

Chapter 34

Using Social–Situational Learning to Create Career Pathways Into Community College Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a partnership created between a community college and a university designed to create pathways into community college leadership. The program used social-situational approaches to learning, placing students enrolled in the university's higher education graduate programs into graduate assistant positions that had defined responsibilities for the college's key strategic priorities. The program introduced students to multiple leadership pathways through participation in a community college environment. Students engaged in work that significantly advanced the college's strategic initiatives. The program centered social-situational leadership development on multiple levels and circulated through the shared priorities of social justice and inclusive excellence across the community college and the university. The partnership viewed graduate student development through the lens of transformative leadership, focusing on equity, access, diversity, ethics, critical inquiry, transformational change, and social justice. These principles underlie in the mission of both institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Community colleges play a significant role in the American higher-education system as a pathway to social and professional opportunity. More students attend community colleges than any other type of higher-education institution (Ma & Baum, 2016). Community colleges are a gateway to community engagement, educational opportunity, diverse learners, lifelong learning, economic development, and improving the quality of life for Americans. Amid the current public debates about the value of higher education, with state legislatures increasingly less willing to fund higher education generally, community colleges face real threats to their continued existence (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Rhoads & Valadez, 2016). Community colleges operate in an environment that increasingly views college as too expensive and lacking the flexibility to respond to local needs (Castleman, Schwartz, & Baum, 2015; Mellow & Heelan, 2014). Effective leadership to sustain open access to higher education is essential to the future of community colleges and all they do to enhance their communities.

Leadership development is now a critical focus for community colleges. Historic numbers of impending presidential retirements make the future less certain, and inform renewed efforts to develop leadership succession (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; Ellis & Garcia, 2017; Shults, 2001). Succession planning, developing new leaders, and attracting successful leaders to the community college sector are key strategies for building a cadre of future community college leaders. Successful colleges of the future are already working today to create a new generation of change-agent leaders at all administrative levels (McNair, Duree, & Ebberts, 2011). Community colleges must work to develop pathways for leadership in academic affairs, student affairs, and fiscal affairs to create a robust and viable future for this important sector of higher education. A shift in mindset is necessary to achieve this leadership vision, and commitment to a sustainable, long-term effort to transform multilevel educational leadership must remain vital.

Graduate assistantships have long been a training ground and pathway into both faculty and professional staff positions in higher education. They are effective ways to provide socially situated learning, and career development for graduate students, who have already selected their professional field of study, but may be unsure of career pathways within that field that are available to them. Graduate assistantships also provide financial resources to help students complete graduate studies. It is a mutually beneficial relationship for the student and the institution.

However, unlike other types of institutions, community colleges do not usually have the option to develop graduate assistant pathways as a means of attracting new professionals and future institutional leaders. The fact that their mission does not include graduate education puts them at a disadvantage for attracting new talent through the graduate assistant model. Nor do graduate students have the opportunity to receive exposure to the dynamic community college working environment. This essentially limits their awareness of, and exposure to potential career opportunities to research universities and regional comprehensive institutions, where most graduate programs in higher education are housed (Hirt, 2006). Financial constraints at community colleges also make implementing graduate assistant positions difficult. However, there are ways to provide graduate assistant opportunities in community college settings. Community colleges cannot solve this problem in isolation. They must create dynamic learning organizations through transformative community partnerships. This fits their role and mission very well as community colleges have always positioned themselves in their communities as collaborators, partners, and agents to connect industry, non-profits, and universities in meaningful partnerships to benefit students.

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