

**CAMPUS DIVERSITY TRIUMPHS:  
VALLEYS OF HOPE**

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DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION VOLUME 20

# CAMPUS DIVERSITY TRIUMPHS: VALLEYS OF HOPE

EDITED BY

**SHERWOOD THOMPSON**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# FOREWORD

Recently, I attended a Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC) workshop entitled *Leveraging Diversity: The Department Chairs' Transformative Role*. The facilitator of the workshop asked participants to introduce themselves and to state their hopes and fears pertaining to the topic. There were many veteran chief diversity officers in the room and their answers were a bit jaded. They were fearful that what will be shared in the workshop would be nothing new and that there would be much lamenting about the lack of diversity in higher education, but little action. Of course, the setting of a four hour sit and get session was not one that would engender immediate actions.

Initially, I felt sorry for the facilitator because she set herself up for this open ridicule, but the facilitator was able to anticipate and pivot around the initial disenchantment as she rephrased some of the negativity. She said, "if we were to return to this workshop in ten years what do hope would be different and what could each of us do to make a difference?" This pivot was very necessary because it engaged the audience in thinking about actions, baselines, and benchmarks. These veterans did not want to see the statistics around recruitment and retention of faculty and students of color. They did not want to see that there are a shift in demographics in which students of color will be on the rise and recruitment and retention of faculty of color would not keep pace; therefore, parity would become a fantastical dream, not a reality. These participants could quote the data more readily than the facilitator could and they had a host of stories from their own context to validate the data points. What these participants wanted were actions. In fact, they wanted to know about culturally responsive strategies that worked and whether these strategies could be replicated on their campuses. My own personal story is one that is a Valley of Hope. I share this story as a tribute to the authors of this volume who are engaged in their own personal triumphs.

As a professor of literacy instruction, department chair, associate dean, dean, and now provost, I often incorporated tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy into my leadership, most specifically those touted by Geneva Gay in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2000). In her book, she stated that to teach and lead culturally responsively, a teacher leader must be validating, comprehensive, empowering, multidimensional, transformative, and emancipatory. As an African American, provost in a predominantly White institution, I perfected these tenets as access points into the community. My navigation was intentional and discerning; therefore,

I embraced what I knew best and embarked on leadership that was culturally responsive.

In order to engage and connect with faculty and staff, I needed to focus on who they were as people and to validate their cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles. I began the provostship with the phrase, “In order to launch our future, we must honor our past.” As an outsider to this culture, I needed a contextualized understanding of the people and the programs. I wanted to know how each person was invested, their ownership, and history. I open my doors to all comers and simply asked them to tell their stories.

In listening to the stories, I focused on the next tenet of culturally responsiveness which was comprehensiveness. I wanted to know the faculty and staff as they were connected to the university, but also any personal anecdote that they were willing to disclose. I too was free to tell my story as it paralleled events in their lives. My only caution was to ask them to avoid discussing problems or concerns. I did not want my first personal interface with faculty and staff to be one based on negativity or discussions about other colleagues. I did set up a mechanism for those problems to be vetted, but not at the initial encounter. An element of comprehensiveness is that a culture operates as an extended family – assisting, supporting, and encouraging each other.

As I listened, I was discovering who were the cultural keepers and brokers of solutions and relationships that would support my navigation, understanding, access, and inclusion in the organizational culture.

Multidimensional means that a culture is not finite, but intricately woven across copious aspects of the people involved in the culture. Although I was hitting the ground listening to my colleagues as they shared their persons, I was aware that their stories connected to their programs, the curriculum, content, the climate, student-centered relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments. I recognized that faculty and staff members were highly invested in the effectiveness of their positions and the success of the students. What I learned is that they were seeking a leader that was directional, not directive. They wanted a person who understood the complexity and multifaceted aspects of leadership who could lead them where they wanted to go without derailing their progress or intent with initiatives not steeped in their cultural values.

What I discovered about the faculty and staff was that they already had a cohesive sense of mission. They wanted to empower their students to learn, serve, and lead. It was evident that the faculty and staff had their own sense of empowerment that focused on engaged motivation, perseverance, and resilience in times of economic unrest and diminished capacity. They wanted leadership that recognized their tenacity and determination and paved a way for their continuous progress by removing barriers to effectiveness and productivity. In order to embrace empowerment, as a leader, I had to be invested in the support of all faculty and staff members through fiscal as well as affective means. The faculty and staff members had to recognize that what they accomplished was

viewed as valid and valued. My own empowerment statement that I wanted them to embrace was that we needed “internal solidarity in order to generate better external positioning.”

Transformative leadership that is culturally responsive does not rely on traditional practices; therefore, a clear, intentional, consistent message about the path in which we were to follow had to be stated. From my platform presentations when I was seeking the appointment to my welcome address at the first all-university meeting, my transformational goal was highlighted, “In order to serve all learners, we needed to produce students who are culturally, linguistically, developmentally, and technologically confident and competent.” All of our students could indeed become effective multicultural citizens of the world if they were taught culturally responsive techniques that were imbedded across the curriculum and not just taught in an isolated multicultural course. I expressed that in order for us to teach these competencies, we too must transform our practices and participate in professional development opportunities that would enrich our knowledge, skills, and dispositions in these critical pedagogical areas. We cannot teach what we do not know!

I was willing to appropriate funds for professional development, curriculum mapping, and strategic planning at the program level provided they were willing to engage. Collectively, we realized that to transform our programs and instructional practices, we needed collaboration and not coercion. Currently, we are strategically planning for these transformational processes that will enhance our students’ abilities to become social critics who can make effective decisions that lead to personal, social, political, and economic, and educational action.

Emancipatory leadership allows for multiple perspectives. As a leader, I want to listen to all and honor these myriad voices by channeling what is conveyed into action. I think that faculty and staff members feel emancipated when their voices are heard and they can identify demonstrative outcomes based on their input. I want my faculty to speak their truths, but to recognize that there may be no single version of the truth that is total and permanent because multiple lenses germinate multiple realities.

Emancipatory leadership encourages clear and insightful thinking and the acceptance of knowledge as something to be continuously shared, critiqued, revised, and renewed. In order for emancipation to promulgate, opportunities such as forums, symposia, blogs, round tables, and other interactive dialogues are to be established as conduits to connectivity between ideas and actions.

As a culturally responsive leader, I must move beyond my mental board of directors and collaboratively embrace the cultural cadence of the people (faculty, staff, and students) who are the lifeblood of the university. I want to seek understanding constantly and consistently as I launch my administration as provost in order to lead to a sustained direction that embraces an intentional and discerning vision that does not outpace our capacity.

My personal learning and leadership story is indeed one filled with many triumphs as I traversed my own Valley of Hope. I wish I would have had this volume to help me navigate my leadership journey. I had to stumble and falter along my path in order to come to an actualized leadership cadence that was culturally responsive. I had to take action and move forward just like the audience of the workshop I attended.

The audience like many others who are doing the rich work of equity, diversity, and inclusion on our campus need the tools and strategies that are effective. The chapters in this edition, *Campus Diversity Triumphs: Valleys of Hope*, are exactly what the audience needed. Those diversity officers, deans, and chairs were seeking transformational practices that could enable them to become culturally responsive leaders of their campus diversity efforts. They wanted to recruit more students and faculty of color, they wanted to retain said faculty and students, and they wanted to create a campus culture and climate that was open, affirming, and inclusive for not only students of color, but for White students and international students as well.

The authors in this edited volume are what I would call culturally responsive, transformational leaders. They did not want to wait 10 years to return to the same dialog, the same reflection, and the same concerns. They took action and did things differently on their campuses. These authors understand culturally responsive leadership. This leadership is truly telling in each of the chapters edited in this volume and many are aligned with my own experiences as a culturally responsive leader.

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