

The Multicultural Myth: A Study of Multicultural Program Organizations at Three Public Research Universities

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The large volume of research on organization development lends theoretical background to the work of assessing higher education organizations. Schein (1984) viewed organizational culture as a pattern of assumptions that groups have invented to adapt to changes in both the external and the internal environment. Schein (1985) identified three levels of organizational culture: Artifacts, values, and basic underlying assumptions—the most fundamental level at which organizations develop and express values. In order to understand organizations, Schein (1984) argued that analyses should go beyond values and artifacts levels, and explore the basic underlying assumptions of these complex systems. Researchers uncover assumptions by examining discrepancies between espoused values and organizational practices (Schein, 1984). For example, an organization may espouse the value of the importance of equality in staff reward distribution yet provide more developmental experiences for some employees than for others. This research project assessed the underlying assumptions of multicultural program organizations in order to lend support to improving their organizational climate.

Higher Education Organizational Development

Organization development within higher education has been studied primarily from the perspective of campus climate. Higher education institutional climate has been defined as the historical, structural, behavioral, and psychological elements that constitute a campus community (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). These elements, which together make up the campus climate, have imbedded within them underlying assumptions and values. Researchers studying organizational climate are assessing these assumptions and values.

Focusing on climate studies of the differential experiences of faculty, administrators, and support staff, Mattice (1995) found that 63% of support staff had no experience of diversity activity (defined as diversity training or diversity discussions), whereas 54% of faculty and 17% of administrators had no such experiences of diversity activity. In general, support staff felt ignored (their word) in their work environments and reported the need to receive more training and development opportunities—specifically regarding diversity (Mattice).

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Bauer (2000) concluded that for support staff, satisfaction with the climate could be organized into four themes: (a) rewards and recognition (both intrinsic and extrinsic; e.g., purpose and recognition by others, and benefits and pay); (b) work-life balance (e.g., provisions for child and elder care, and the recognition of the interrelationship between job and life satisfaction); (c) development opportunities (e.g., opportunities to continue to learn in the context of the work); and (d) perceptions of the working environment (i.e., nature of professional relationships).

In a separate study, Somers et al. (1998) found that faculty and support staff satisfaction were similar but had some unique features. Faculty were most often influenced by the level of collegiality, the workload, and the opportunity for autonomy, whereas support staff were more likely to cite aspects that faculty took for granted, such as the ability to link with the core mission, the opportunity to develop through mentoring, and workplace equality; that is, having administrative policies apply equally to all employees (Somers et al.). On another campus, a secretary who participated in a campus book-reading program was heartened that she got a copy of the book, and was able to participate in discussion groups on the book topic. It was the first time she felt included in the central mission of her higher education organization (Sedlacek, 2004).

Overall, there is minimal research on the organizational climate of higher education organizations. However, there is even less research on the climate of multicultural program organizations (MPOs) within higher education.

Multicultural Program Organizational Development in Higher Education

Multicultural program organizational develop-

ment has emerged as a separate area of study from traditional organizational development. For the purposes of this study, MPOs are units on campuses that have as their primary responsibility to engage differing constituencies of the campus community in services and educational interventions that, broadly defined, work to overcome systems of social oppression (Jackson & Hardiman, 1994). MPOs often include campus equal employment opportunity officers and affirmative action officers, and faculty, student, and staff ombudspersons. Some offer a variety of educational supports that target specific traditionally underrepresented ethnic and/or racial groups; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students; international students; students with differing abilities; and nontraditionally aged students, as well as others (Pope, 1995).

In MPOs social oppression is considered a primary source of organizational conflict (Jackson & Holvino, 1988). In these organizations, Jackson and Holvino (1988) found that conflict was perceived to occur as a result of systems of oppression, not because of poor management. In addition, because of their attention to eradicating social inequities, MPOs are naturally expected to include all members as full participants, including in decision-making and the establishment of values. According to Jackson and Holvino (1988), a multicultural organization "acts on a commitment to eradicate social oppression in all forms within the organization" (p. 83).

Pope (1995) wrote that multicultural organization development involves a systematic, planned change effort. Colleges and universities have generally failed to be successful in responding to structural or proportional diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999), and there have been only sporadic efforts at systemic change within higher education

(Pope). MPOs function to address these problems. This function is very challenging, adding pressure to these organizations. Given these pressures, one might ask whether the climate within these organizations has been addressed sufficiently. Although researchers have thoroughly assessed diversity activities in higher education, there has been little assessment of the climate within MPOs themselves. This unique study assessed the underlying assumptions and values of MPOs in higher education.

Clark (2003) suggested three ways to assess MPOs. She suggested examining: (a) the aesthetic environment (e.g., the physical surroundings that give messages of inclusion or exclusion; Banning, 1973); (b) the structural environment (e.g., positions held, decision making styles, benefits, and development opportunities); and (c) the interpersonal environment (e.g., the presence of caring, listening, respect, and teamwork).

The State of the Climate Within Multicultural Programs in Higher Education

MPOs are expected to provide a great deal for their campuses (Hurtado & Dey, 1997). There are many demands, limited authority, and restricted funding. Whether they are called by the name of offices of multicultural affairs, human relations, affirmative action, educational opportunity, or minority affairs, they often face benign neglect (or worse) within universities (Hurtado & Dey; Jackson & Holvino, 1988). Because of the many expectations for these organizations combined with limited resources, an institutionalized form of discrimination occurs. Although the virtues of a structurally and proportionally diverse campus are often lauded in mission statements, daily realities in MPOs often reflect an experience of marginalization.

Sometimes MPOs are too far removed from the organizational (i.e., power-wielding) center of their institutions. All of these stressors take a toll; this assessment project sought to find out just how the stress is felt. The research questions were: What is the climate in MPOs within universities? What are the best and worst elements of working life in MPOs? What are the unique challenges?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 33 employees working in MPOs at three public research extensive universities, located in the eastern, Midwestern, and western United States. Universities were chosen for comparable size and Carnegie type in three U.S. regions. Each organization was the primary university unit responsible for diversity programming on each campus.

Participants represented a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity. Approximately 28% of the employees were Asian American, 28% were African American, 25% were White, 16% were Latino, and 3% were Native American. The staff of each program was about equal in men and women. These organizations were also broadly diverse by age, sexual orientation, ability and religion. Every employee in each organization was asked to participate, including administrators, faculty, staff, and students. The overall response rate was 80%.

Instrument

An assessment instrument was created for this study. The literature on organizational climate indicates that climate can be adequately measured using assessment instruments and items from several instruments were used in this study. Questions were selected that were consistent with organizational climate literature (Borrevik, 1982; Clark, 2003; Schein,

1985), and that reflected administrative policies. The instruments included the Hale Inventory of Commitment to Multiculturalism (Garcia et al., 2001) and the Cultural Orientation Attitude Scale (Miville, Molla, & Sedlacek, 1992). An organizational climate description questionnaire and a leadership instrument contributed additional resources for instrument measures (Borrevik, 1982; Tyree, 1998).

The Multicultural Program Organization Assessment Instrument (MPOAI) in this study contained a combination of 29 Likert-type and 5 open-ended questions. The MPOAI measured attitudes, information, and behavior.

Reliability of the scores on the MPOAI was confirmed through internal consistency, both across items at each of the three universities, and through consistency between the quantitative and qualitative components of the instrument at each university. Thus, there was internal consistency of method (qualitative/quantitative) and internal consistency of responses across three institutions.

Reliability of the scores on the MPOAI was also determined through a Cronbach alpha reliability test of all items. The alpha of the merged data of all schools was .93. In addition to calculating Cronbach alpha coefficients for the entire sample, separate reliability analyses were conducted with samples from each respective institution to assess the items across campuses. The results indicated that at one institution, the reliability estimate was .94, and at another it was .93.

Both construct validity and content validity of scores from the MPOAI were evaluated. Construct validity was tested through intercorrelations of the scores on the items. In an intercorrelation of all items, there were strongly negative correlations where expected, and strongly positively correlations

where expected. For example, the item, "The morale of employees is high," correlated .78 with the item, "The department head displays tact." The item, "The department head encourages employees to share in making decisions," correlated .73 with, "The department head treats all employees as his/her equal." The correlation between, "I feel that people can tolerate each other's viewpoints," correlated -.71 with, "Tensions between employees interfere with departmental activities." The median item intercorrelation was .44.

Content validity of scores from the MPOAI was determined through pilot testing with four reviewers, all who worked in various aspects of organizational development. After some editing, the reviewers agreed on the clarity of all items.

Procedure

The MPOAI was sent by both hard copy and e-mail attachment to all employees (including student employees) in each organization. Because the researchers wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible, the participants were encouraged to complete the MPOAI anonymously (every participant opted to remain anonymous). Answers to open-ended questions were entered via computer, or handwritten. Participants returned the MPOAI in a stamped, addressed envelope with no return address.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for each item are shown in Table 1. Consistent quantitative and qualitative results emerged across nearly all of the responses across all institutions. Two primary themes emerged with respect to strengths within MPOs.

The first theme was the rewarding aspects

of the work. Responses to the open-ended question, “The best part about working as a member of the program,” were clustered into response types. The type that emerged most frequently was the sense of purpose in the work. Answers within this type included: the nature of the work, the idealism, doing social justice education, teaching, the sense of accomplishment in helping to develop students, and working for the mission and vision of a better world.

The second most cited response to, “The best part about working as a member of the program,” was the positive relationships with coworkers. These responses included: the people, the collaboration and trust, the interactions and rich discussions, collaboration between academic and student affairs, and the collegiality among coworkers.

The third response type on the best part of working as a member of the program clustered around the environment. Aspects of the environment included the ability to be flexible and do independent work, having fun at work, and the atmosphere.

The second theme related to strengths was a strong core of group efficacy and respect for diversity of thought in the organizations. There was very strong agreement on, “Hearing differences of opinion enriches my thinking.” In fact, agreement on this item was the highest in the instrument. There was also high agreement on, “Greater harmony can come out of disagreement,” “Differences of opinion can often lead to better solutions,” “I am committed to the collective purposes of the group,” and, “The department works collaboratively with other units on campus.” There was collective disagreement on the item, “Working in groups tries my patience,” making this a positive response. Finally, “I feel that people can tolerate each other’s viewpoints,” averaged to a positive response.

Three primary themes emerged with respect to challenges within the MPOs.

Reluctance to Acknowledge Prejudice

At least 70% of the staff in each organization declined to list personal prejudices in the open-ended question on this item. Some may have been reticent to answer despite the anonymity of the respondents. When respondents did name prejudice, it was with one exception toward individuals with dominant group membership. For example, prejudice was named toward men, Whites, and Christians. It appears that it may be preferable in MPOs to name prejudice toward those who traditionally hold institutional power.

In the quantitative section (see Table 1), respondents tended to agree with, “Taking risks (including making mistakes) is encouraged in this department,” (overall mean = 2.13, but the standard deviation was almost a full point). Many respondents answered that taking risks and making mistakes were not encouraged.

Similarly, on the item, “I feel pressure to work well with all groups,” respondents’ overall mean answers were closest to *agree* (2.18). At two of the institutions, standard deviations were more than a full-scale point. In each organization, some individuals strongly agreed that there was pressure to work well with all groups, whereas others strongly disagreed.

Limits on Socializing Outside of Work

Despite a strong sense of collegiality within the organizations, limits were placed upon the closeness of the relationships among employees. The regard that employees had for one another did not imply that they wished to develop their relationships outside of the work environment. In fact, employees agreed that they didn’t generally get together outside of

TABLE 1.
Multicultural Program Organization Assessment Instrument (MPOAI)
Mean Scores (N = 32)

Summary of Question	Org 1		Org 2		Org 3		Org M	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Q1 – dept works collaboratively with other units	1.50	0.52	1.13	0.35	1.00	0.00	1.21	0.29
Q2 – dept head puts dept's welfare above others	2.36	1.28	2.27	0.88	2.50	0.71	2.38	0.96
Q3 – dept head encourages staff to share in decisions	2.00	1.04	1.27	0.46	1.33	0.58	1.53	0.69
Q4 – dept head displays tact	2.50	1.16	1.27	0.46	1.00	0.00	1.59	0.54
Q5 – there is borrowing and sharing among staff	1.93	0.83	1.20	0.41	1.00	0.00	1.38	0.41
Q6 – staff get fair recognition for their work	1.86	0.86	1.33	0.62	1.67	0.58	1.62	0.69
Q7 – staff enjoy getting together outside of work	2.77	0.93	2.47	0.92	3.33	0.58	2.86	0.81
Q8 – tensions between staff interfere with activities ^a	2.07	0.92	0.20	0.41	1.33	0.58	1.20	0.64
Q9 – morale of staff is high	2.29	0.99	1.13	0.35	1.33	0.58	1.58	0.64
Q10 – dept head treats staff as his/her equal	2.46	1.20	1.33	0.62	1.67	1.15	1.82	0.99
Q11 – I am comfortable to express my individuality	1.79	1.12	1.40	0.83	1.33	0.58	1.51	0.84
Q12 – I am committed to the purposes of the group	1.86	1.03	1.20	0.41	1.00	0.00	1.35	0.48
Q13 – differences of opinion enrich my thinking	1.29	0.47	1.13	0.35	1.00	0.00	1.14	0.27
Q14 – greater harmony can come out of disagreement	1.93	0.92	1.40	0.63	1.33	0.58	1.55	0.71
Q15 – change brings new life to an organization	1.79	0.89	1.67	0.62	2.00	0.00	1.82	0.50
Q16 – working in groups tries my patience ^a	1.50	1.02	1.60	0.83	1.33	1.15	1.48	1.00
Q17 – the goals and priorities of the dept are clear	3.00	1.18	1.87	0.74	1.33	0.58	2.07	0.83
Q18 – I feel respected by coworkers when I make requests of them	2.00	0.68	1.40	0.74	1.67	0.58	1.69	0.67
Q19 – my attitude toward my coworkers is positive	1.71	0.61	1.20	0.41	1.33	0.58	1.41	0.53
Q20 – I believe that I generally know my coworkers	2.57	0.94	1.87	0.92	1.67	0.58	2.04	0.81
Q21 – I have at least one confidante within the dept	1.77	0.73	1.64	0.93	2.00	0.00	1.80	0.55
Q22 – taking risks (including mistakes) is encouraged	2.64	1.39	1.43	0.76	2.33	0.58	2.13	0.91
Q27 – differences of opinion lead to better solutions	2.00	0.96	1.40	0.51	1.00	0.00	1.47	0.49
Q28 – I feel that people can tolerate other viewpoints	2.79	1.19	1.40	0.63	1.50	0.71	1.90	0.84
Q29 – It can be overwhelming to consider differences ^a	2.14	1.03	1.80	1.15	0.00	0.00	1.31	0.73
Q30 – Leaders make serious efforts to increase people of color at all levels of the organization	2.14	1.46	1.47	0.74	1.50	0.71	1.70	0.97
Q31 – Leaders make effort to reduce hierarchy	3.07	1.44	1.87	0.99	2.00	1.41	2.31	1.28
Q32 – Employees seek to incorporate multiculturalism	2.36	0.74	1.53	0.74	1.00	0.00	1.63	0.49
Q33 – I feel pressure to work well with all groups ^a	2.08	1.38	2.47	1.30	2.00	0.00	2.18	0.89

Note. Q1 – Q11: 1 = almost always occurs, 2 = approximately equal in occurrence and nonoccurrence, 3 = infrequently occurs, 4 = almost never occurs. Q12 – Q32: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree.

^a Item reflected in positive direction.

work (this item had the highest negative response of all items), and that employees did not know one another on a personal level.

Disempowerment of Support Staff and Student Staff

In a cluster of questions about the hierarchy of the working environment, staff generally rated these questions the lowest (the second and third lowest of all items on the instrument), indicating that they believed that hierarchy existed within the organization. On the question, “Leaders make efforts to reduce hierarchy,” answers ranged between *agree* and *neutral*, but the standard deviation was the highest of all questions on the instrument, indicating that some employees agreed with this item, and others disagreed. Similarly, on the question, “The department head puts the department’s welfare above the welfare of individuals,” mean answers were about neutral, but there was a full one-point standard deviation in responses, indicating that some agreed with the statement, whereas others disagreed.

In the open-ended questions, in general, when there was disenfranchisement, it was students and support staff who expressed it (self-identified). Responses that indicated concerns about marginalization were consistent within individual surveys across both Likert-type and open-ended questions.

In responses to the open-ended questions, the best experiences cited were often teaching, and the worst experiences were often being prevented from teaching. Access to the most positive experience was not available to all employees. Those who regretted not participating in teaching and training were support staff and students (both graduate and undergraduate).

DISCUSSION

Limitations

Given the small sample size, these results may

not be generalizable to other institutions. However, they did represent responses from three areas of the country. Further, given the paucity of studies that investigate the climate within MPOs, these results provide an initial glimpse into some of the dynamics within these organizations. This study also, in the spirit of an interpretive tradition, likely gives voice to issues in ways that a strictly statistical survey could not. Open-ended questions and the opportunity for open comments were included because researchers wanted to capture unanticipated variables. To maintain the anonymity of the respondents, no in-person interviews were done. For this reason, the study does not fit within either a specific quantitative or qualitative tradition.

Although the literature on the topic studied here is not extensive, the results are consistent with issues raised in other work. For example, Sedlacek (2004) discussed the tendency of workers on multicultural issues to “burn out” and to feel distanced from others on diversity issues. Others have noted the difficulty of dealing with the complex issues in MPOs, and the paucity of institutional support (Garcia et al., 2001; Hurtado et al., 1999). Results are also consistent with research reviewed earlier on the importance of a sense of purpose and work-life balance, particularly for support staff (Bauer, 2000; Somers et al., 1998). But there has been little research beyond discussion and conjecture on the organizational climate in departments concerned with multicultural programming and the issues facing employees in these units. More research could further specify the strengths and weaknesses of the climate in MPOs.

Implications

Practice. Each of the three findings has implications for practice. Given the reticence of staff to acknowledge personal prejudice, and

the pressures to not make mistakes, it could be important to openly discuss this trend in organizational meetings. Keeping statements about values more fluid might also lessen the pressures to conform and to not reveal oneself (Dahler-Larsen, 1998). Many of these organizations are expected to “carry the diversity flag” on their campuses, and experience pressure to be the experts in multiculturalism on campus. There may be an internalized expectation that to be perceived as competent or credible, employees must not have personal prejudices.

In practice, this dynamic could begin to be addressed if leaders could model that one need not be perfect by stating their own prejudices with all staff present. This is one way to challenge the basic underlying assumption that those doing this work are free of their own prejudices. In addition, more attention to relational values, including the values of trust, forgiveness, and reconciliation, could enhance a climate of acceptance of human faults (Chen & Eastman, 1997).

Many staff indicated that they did not socialize with one another outside of the work environment. It could be that because of the intensity of this work, there may be a need to create a separation between work and home. Given this finding, one way to ease stress on employees could be to accept this as an attempt to create more work/life balance in the context of stressful work. Once acknowledged, employees may be less likely to experience guilt and the pressure to perform as multicultural experts throughout their lives.

It may be more imperative to lead the way in equality among staff in MPOs than in traditional organizations, because MPO staff may be even more aware of discrepancies between stated values and underlying assumptions (Schein, 1985). Expectations of meaningful work may be higher in these programs

because of the stated value on empowerment for all groups in MPOs. These expectations could contribute to a heightened awareness that inequality of opportunity exists within the organization. It is the significant meaning available to staff in MPOs that offers the greatest intrinsic rewards. As was found in this assessment, the most positive aspect of the working environment was the meaning in the work. It may be possible to expand this connection to the core meaning to each employee in these organizations through expanding opportunities for all to participate in teaching.

There is some indication that the business community may have achieved this shift towards creating opportunities for support staff, rather than professional diversity or consultant staff, to teach. At Pacific Gas & Electric Company, there was an immediate need to train 27,000 employees in diversity awareness. The company accomplished this by training 110 support staff employees to perform the training (Johnson & O'Mara, 1992). Although most faculty and students surrounding support staff in higher education are striving toward advancement, for support staff, the reality is that the opportunity for growth into higher positions is rare. In “The Diversity Issue No One Talks About,” Oleson (1999) explored class issues in the workplace. She noted that fewer than 1% of U.S. workers ever move from support staff to professional level work in midcareer (Olesen). When they do, they require mentors, and their change is often motivated by the desire to make a difference. It often has high costs to family and friends, and it can limit other life options. Those who have made the change indicate that white-collar and blue-collar are different worlds. Adams (1992) and Oleson have suggested that the best way to facilitate the shift is to make no assumptions that employ-

ees will understand details of the new culture while continually communicating all aspects of the work culture.

We have made suggestions in three areas, each addressing a key finding from this study. Creating an environment where personal prejudice is safe to express could enhance a climate of trust (Chen & Eastman, 1997). Acknowledging the difficulty of socializing with colleagues outside of traditional working hours could help employees negotiate work-life balance. Finally, providing opportunities for all to participate in diversity training in a teaching role could contribute a greater sense of purpose.

If organizational leaders are significant creators and shapers of organizational culture (and thus, climate), then leaders bear the burden of responsibility in addressing issues of climate in these organizations. In fact, Schein (1985) stated, “There is a possibility . . . that the *only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture*” (p. 381). Leaders can be more effective as cultural managers as they work to uncover underlying assumptions.

Theory. This study raises questions applicable to racial and other identity development models. As those who study racial identity development have stated, rare is the individual who has achieved racial identity at the level of autonomy or integration (Helms, 1995). Further, integration and autonomy do not imply the complete absence of prejudice, but are stages that indicate the capacity to take personal responsibility for one’s prejudice (Helms). More research is needed to test theories of racial identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other forms of identity development with respect to the pressures that individuals may experience working in multicultural program organizations. What do these professional pressures

imply for individual identity development? Within the Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, and Mallory (2003) framework for individual diversity development is an emphasis that diversity development for everyone is gradual and requires a lifetime of practice. Further complicating the process is the need to integrate each intersecting and interacting identity (Chavez et al., 2003; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

This study has implications for multicultural organization development theory. Pope (1995) noted that many institutions of higher education and specifically student affairs organizations are engaged in what she terms 1st order multicultural developmental changes. First-order changes include basic tasks such as recruiting and retaining staff, and second-order changes are structural, such as changes in patterns of work assignments. Other second-order changes can include an evaluation of social groups and their levels represented in a given organization’s staff, and anti-oppression-focused values development (Jackson & Holvino, 1986, 1988). Pope posited the need for more second-order change, for a paradigmatic shift in thinking and doing in MPOs.

CONCLUSION

There are some similarities among higher education MPO development and other organization development. As mentioned earlier, both types of organizations have underlying values and assumptions. The challenge is to uncover these assumptions so that they can be addressed. As Schein (1984) suggested, researchers can aid organizations by uncovering underlying assumptions.

However, these organizational types differ in that MPOs face additional pressures to address social oppression (Chesler, 1994). This

study suggests that some consequences of these pressures may manifest in not being comfortable to exhibit prejudice, in avoiding socializing with colleagues, and in maintaining organizational hierarchies. Each of the three themes has been organized around the concept of the “multicultural myth.” The multicultural myth is the underlying assumption that those doing the work of diversity in MPOs in higher education should be free of discriminatory

behavior and personal prejudice. Those doing the difficult work of MPOs might lessen the burdens by avoiding getting caught in the assumptions of the multicultural myth. Uncovering and acknowledging these assumptions can be helpful in the ongoing improvement of MPO climate.

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