Understanding that there is no easy fix, an important move that educators can make is to develop competence in cultural understanding of their students. Through cultural competence, educators can have a positive impact on their students' day-to-day experiences. This can and should be the first step to improving student experiences and outcomes, suggesting groups participating in initiatives such as PTR should include cultural competence as a core principle.

What Do We Mean by Culture?

Culture is inclusive of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, social class, disability, language, educational level, and other distinguishing characteristics that can exclude, rather than include, students as active, successful learners. Culture is the glue that shapes life experiences. Day-to-day behaviors are shaped by cultural norms and values that are reinforced by family, peers, and social institutions, such as schools (Diller & Moule, 2005). How a student maneuvers through life is influenced by his or her culture. However, differences between individuals can be extensive, even when individuals are associated with the same racial group.

Each member of a cultural group experiences life with different intensity that transcends phenotype. For example, an African American female who is also a single mother holding a full-time job undoubtedly experiences a program of study differently than an African American female from a middle-class family who is just beginning college. Though both African American, each woman experiences different levels of her larger cultural context to understand and give full consideration to her life experiences and behaviors. An organization seeking to be responsive to the needs of its students would benefit from ensuring that its employees acquire knowledge and skills that reinforce a student-centered focus. Members of PTR teams need to be especially sensitive to the cultural context from which their students come.

What is Cultural Competence?

Researchers have debated the term "competence" for some time (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993; Evergreen & Cullen, 2010; Evergreen & Robertson, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; SenGupta, Hopson & Thompson-Robinson, 2004). The words competence (or competent) refers to the notion of mastery, and used in the context of "cultural competence;" it implies the on-going process of learning and gaining new knowledge while actively seeking cultural grounding (Diller & Moule, 2005). Individuals seeking cultural competence actively reflect on their own culturally-based assumptions, and their understanding of the worldviews of those who are culturally different from them. Cultural competence is an aspiration more than a destination. Professionals who seek to demonstrate cultural competence do it in their everyday actions, and they recognize that there is always more to learn and understand about others' cultural experiences and circumstances.

Cultural competence is a framework that is utilized in many fields including evaluation, education, health care, and psychology (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through intentional practices, cultural competence includes meaningful reflection on assumptions and values necessary to learn how to work with diverse communities (Diller & Moule, 2005). Through reflective practice, individuals learn and demonstrate cultural competence by interacting with persons who come from other cultures. This entails developing a complex awareness of and sensitivity to various bodies of knowledge, and a set of skills that come together to underlie effective cross-cultural interaction (Atkinson, Morton, & Sue, 1993).

Cross' (1989) model of cultural competence suggests a "set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (p. 7). Embedded within this framework is the notion that interventions must be responsive to cultural needs and empower the students who are being served. Cross posits that there are five essential components that contribute to the development of culturally competent practices in an organization: "a) value diversity, b) have the capacity for cultural self-assessment, c) be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, d) have institutionalized cultural knowledge, and e) have developed adaptations to diversity" (p. 8). Furthermore, organizations that seek cultural competence strive to influence this thinking at every level. Cross' framework is discussed below, with a brief description of how it relates to PTR.

Valuing Diversity

Differences in race, ethnicity, and gender impact the learning process and how students interact with the environment around them. Understanding and appreciating differences does not require that we compare or judge others against our own circumstances, but rather acknowledge that differences exist. It is important to understand how to leverage this knowledge to improve student experiences. To be successful, the PTR process must include an understanding of how different student groups experience and benefit from their participation in programs of study, so the more PTR team members understand about the students who participate in their programs, the better they are able to help students succeed in achieving their intended outcomes.

Building Self-Awareness

Building self-awareness is accomplished by developing an understanding of areas that are sensitive to a person. It is important that individuals develop their own awareness and perspectives on cultural competence. The first step is to engage in a period of self-reflection by asking questions such as, do I think critically about power and oppression?, and what beliefs, knowledge, experience, and skills do I need to develop trust and communicate effectively with others, especially the stakeholders that we work with during this process? The PTR process includes reflective questions to encourage PTR team members to understand their own perceptions and sensitivities and the perceptions and sensitivities of others. PTR teams would do well to pay attention to issues of difference in power, trust, and capacity as they relate to the student groups who enroll in programs of study.

Cultivating Institutional Cultural Knowledge

Once members of an organization have reflected on their own awareness and have a better understanding of how their own experiences and perceptions relate to their students' experiences, the next step is to build a foundation toward cultural competence, including the transformation of organizational policies and beliefs. Recognition by students, faculty, staff, and partners of practices that differ from the dominant culture is very important (Uttal, 2011). Providing workshops and other forms of professional development can be an appropriate first step to growing knowledge throughout an organization and across organizations connected through partnerships. Though not consistently practiced in PTR, more can be done to help practitioners see how the PTR process is a form of professional development that encourages individuals to develop and institutionalize cultural knowledge. Activities that encourage individual and collective growth in understanding of cultural competence should be added to PTR's toolkit to make this possible.

Developing Adaptations

Adaptations include translation of language in documents used to support a program of study, and the adjustment of time and place of meetings to consider the needs of those who cannot attend during traditional hours. Further, student services, faculty, and staff working with students should be sensitive to the values and traditions of culturally diverse communities. An example of how PTR projects have encouraged and supported adaptations is in the area of gender equity, by considering the special needs of females who pursue non-traditional careers. PTR teams have focused on the recruitment and retention of females who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with male-dominated occupations. Some focus has also been paid to adaptations of institutional policies and practices to the needs students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, but more needs to be done in the future.

The next section focuses on a concept that is related to cultural competence. Rooted in similar theories on cultural diversity, reflection and engagement, culturally responsive evaluation is an important area of program evaluation. To date, PTR has not been envisioned as a form of culturally responsive evaluation; however, the process may benefit from this perspective because it would help PTR to develop tangible expectations and methods that ensure cultural competence is included in the work that PTR teams undertake to address gaps in the outcomes of diverse student groups.

Culturally Responsive Evaluation

Culturally responsive evaluation provides a rationale and methodology to apply cultural competence to program evaluation. Evaluators see culturally responsive evaluation as a critical tenet that respects and supports the diversity and accurate interpretation of evaluation findings. Culturally responsive evaluation, as defined by the American Evaluation Association (2003), is a stance taken towards culture. Furthermore, a culturally competent evaluator is described as someone who is "prepared to engage with diverse segments of communities to include cultural and contextual dimensions important to the evaluation" (p. 1). Similarly, SenGupta et al. (2004) reflect upon cultural responsive evaluation as an appreciation for the cultural context embedded in a community that is being evaluated. The utilization of responsive and inclusive practices is encouraged. Culturally responsive evaluation requires an active awareness and understanding of the embedded context and thoughtful consideration of methodological practices that guide meaning, and help evaluators to arrive at useful findings (SenGupta et al., 2004).

Frierson, Hood, Hughes, and Davis (2010) mention the importance of using a culturally responsive approach in evaluation. They recommend nine systemic strategies to guide practitioners through developing culturally responsive evaluations.

1. Preparing for the Evaluation

When planning for an evaluation, a thorough understanding of the cultural and sociopolitical environment establishes parameters for the evaluation. Background data on the client can be gathered through informal conversations with leaders in the cultural community. Leaders who are respected and serve as role models in the community can serve as rich sources of information for the evaluation. Embedded in this strategy is creating a multi-ethnic team. Creating a team and inviting team members who have shared experiences "increases the chances of really hearing the voices of underrepresented students" (Frierson et al., 2010, p. 80).

2. Engaging Stakeholders

In communities that serve marginalized students, issues of power can prevent engagement from others in the community that have a vested interest in results. Relationship building and involving stakeholders in the beginning is critical to understanding power dynamics pitfall. In participatory evaluation, stakeholders are encouraged to get involved in developing an understanding how knowledge is transmitted and shared in the community. Ignoring relevant stakeholders can lead to inaccurate findings and judgments about a program.

3. Identifying the Purpose and Intent of the Evaluation

Understanding the evaluation purpose and intent allows the evaluation team to organize and develop questions that yield useful information at its conclusion. Evaluations are often categorized as formative or summative. A formative evaluation provides findings to "inform the staff how a program operates" (p. 83). Summative evaluation findings place judgment about the extent to which a program achieved its intended outcomes and "a culturally responsive evaluation examines these connections through culturally sensitive lenses" (Frierson et al., 2010, p. 83).

4. Framing the Right Questions

Criteria for judging program quality should be developed prior to beginning the evaluation. Gaining stakeholder input is helpful. The evaluation questions should be developed in a participatory manner that considers the ideas of evaluators, program staff, and relevant stakeholders to increase the likelihood that all voices will be heard and that the findings are utilized.

5. Designing the Evaluation

Culturally responsive evaluation utilizes the methods that are most appropriate for answering the evaluation questions. Many comprehensive evaluations use mixed methods studies. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods it is possible to develop an "increase in confidence" (Frierson et al., 2010, p. 85) in evaluation findings.

6. Selecting and Adapting Instrumentation

Data collection instruments that are used to gather data about the client should be tested to make valid inferences about the program and the population being evaluated. These pilot tests should be done with groups similar to those involved in the study. The use of an instrument developed previously does not guarantee responsiveness to a new project.

7. Collecting the Data

In culturally responsive evaluation, qualitative data collection techniques such as focus groups and interviewing give participants the opportunity to share ways of knowing and may also give voice to silenced populations. Qualitative methods are a useful tool to gathering information to develop surveys and questionnaires for the evaluation. Non-verbal behaviors seen during interviews provide key information for interpretation. Culturally responsive evaluators make it a priority to know what individuals are hearing and seeing when collecting data.

8. Analyzing the Data

Frierson et al. (2010) posit that understanding the meaning of data is critical to culturally responsive evaluation. Extensive experience has shown that "it is both desirable and prudent that the analysis of data and interpretation of behavior...be achieved with considerable sensitivity to, and understanding of, the cultural context in which data are gathered" (p. 89). Consideration and sensitivity to cultural context can be accomplished in several ways, with one being to organize a review panel that consists of stakeholder groups to examine the findings. Additionally, data should be disaggregated to reveal microlevel information regarding the groups under study.

9. Disseminating and Using the Results

To reduce backlash from stakeholders on findings and increase the likelihood that findings will be useful and truthful, evaluation teams should share findings with stakeholders prior to dissemination. Written communication and wide dissemination of findings is encouraged to make the findings available and understandable to all audiences. Ultimately, a culturally responsive evaluation should promote positive change in the lives of those affected by the results.

Toward Culturally Responsive PTR

Inherent in PTR and culturally responsive evaluation is the importance of developing relationships and the inclusion of stakeholders in the evaluation process. As PTR demonstrates, considering cultural and contextual dimensions that are important to an evaluation is one way to obtain evidence-based results. If culturally responsive evaluation were undertaken, the potential for outcomes-based decisions that are inclusive of cultural competence would be optimized, and the overall scope and mission of PTR would be enhanced.

Final Thoughts

The field of program evaluation is learning that cultural competence, like culturally responsive evaluation, is a long-term process, and one that should continuously be refined and developed. Reflection of one's own culture and commitment to transforming institutional policies and practices is an important part of understanding the potential impact that approaches to cultural competence can have on students' lives. Given the growth of diverse student populations in the community college system, these guiding elements can provide the first steps to developing a culturally competent system of care for all students.

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