Understanding the Culture of Student Orientation Leaders
Executive Summary
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The purpose of this study was to understand the culture of student orientation leaders at a large, research institution in the south east. Specifically, the Research Team was interested in the climate of student orientation leaders for underrepresented students. To better understand the culture of these student leaders and better engage underrepresented students, this study was guided by the following research question: *How do community members describe and define the culture of orientation leaders?*

To understand the culture of stdent orientation leaders and the experiences of underrepresented students, the Research Team used two theoretical models to analyze the culture of the group.

To fully analyze the culture for this study, the Kuh and Hall (1993) model of culture provided the theoretical basis to guide this research. The culture could both shape the outcomes and also be a product of the individuals, attitudes, and characteristics (Kuh and Hall, 1993). Kuh and Hall identified four levels of culture including artifacts, values (both espoused and enacted), perspectives, and assumptions.

While analyzing the four levels of culture defined by Kuh and Hall (1993), this study also considered the work of Milem, Chang, & Antonio (2005). Milem, et al.'s work put forth a framework to understand a campus' racial climate. The use of this framework assisted to dig deeper into the culture and highlight the culture with a clear focus on the racial climate. Milem, et al. developed this framework in an effort to assist institutions of higher education to consider the current and historical roots of climate. The Milem, et al. (2005) framework highlighted dimensions of campus racial climate for consideration, the historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, the compositional diversity, the psychological dimensions, the behavioral dimensions, and the organizational/structural dimensions of the climate. These dimensions were all reinforced by the larger institutional context, governmental/political and sociohistorical forces. The Research Team believed this framework complemented the Kuh & Hall (1993) cultural analysis.

As noted, this study was conducted with a focus on culture. The methodology and methods however had more characteristics of a case study. As Creswell (1998) described, "case study is an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case … overtime through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information in context" (p. 61). The methods utilized in this study were traditional qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured individual interviews took place with participants. Documents were analyzed to fully gather the contextual considerations for the population under study. By the conclusion of data collection, 16 students, 11 Alumni, and 7 faculty/staff members took part in semi-structured individual interviews.

Findings from this study indicated the orientation leader culture was open and accepting of students from underrepresented backgrounds. This culture has evolved over time in both diversity and purpose, which has attracted more students of color. The culture was hospitable for students of color, however it seemed that anything beyond appreciation was not explored.

One of the most compelling conclusions from this research was the saliency of Tatum's (1997) work. The work of Tatum and identity theorists (Cass, 1984; Cross, 1995; Helms, 1992) stated that safety and true engagement was found in racially homogenous groups. "In racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism" (Tatum, p. 62). Participants who identified as an underrepresented identity stated that they were recruited to be [orientation] leaders by students who held their same identity. Interviewee 4 discussed these issues,

> When I reached out to people to help me, give me tips how to apply for [an orientation leader position], they were all African-American, because I was like these are people who look like me so they were the

only people on staff I knew, but as a freshman they just so happened to be Black. And they also helped me understand what the process was like so that I can be [an orientation] leader.

Further, once being part of the culture they found those with the same identity to be their support system and confidants.

She would come find me to talk about how she felt discriminated against by a parent or ignored by a parent because the fact she was Black…I would just talk to her and tell her that it is what it is, you just got to like pull through it. (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 2 summed these thoughts well,

I wouldn't say that there was any intentional inclusion or exclusion of any ethnicities or demographic backgrounds within [orientation]…People tend to stick with who they know, who they are familiar with. That was the kind of natural order of inclusion and exclusion that came from being [an Orientation] Leader due to just the nature of people in and of themselves. But I wouldn't say…[orientation] specifically chose different people or specifically left out different people from being leaders. I wouldn't go as far to say that. I would more say it was just once you became a leader or the people who gravitate to becoming leaders happen to just come from their own demographic or certain demographics due to just the nature of the beast I guess you could say.

Therefore, the solution for students of color in this culture to feel safe and engaged was to rely on others with their same identity.

Orientation leaders are at times the "first face" of a college or university given orientation is typically a program which initiates students into the environment. Not only should the orientation leader staff mirror the larger student population but the group should also be able to work in harmony. With any type of strife, a group can become fractured and unable to work together cohesively. This breakdown of relationships can further effect the larger program.

The recommendations from this research include more intentional recruitment and thorough, intentional training on diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Staff admitted that more intentional recruitment was vital to creating a diverse staff. Regardless of the identity, this research showed that more intentional recruitment of leaders would yield more students applying and becoming part of the culture. In the absence of intentional recruitment, the staff would rely on "word of mouth" recruitment which had not yielded a compelling number of diverse students. Training that is interactive and engaging is also vital to allow students to learn about one another and create a welcoming, safe culture for all students.

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