Cultivating Connection: Developing Empathy in Peer Leadership

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Student leadership is an increasingly utilized tool on college campuses for welcoming and supporting new students as they transition to college. In our various experiences as previous student leaders turned student affairs professionals, we found a common thread in our work which made a tremendous difference in the development of student leaders and the students they served—the ability to create and maintain meaningful empathic connections. This paper will provide structure for orientation, transition, and retention (OTR) professionals to cultivate empathy in student leaders who may use those skills to build stronger and more authentic connections as they welcome and help students successfully navigate their transition to college. The purpose of this paper is to fill a gap in empathic leadership development and its potential to positively impact the transition and retention of new students.

The Need for Empathy Skills in Peer Leadership

There is a critical need to develop empathy in today's college student. Millennial college students show less of an ability to demonstrate empathy than previous generations (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Generally, students stray from in-person interactions and prefer less personal communication, such as texting, impacting their ability to perceive others' emotional cues and needs (Turkle, 2011). As higher education continues to serve a globally diverse population, there is a need for co-curricular education rooted in cultivating empathy skills.

When striving to support the contemporary college student, it is crucial to understand the barriers to academic and social success that manifest during transition. The presence of peer support is one factor which may positively impact a student's sense of belonging and integration (Swail, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012). The development of strong peer relationships increases the likelihood students will persist beyond their first year (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1995). Additionally, students who feel comfortable seeking help from peers are more likely to succeed (Holt, 2014). In her research on interpersonal connection and authenticity, Brown (2012)

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found a correlation between authenticity, connection, and vulnerability and discovered empathy is at the crux of vulnerability. Brown (2007) described four elements of demonstrating empathy: the ability to view the world as others see it, the ability to be non-judging, an awareness of our own and others' feelings, and the ability to communicate one's understanding of another's feelings.

Working from this framework, we present a training curriculum addressing empathic development in student leaders. This training is built upon the Six Habits of Highly Empathic People (Krznaric, 2012) and follows six tenets which are indicative of a highly empathic individual: curiosity about others; challenging prejudices and finding commonalities; trying another person's life, or experiential empathy; the art of conversation; mass action and social change; and ambitious imagination.

Empathic Leadership Curriculum

The curriculum outlined is intended to help student affairs professionals develop empathy in their student leaders. This curriculum is designed to both teach student leaders about the concept of empathy as well as help them develop empathy skills to support their peers. The activities and assessment items suggested are meant as guides to conducting an empathy development series that is most applicable to the group of leaders being trained or fits within the context of the resources available to the facilitators.

Curiosity about Others

The empathy development curriculum starts with student leaders cultivating curiosity about others (Krznaric, 2012). This module aims to help student leaders move from introspection to outrospection, meaning they learn to show interest in others' experiences in conjunction with their own perspectives.

An applicable training activity to cultivate curiosity about others is called "The I-Statement Game." The facilitator asks all participants to stand in a circle. One person at a time, whenever they feel they have something to share, may step into the circle and share an opinion, identity, or event that has shaped them, using the first-person pronoun "I" (i.e. "I like the color blue"; "I have a challenging relationship with my parents"; "I identify as a woman"). Then, all others in the circle to whom that statement also applies may join by stepping into the circle. They may then all step back to allow for another person to step in and initiate a statement. At the end of the activity, the facilitator may ask a series of reflection questions so students may reflect on what was shared.

Students are encouraged to speak individually to anyone they wanted to know more about as a result of the activity, remembering to ask questions and listen, rather than assuming. They are especially encouraged to engage with individuals with an experience, opinion, or identity different from their own.

Challenging Prejudices/Finding Commonalities

Highly empathic individuals "challenge their own preconceptions and prejudices by searching for what they share with people rather than what divides them" (Krznaric, 2012). Student leaders, particularly those working in OTR, are expected to successfully navigate interactions with large numbers of new students. After completing this training students, will have a working definition of "microaggression" (Sue et al., 2007) and begin to understand how to navigate interactions with individuals who share identities different from their own.

"Stereotypes: More Than Meets the Eye" is an interactive training that provides students with a safe space to have difficult conversations regarding microaggressions college students face every day. The facilitators should begin by establishing a safe space and dialoguing about micro-aggressions and how they manifest, particularly on college campuses. Then, facilitate the activity as follows:

1. Post various demographic identities on large pieces of paper around the room (i.e. queer, differently abled, Muslim, low SES, etc.).
2. Provide all participants with adhesive notecards and tell them to write down the first word or phrase that comes to mind as the facilitator reads each identity. Remind students phrases may insight negative or positive reactions and to post their cards with the corresponding identity.
3. Students are invited to individually select an identity they share, take and read the cards and explain whether or not they personally identify with that stereotype.
4. If there is an identity on the wall with whom no students identify, facilitators should read from the cards and facilitate a conversation regarding the responses.

Experiential Empathy

The third habit of highly empathic people as outlined by Krznaric (2012) is trying another's life, otherwise called "experiential empathy." It is essential for student leaders to share their emotions and stories and move beyond their experiences to feel with people. Students will become cognizant of different social identities and understand how to successfully navigate these conversations. It is essential students understand experiential empathy can be highly problematic if the host group is viewed as deficient, requiring the building of trust and cultural exchange.

Students can be assigned a "Cultural Immersion Project" where they participate and engage with individuals with an identity they do not hold. Students are encouraged to reach out to an organization that focuses on a community they are not affiliated with and attend a program being hosted by the organization.

The Art of Conversation

This training component teaches students the art of conversation (Krznaric, 2012). The intention of this step is to teach student leaders to listen carefully to unique needs and emotions shared by peers in that moment. This step also teaches peer leaders to share vulnerably in a relatable way.

To teach student leaders about the art of conversation, this curriculum suggests conducting peer helping skills training. One effective method is to teach students SOLER (Sit squarely; Open posture; Lean in; Eye contact; Relax), an acronym which helps students effectively practice nonverbal cues.

Students may also learn verbal forms of active listening, including a roleplay activity where student leaders may rephrase or find meaning in a statement after listening. In these roleplays, student leaders may also learn to ask open-ended questions to learn more about the other person. Student leaders can also learn the art of appropriate disclosure, in which they share personal experience as a means of role-modeling vulnerability, followed by turning the conversation back to the student and asking how the topic relates to them. With these activities combined, student leaders are learning to listen, ask questions, and share in a way that facilitates conversation.

Mass Action and Social Change

The fifth habit of highly empathic people is participating in mass action and social change (Krznaric, 2012). Student leaders will see how understanding others' perspectives "can be a mass phenomenon that brings about fundamental social change" (Krznaric, 2012). The goal is to encourage student leaders to think about how their actions can have a greater influence.

Depending on the campus' OTR programs, student leaders can facilitate, present, or participate in a session or program which teaches new students about a social issue. Student leaders may select a topic relevant to the campus community and talk about actionable steps students can take to improve the social climate around them, or student leaders may identify a broader, global topic and educate students about how to get involved.

Ambitious Imagination

The final habit of highly empathic people is developing an ambitious imagination. This requires students to look beyond their own or surrounding realities and envision possible solutions.

Students should identify a social issue of passion or interest, thinking both globally and locally. Students should identify and interview a university community member who has taken the lead in addressing the social issue. The interview should span the scope of how the project got started and was brought to fruition, focusing on how empathy contributed to creating solutions. Students

should then write a reflection paper, making meaning of the interview and ideas to further address the issue.

Challenges and Limitations

Several limitations exist in the application of this empathy development curriculum. First, the curriculum is not yet supported by empirical evidence; it is built on theory and research, not validated through the collection of evidence across various populations of student leaders over time. The results of the assessment on empathy development may vary based on student population, type of role student leaders hold, length or location of activities, and the facilitators who conduct training. In this phase, the curriculum is intended to provide ideas to student affairs professionals striving to develop empathy in their students.

Additionally, the developers of this curriculum applied the concepts of empathy and empathic leadership to student leaders working in OTR based on their professional lenses. More research must be done to apply empathy and other peer leadership concepts to orientation leaders, the impact their leadership development has on the peer relationship, and the impact on the new student experience. Research can also be done to explore how empathy development may apply to other areas of college student leadership, including resident assistants, Greek leaders, peer health educators, and more.

This curriculum is limited in its assumption that the literature collected on empathy, peer leadership, and practical implications for empathy development connect. Much of the research used is drawn from different fields of study. Further research must be done to gain more insight into the connections between empathy, vulnerability, peer leadership, and peer connectedness in the new student experience.

Conclusion

Connected leadership results from leaders demonstrating and instilling an authentic sense of self in themselves and others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). In OTR, authentic peer leadership may involve sharing one's own story of transition to college to role model and acceptance of new students sharing anxieties, fears, or challenges with a trusted peer. There is a need for future research and implementation of empathy curricula for student leaders as campuses continue to utilize peers to serve new students and support their persistence to graduation. Peer leaders must go beyond their role of merely referring students to campus resources. They must build relationships based upon connection, authenticity, and empathy, which may further aid in the persistence, retention, and success of the students they strive to support.

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Sample: Empathy Skills Assessment

The following are some assessment measures which may help to identify the student leaders' cultivation of **curiosity about others**:
- I often wonder about the perspectives of individuals with experiences different from mine.
- I inquire when I am curious about the perspectives of another person.

The following are some assessment measures which may help to identify the student leaders' ability to **challenge prejudices/discover commonalities**:
- I am able to identify cultural stereotypes about different social identities.
- I feel comfortable challenging verbalized prejudices expressed by my peers.

The following are some assessment measures which may help to identify the student leaders' understanding of **experiential empathy**:
- I understand the role my identities play in varying cultural contexts.
- I am comfortable exploring the experiences that shape another person's perspective.

The following are some assessment measures which may help to identify the student leaders' development in the **art of conversation**:
- I am able to actively listen when others are sharing.
- I am able to vulnerably share in a way that relates to others.

The following are some assessment measures which may help to identify the student leaders' development in **mass action and social change**:
- I recognize the role I can play in social change.
- I am able to successfully facilitate a presentation on a social issue.

The following are some assessment measures which may help to identify the student leaders' progression in developing an **ambitious imagination**:
- I am able to construct a personal ambition to work toward a campus issue.
- I am able to adapt my approach based on differing perspectives of others.