Chapter 8: Increase Your Leadership Impact: Curating a Culture of Belonging

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Equity, diversity, and inclusive excellence are critical and complex issues facing leaders of colleges and universities.

Access to higher education (e.g., affordability, opportunity, and accessibility) and ensuring that students thrive are critical issues for all of us. Building a culture of belonging is a unifying leadership strategy that supports student success, shared governance, research excellence, financial sustainability, and community engagement. A culture of belonging is the key to enhancing the effectiveness of higher education in the 21st century.

Clarion Call for Change: Experience of Students with Disabilities

Higher education has problems achieving equitable retention and graduation rates among students, especially students from socially stigmatized groups, including those whose identities are based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Students with disabilities comprise another group that is deeply affected and often struggle to garner attention from presidents and boards.

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Further, students with disabilities are failing in higher education at rates far higher than their peers. According to federal data, about 30% of students with disabilities who enroll in four-year colleges or universities graduate and even then, it can take as much as six years for them to complete a degree. (Sanford, Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey & Shaver, 2011) For those who enroll in two-year schools, 41% graduate. For individuals who complete a bachelor’s degree, there was a 15% gap in educational attainment between deaf and hearing people.

According to the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes Deaf People and Educational Attainment in the United States, students who are black and deaf are 18% less likely to receive bachelor’s degrees compared to their hearing, white peers (Garberoglio, Cawthon & Bond, 2016). Deaf and Asian students were 27% less likely to attain a bachelor’s degree compared to their hearing Asian peers. Garberoglio, Cawthon, and Bond’s data shows that students with multiple identities (i.e., intersectionality) experience a profound negative impact on their achievement. The negative impact on achievement creates a talent drain and missed opportunities for knowledge creation and innovation.

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Heroic narratives are commonly attributed (often unconsciously) to students with disabilities and from socially stigmatized groups. Stories of success “against all odds” are heartening and considered newsworthy. However, these stories reveal an expectation of exceptionalism that is pervasive in higher education. Higher education’s origins focused on its ability to get the best and the brightest students. When students enter who do not look, behave, learn, or “fit in” with the images that people hold about the image or the ways of being that are exhibited by the best and the brightest, it creates dissonance that can lead to, often unconsciously, the pressure for students from socially stigmatized groups to conform to the university’s physical, social, and curricular design. Students must overcome these barriers on the institution’s terms to succeed. Reasonable accommodation practices often place more onus on the student with a disability to adapt to the norms of the institution, rather than on the institution adapting to different modes of learning, expression, and participation. A female, Eritrean-American, deafblind Harvard-trained lawyer said one of her life goals was “to live in a world where her feats aren’t heroic” (Oxygen, 2016).

Importance of Culture of Belonging
Belonging is a fundamental element of the human condition that is nearly as important as food and water (Pelletier, 1994; Pitonvak, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Stanford researchers Gregory Walton and Geoffrey Cohen (2011) write, “Social belonging—a sense of having positive relationships with others—is a fundamental human need. Social isolation, loneliness, and low social status harm not only subjective well-being but also intellectual achievement and immune function and health. Even a single instance of exclusion can undermine well-being, intelligence quotient (IQ) test performance, and self-control” (p. 1447).

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The importance of belonging in higher education is not new. Belonging is a measure of a healthy campus climate because it’s positively correlated with student persistence. It is a measure incorporated in the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climate Survey. Research shows a clear benefit when interventions and practices focus on creating a sense of belonging among students, particularly those from socially stigmatized groups (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Students are able to understand their experiences and the impact of the intersectionality of their identities as they move through their collegiate journey.

Currently, a culture of compliance rather than a culture of belonging prevails at most institutions for important reasons. Compliance is critical for the integrity of our leadership and our organizational structure. Legal and regulatory requirements demand specific processes and reporting to government and accreditation agencies, including Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) accreditation, Title IX, and highly detailed accommodation processes for people with disabilities. Legal and managerial advice often focuses on minimizing legal risks and making decisions that are logical and technically correct. Although acceptable and necessary in some situations where the problem and the solution are fairly clear, resolving complex situations requires us to balance competing perspectives and manage losses experienced within the community in ways that the community can bear during a time of change (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). What is not commonly understood is the impact of narrowly conceptualized legal jurisprudence since the introduction of the 14th Amendment and civil rights laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Embedded in the advice we receive are the biases within our constitutional jurisprudence that reinforce social hierarchy based on human value. The hierarchy based on human value concept is currently at the heart of the work of Kellogg Foundation’s Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation initiative that focuses on the impact of racial hierarchy created by conscious and unconscious bias (Kellogg, N.D.).

Leaders of thriving organizations are putting belonging at the heart of other similar unifying approaches. In his book, Hit Refresh: The Quest to Rediscover Microsoft’s Soul and Imagine a Better Future for Everyone, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella describes his work to curate a culture at Microsoft that better meets customer needs and strengthens teamwork and innovation (Nadella, Shaw, & Nichols, 2017). Nadella, Shaw, and Nichols’s book reminds us that our work begins with people and creating a culture that fosters a dynamic and thriving environment for everyone.

Microsoft’s strategy of culture first is paying off. The company’s stock is rated as the top technology performer in 2018, surpassing Apple and other tech giants (Kim, 2018). Companies such as Google, Netflix, and Pixar are also working to create cultures that enhance a sense of belonging to accelerate their creative edge. The best way for us to create value for the world is to provide a campus experience that allows for students to better prepare themselves for a workforce that is already discovering the power of belonging.

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Presidents need to grow the circle of belonging on and among our campuses. Success measures related to campus climate and belonging are incorporated in most of our campus assessment tools. The absence of a culturally-binding narrative for all unconsciously supports the dominant culture built into the DNA of our organizations. Building a culture of belonging provides a values-based narrative focused on empathy and the well-being of others and a new way of making decisions that can strengthen student, faculty, and staff retention—particularly for those experiencing institutional and cultural bias. It invites people to focus on daily interactions where intersectional identities illuminate how our systems and behaviors are not working. This focus has the power to convert those moments into opportunities for discovery of how we can innovate and improve ways to teach, learn, research, and engage with each other.

Creating a culture of belonging provides a unique opportunity for collective action within higher education by encouraging us to understand how to use our unique strengths as institutions not only to compete but also to provide critical opportunities needed by students in their socio, emotional, and intellectual developmental journeys toward completing their degrees.

Culture of Belonging: Creating a New Creative Edge in Higher Education

When we make adaptations for people with disabilities, many of the adaptations end up benefitting a larger group of people. For example, think curb cuts for sidewalks on street corners. Initially created to comply with the needs of wheelchair users, the curb cuts became a must for parents pushing strollers, small children riding their tricycles, and people walking with their pets. Think Individualized Education Plans, which became policy 40 years ago for children with disabilities. Today, personalized learning is touted as the future of learning. Think Stephen Hawking and how he impacted cosmology while using a machine to speak for him. Think text-to-speech programs, which were initially designed for people with vision loss and learning disabilities but are now a standard feature in smart technology.

My perspective is that as a president of a university that is different than most: Gallaudet University. Gallaudet University is the only liberal arts bilingual university in the world that focuses on teaching, research, and engagement communicating with American Sign Language (ASL) while using spoken language (English) for reading and writing. Founded in 1864 by a Congressional charter signed by President Lincoln, at a time when deaf people were excluded from higher education, Gallaudet fulfills Lincoln’s belief that everyone should have a “fair chance at the race of life.” (Cordano, 2018) Gallaudet’s mission states that we are “a bilingual, diverse, multicultural institution of higher education that ensures the intellectual and professional advancement of deaf and hard of hearing individuals through ASL and English.” Because Gallaudet serves people with hearing loss with intersectional identities, it has become a place where identifying as deaf or hard of hearing provides a sense of acceptance, understanding, and empathy—all of which are key to fostering belonging.

As a result, Gallaudet has become an epicenter of research and knowledge based on “Deaf Gain”—the benefits of deafness that create value for the world. The benefits include the discovery that ASL is a language just like Spanish, English, and Japanese. We have also paved the way for a new field: cognitive, educational neuroscience. It is based on visual learning and visual language acquisition (Visual Language and Visual Learning Science of Learning Center, 2011). This research proves that the brain doesn’t discriminate against visual language, people
do (Visual Language and Visual Learning Science of Learning Center, 2011; Cordano, 2016). Gallaudet also holds a patent for real-time texting that allows people to text simultaneously (instead of alternately), increasing the efficiency of texting (Carter-Conneen, 2017).

A creative edge can be achieved when belonging and identity are linked and celebrated. Gallaudet has become an unintended grand experiment in learning community design. These gains reinforce the argument that a creative edge can be achieved when belonging and identity are linked and celebrated. Gallaudet has become an unintended grand experiment in learning community design—one that fosters a sense of belonging and celebrates a way of being in the world (rather than a disability). This has led to Gallaudet creating and advancing opportunities, knowledge, and resources to improve the world for everyone, including our community.

Curating A Culture of Belonging
Curating a culture of belonging will transcend the compliance orientation to civil rights laws and regulations that exists on many campuses—creating a new social fabric of learning. This work will help accelerate organizational strategic priorities by providing an integrative focus. It will also deepen our attention to things that matter, leading to a transformative impact. We at Gallaudet are early in this journey. Curating a culture of belonging is a leadership move by which presidents can make a difference. Actions that can support creating a culture of belonging and a new creative edge include:

- **Incorporate a culture of belonging in as many decisions as possible.** We must incorporate the values of belonging in our decision-making. This means asking others and ourselves how each initiative, curricular offering, project, budget request, or capital request supports a culture of belonging. This will stimulate the development of a unifying narrative that will create a different set of behaviors and decisions on and among our campuses, which will have effects in the larger world. Rewards will be more apparent, actions sharper, and ideas strengthened through human connections on campus.

- **Pay attention to difference-makers, particularly those who support developmental learning (Maxwell, 2006).** When intersectional identities illuminate how our systems and behaviors are not working, we need to use these moments as opportunities for discovery. How are they impacting learning and innovation? Difference-makers use developmental approaches to teaching and working to ensure that diverse students are welcomed and supported. For example, after seeing a significant failure or withdrawal rate among students in groups with social stigmas in an entry-level course, through our participation in the Association of Chief Academic Officers’ Digital Fellows Program, we encouraged our mathematics faculty at Gallaudet to use digital adaptive software to better provide learning support and to deliver the content bilingually in ASL and English. When belonging, framed by accepting a person’s way of being, is the focus of actions, it yields powerfully different results and remarkable high impact innovations.

- **Focus on a culture of belonging with key leadership/shared governance groups.** The importance of belonging must be frequently and strategically discussed with key leadership constituencies, including the board, the faculty senate, employee/staff organizations, and student governing organizations. We must create opportunities to
support, develop, and appreciate ideas and efforts that strengthen a culture of belonging. Leadership discussions and efforts that reinforce caring are at the heart of creating a culture of belonging. At Gallaudet, we formed a University Council with leadership representatives from the board, administration, faculty, staff, and students. Supporting our collective leadership success is a crucial goal of the council. Connecting and developing as leaders strengthens our sense of belonging as leaders—an important place to begin.

- **Shift from being competitors to collaborators.** Higher education will be more robust when students have access to more flexible learning experiences that enhance their sense of belonging on our campuses. As presidents, how can we work more collaboratively to redesign higher education pathways? This may require shifting from being competitors (focused on the “fit” of students to our campuses), to collaborators that map our impact on students and their developmental journey. If we succeed, it will likely benefit higher education’s expanding regional collaboration with employers, governments, and the nonprofit sector. One witness of this possibility was a Gallaudet student who spent last summer in a research community at Harvard University, where his research thesis won an award. This experience made him feel that he could have the best of both worlds: conducting research at an elite institution (giving him and his hearing peers an opportunity to grow and learn in a specific scientific field) and communicating directly in sign language at Gallaudet.

As presidents, we have an opportunity to create cultures of belonging on and among our campuses that will advance a new creative edge in higher education—one that provides a well-prepared workforce for the world and supports the developmental journey of students in their lifelong pursuit of knowledge.

**References**


