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Student Involvement on a Campus Committee and Its Impact on Sense of Belonging: A reflection on a collaborative effort to honour Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflection of one public university's experience developing a collaborative effort to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Aware of the impact student involvement can have on their sense of belonging, an ad hoc committee planned programmes and events to honour Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that emphasised student involvement. First, to illustrate the importance of student belonging at the university level, we discuss the universal application of Maslow's (1954) belonging needs. Next, we explore the theoretical literature on the topic of student belonging by Goodenow (1993), Strayhorn (2012), Thomas (2012), Cooper (2009), Tinto (1993), and Astin (1993). Then, we describe the Dr. King programme and analyse it at the programme level by applying elements of Kezar's (2005) model of institutional collaboration in higher education. We conclude by discussing the benefits of student involvement in programme planning and implementation, and as panel participants to demonstrate how institutional collaboration that includes students can impact their sense of belonging.

Keywords: institutional collaboration, student involvement, sense of belonging

Introduction

Every January, the United States honours Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an American hero, a Baptist minister, and civil rights leader who employed civil disobedience in the fight for racial, social, and economic justice and equality. On campus, the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Day typically occurs before the start of this university's spring semester and as a result goes unrecognised. Painfully aware that our institution had failed to honour Dr. King's legacy in any substantive way for many years, we took it upon ourselves to create a programme built upon student-faculty collaborations to honour his life and legacy.

A key component in planning a successful celebration required institutional collaboration that would include members from both the academic and student affairs departments. Furthermore, the programme plan needed to advance the university's mission outlined in the strategic plan goals that deemed it essential to "focus on academic programs and curricular initiatives and to affirm student, faculty, and staff diversity as central to the university experience" (University, 2015). The university maintains that "experiencing diversity expands perspectives, contributes to multicultural competence and becomes a key element in attracting and retaining students, faculty, and staff" (University, 2015). Additionally, the university strategic plan promotes the following actions, "to initiate a process to identify appropriate, feasible methods for faculty and staff hiring and student recruitment from underrepresented groups; adopt appropriate implementation strategies to increase faculty, staff and student diversity, retention and identify; and to support appropriate and ongoing efforts to further develop multicultural competencies in students, faculty, and staff" (University, 2015). A programme to honour Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. supported and advanced the aforementioned aspects of the university's mission.

The programme committee membership included faculty, staff and students who were involved in the planning process, implementation and participated in the programme events. Research suggests that students who are engaged and participate in university activities tend to feel a stronger sense of belonging which can lead to higher rates of retention and graduation (Tinto, 1993; Thomas, 2012). The programme series celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. provided an opportunity for students, especially from underrepresented groups, to take leadership roles in planning and participating in university-sponsored events.

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In this article, we describe a university community's effort to celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that provided a group of faculty, staff and students the opportunity to collectively create a culturally relevant programme. We explore student involvement and its impact on students' perceived sense of belonging. We begin our reflection by discussing the universal application of Maslow's belonging needs. Next, we explore the theoretical literature on student belonging. Finally, we describe the programme and analyse it using Kezar's model of institutional collaboration in higher education.

Maslow's 'belonging needs'

The desire to belong to a group is an innate need. Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954) suggested that humans, by their very nature, engage in activities on a daily basis to satisfy basic needs such as the need to belong. As humans engage in daily experiences to meet their needs and/or desires, their perceptions, memories, emotions, and cognition change. According to Maslow (1954), humans may consciously or unconsciously seek to meet identified needs. Individuals may also have multiple motivations driving them. Human needs and desires appear to be endless making it impossible to find complete satisfaction, thus we are perpetually motivated to take action to satisfy our needs/desires (Maslow, 1954).

Initially Maslow's hierarchy identified 5 needs - physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualisation. He believed the most basic needs must be met before an individual could begin fulfilling higher level needs. Over the years, Maslow (1970) expanded the model to eight needs by adding cognitive, aesthetic, and transcendence. Additionally, Maslow (1987) recognised that human needs were often interrelated and depending on the individual, a higher level need could be satisfied before a lower level need. The full hierarchy of needs is described below.

- Physiological needs are the basic tenets of food, water and the ability to rest. It is difficult for individuals to feel motivated when hunger, thirst, and sleep deprivation are a constant presence.
- Safety is the second level of needs and refers to having a sense of security and a reduction in anxiety and uncertainty. When an individual does not feel safe, the ability to be productive and motivated to achieve a goal is minimised because energy is thwarted from these altruistic endeavors to mitigate internal angst.
- Belongingness and love needs encompass intimate relationships, friendships, trust, respect, and affiliating with a group.
- Esteem needs require a human to feel respected and valued by others as a way to build a sense of self-assuredness.
- Cognitive needs satisfy humans desire to understand, to seek meaning and to establish predictability in our lives.
- Aesthetic needs fulfill the human urge and appreciation for creativity and beauty.
- Self-actualisation is the acceptance of self and others, being both open-hearted and open-minded, and becoming self-fulfilled.
- Transcendence needs motivate humans to move beyond individual growth and to embrace transformative values such as unconditional love, peace, equity, and justice for all sentient beings.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is divided into two categories - deficiency needs and growth needs. Physiological, safety, belonging and love are deficiency needs as they stem from a lack of something. Esteem, cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualisation, and transcendence are growth needs and result from a desire for something more. Maslow (1954) states that motivation increases exponentially as individuals' needs are met whether they are deficiency or growth needs.

While Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (both the original and expanded versions) explains many reasons for human motivation, we seek to further explore how institutional collaboration can help students move past the deficiency need of belonging by establishing mechanisms that increase students' sense of belonging in a university setting.

Student belonging needs within education

Students' belonging needs within educational systems have received significant attention over the past several decades. Goodenow (1993) explored classroom belonging among adolescents through two lens: 1) the value adolescents placed on the curriculum content, and 2) adolescents' expectations for academic success. In her study, Goodenow (1993) defined belonging as "students sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class" (p. 25). Students who felt that they had supportive teachers demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement. This was even more prevalent among female students who proved to be more highly motivated when they felt that they had a stronger supportive relationship with their teacher. (Goodenow, 1993). Goodenow's definition of belonging within the classroom is twofold:

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students not only need to feel accepted by peers and teachers, but also need to feel that they have an important role and make contributions to the class.

Strayhorn (2012) incorporates elements of Goodenow's definition but he also expands his definition of belonging by incorporating aspects of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Strayhorn (2012) frames students' sense of belonging as a basic human need that motivates and influences human behaviour. His core elements of belonging suggest the following.

- Belonging is a basic human need which is required before one is able to achieve higher level needs such as self-actualisation and knowledge as described by Maslow (1954).
- The desire to belong motivates one to strive to achieve a sense of belonging.
- The desire to belong is heightened in certain contexts, times, and populations.
- Similar to Goodenow (1993), belonging includes feeling valued and appreciated by others.
- Belonging can be impacted by the intersection of identities. Varying aspects of individual student's identity could potentially conflict with one another.
- Belonging can yield additional positive outcomes such as an increase in wellbeing and sense of achievement.
- Sense of belonging is a continual process and situations can increase or decrease a student's sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 18).

Strayhorn surveyed and held focus groups with students to learn how participation in college clubs and organisations develop their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 113). He found that students who had several opportunities to participate on a campus committee or organisation, or socialise with faculty outside of class had pronounced increase in their sense of belonging. As well, he was able to reaffirm that students believe that involvement in campus activities facilitates belonging by: 1) allowing students to connect with other students who have similar interests, 2) familiarising them with the campus environment, 3) affirming their identity and values as part of the campus community, and 4) developing a sense that they mattered and others depended on them (Strayhorn, 2012, p.115). Strayhorn's conclusions on the benefits of student participation in campus committees, clubs, and organisations relate to important aspects of social engagement further explored by Thomas (2012) and Cooper (2009).

When students first arrive at the university as freshmen, they may have concerns about making friends, fitting in with their peers, and belonging to a group. This may be especially true for first-generation college students and minority students with different cultural, ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds. These student populations may feel more socially stigmatised and uncertain about the quality of social bonds which they can form. This can heighten their sensitivity to issues of social belonging and lead to "belonging uncertainty" (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 82). The university plays an important role in creating a welcoming and supportive environment. Guided by language embedded in their mission and vision statements, institutions of higher education strive to ensure all students have opportunities to meet their deficiency and growth needs. Student needs are met in environments that are socially constructed; thus students arrive on campus early to acclimatise themselves to institutions of higher education, specifically during orientation sessions. During orientation sessions students and their families are introduced to the university's academic expectations, resources, climate and culture. Early engagement interventions like orientation provide faculty and staff opportunities to engage students in activities to address academic transitions, campus life, programmes of study, health and wellness resources, and leadership opportunities that positively impact student sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). Institutions of higher education that commit to help students meet individual needs and work to help students develop a sense of belonging also increase academic success (Thomas, 2012, p. 10).

Thomas' (2012) research on student retention and success in England and the UK highlights the impact both student engagement and sense of belonging have on student retention and academic success. In *What Works? Student Retention and Success*, Thomas (2012) reported on the findings generated after 22 institutions of higher education undertook research projects to examine the most effective practices to ensure student retention and success. The report synthesised data from seven projects collected through mixed methodology which included both quantitative data analysis from participant surveys and qualitative data analysis from participant interviews. Thomas (2012) found that student satisfaction with their Higher Education (HE) experiences varied as did university practices; however, the most effective approaches to improving retention and success were those that increased student belonging through: 1) supportive peer relationships, 2) meaningful interaction between staff and students, 3) developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners, and 4) HE experience that is relevant to interest and future goals (pp. 14-15).

Opportunities for students to engage academically, socially, and/or professionally contribute to the development of peer networks and friendships, connections with professors, increased knowledge, academic skills, and confidence (Thomas, 2012). Multiple "What Works?" projects found the most effective interventions for student success and retention were implemented in the academic realm. While the interventions varied, all interventions emphasised engagement (Thomas, 2012). One aspect of engagement is social engagement. Thomas (2012) found that some student populations found it challenging and difficult to socially engage within the university community due to personal situations (i.e. commuting, employment, family responsibilities). Thus, the need to incorporate elements of social engagement into the academic realm is necessary.

Cooper (2009) proposes four components for social engagement - developmental involvement, identity, support and recognition. Developmental involvement tends to focus on student learning outcomes, and it can be expanded to include civic

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engagement, event planning and leadership opportunities. If universities provide opportunities for student leaders to serve on committees alongside faculty and staff *as equals*, and not as token student representatives, students readily engage and become part of the fabric of the campus community. When students who participate on a committee with faculty and staff are responsible for critical tasks such as planning an event, they can see the impact their contributions have on members of the broader campus community. When students recognise that their contributions matter, their sense of belonging and engagement within the university may increase.

Identity, which provides a sense of belonging, can develop at macro and micro levels. At the macro level, universities can develop a collective identity through broad campus-based programmes like orientations, sporting events, campus festivals, homecoming, and spirit days. Homecoming occurs annually in the fall semester and involves activities and events to which alumni are invited, thus encouraging them to maintain a connection by returning home to their alma mater. Whereas spirit days provide opportunities for students enrolled at the university to participate in activities that highlight their enthusiasm and excitement for their class, classmates and their university.

These events can lead to students feeling a sense of identity and belonging with the university as a whole. Students develop a sense of pride in being a member of their campus community. At a micro-level, affinity groups can provide a sense of belonging within a subset of the broader campus community through involvement with student clubs and organisations (Cooper, 2009).

Cooper (2009) defines support as a focus on the care and nurturing of the student. The Office of Student Affairs often assumes this role through mentoring, tutoring, counselling and other non-academic related services (Cooper, 2009). Faculty can also show care and support by developing relationships with students through advising and classroom engagement. When faculty are aware of the issues and challenges that students are experiencing, they can serve as the first line of intervention to assist students in need. Faculty can also recognise leadership potential in students and encourage and nominate students to serve on university-wide committees.

The final component to Cooper's (2009) model for student engagement is recognition. Celebrating and acknowledging students' accomplishments demonstrates to students that their contributions are valued and enhance the university's mission and goals. Recognition can take several forms, i.e. our University recognises student academic achievement during the Undergraduate Research Conference, and at the Convocation ceremony where students are recognised for both their academic achievements and service. Also, the Office of Student Development hosts a student recognition night to honour outstanding clubs and organisations for the events and programmes they present throughout the year.

Copper's research on student engagement expanded earlier research conducted by Tinto on student involvement. Tinto (1993) suggests student involvement with faculty and/or other students builds confidence, stability and increases the value placed on involvement. When provided opportunities to participate, students learn how to relate and persist during challenges, and are less likely to depart the institution prematurely (Tinto, 1993).

Our university provides opportunities for students to engage in research with faculty. We host Undergraduate Research Conference, and a Summer Research Collaborative where students work with faculty to develop community-based research projects. While many research opportunities exist for faculty and students to work together, there are fewer opportunities to develop non-research based community programmes. Without an appropriate balance of research and community-based programmes in which students and faculty can be involved, students may flounder and ultimately withdraw from institutions of higher education.

Within our higher education community some opportunities for student engagement exist and membership is fostered at varying levels. Whether taking the lead, or mutually working alongside peers and faculty, the research strongly suggests that active involvement in clubs, on committees, and in the classroom socially connect, emotionally strengthen and help students meet their belonging needs (Tinto, 1993; Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; and Cooper, 2009). The literature on students' sense of belonging is broad. While Goodenow considered student sense of belonging relative to classroom engagement, Strayhorn examined student sense of belonging as a human need required for social adaptation, Thomas investigated the impact of student sense of belonging on student retention, and we considered the impact that collaboration between faculty staff and students to create a community-based programme had on student sense of belonging. The following illustrates our programme in which a select group of students and faculty collectively engaged and mutually collaborated to create community-based events to honour Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Student committee members & student participants

The committee chair recognised the value and need for student involvement in the planning and implementation of this programme. She identified student organisations on campus whose mission aligned with the programme and contacted student leaders from the Black Student Union, Kappa Delta Pi (International Honor Society in Education) and FemCon (University's Feminist Conversations club). Five students were initially invited to serve on the planning committee, comprising approximately 25% of the committee invitations. Other invitations were extended to faculty and staff from Student and Academic Affairs departments (i.e. English Studies Department, Library, Education Department, Center for Diversity and Inclusion, International Studies, Admissions, and the Tar Hill Political Activists community group). Of the

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invitations extended, seven invitees were consistently involved in the planning process. Three of those members (42%) were students.

In addition to serving on the planning committee, the student members participated on a seven-person panel discussion that included faculty and community members. Undergraduate students also participated in other aspects of the programme, such as through the University Student Choir; and two high-school students from Upward Bound (U.S. Department of Education Achievement Program) read Maya Angelou's poem, *Still I Rise*.

Although there were only three students who participated in the planning and programmes for the MLK event, a significant number of undergraduate students attended the programmes, including many undergraduate students from the Education department and many high school students from Upward Bound.

Programme events

The week-long programme series consisted of four events, a library exhibit and an art display. At the opening session, the President of the Boston Chapter of Black Lives Matter delivered a talk on the role of activism in today's society. The event also included the University Choir singing Sam Cooke's civil rights anthem, *A Change is Gonna Come* and community artists displaying their work. The second event was a film screening and discussion of *I Am Not Your Negro* a documentary based on James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript, *Remember This House*.

The third programme was a panel discussion consisting of three students who were on the programme committee, a former school superintendent, a civil rights advocacy lawyer and two faculty members who teach social justice in their courses. Each panelist shared personal stories. Initially, panelists were asked to present a quote by Dr. King that inspired them or informed their work. The panelists were then asked to address several questions including:

- Can you identify and share an example of injustice/inequity that you currently experience in your professional lives?
- To what extent does the injustice/inequity you identified directly affect you, indirectly affect others?
- What strategies have you used to overcome injustice/inequity?
- What toll has injustice/inequity taken on you?
- What changes need to take place in the workplace, schools and other institutions to remove the barriers to the examples of injustice/inequity that you've identified?

This format created an authentic dialogue where everyone on the panel was afforded an opportunity to share their experiences, respond to one another and eventually the audience was invited to participate and pose more questions.

The final event was the film screening for *Teach Us All*. Released in 2017, this documentary film examines the education system in the United States from the historical perspective of the Little Rock Nine high school students who in 1957 integrated Arkansas schools. The documentary examines the current day Little Rock School District that is experiencing a re-segregation of the district schools that the Little Rock Nine high school students fought so hard to integrate.

To connect the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's (MLK, Jr.) life and legacy in the month of January to the recognition of Black History Month that takes place in February in the United States, several displays were created and displayed in the university library. These displays highlighted first edition books by MLK Jr.: *The Trumpet of Conscience*, *A Stride Toward Freedom*, and *Why We Can't Wait*; samples of DuBois' publications, *The Crisis* magazine and human rights pamphlet *Appeal to the World*; a portion of the FBI file on DuBois; historical photographs, books written on DuBois and other historical records/manuscripts.

The scope and variety of events developed for the entire MLK programme represented the ideas and contributions of several leaders. Students, faculty, and community members made a commitment to collaborate that required continual shifts in individual thinking, and the dedication of tremendous time and effort to build a dynamic, group processes. These are some of the many elements grounded in the theory of institutional collaboration.

Kezar's theory of institutional collaboration in higher education

Kezar (2005) examined how higher education institutions can shift their cultures from institutions that support and reward individual work to institutions that conduct collaborative work. Kezar relied heavily on the field of organisational studies in the development of four types of cross-institutional collaboration that if implemented could transform institutional culture to enable and sustain collaborative work: academic and student affairs, interdisciplinary and community-based research, team teaching and learning communities, and cross-functional teams.

No matter the type of cross institutional collaboration attempted, Kezar (2005) identified the following eight core elements required for collaboration.

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- Mission - formal institutional adoption, commitment of belief and actions that support the work of collaboration.
- Campus Networks - the development of groups of people who not only are committed to work on collaborative initiatives, but also provide social and intellectual resources.
- Integrating structures – the creation of central units to foster collaboration across campus centres or through the use of new information systems.
- Rewards – implementation of changes in the promotion and tenure process to provide equal levels of recognition, merit and awards for collaborative efforts in line with those given to recognise individual effort.
- Senior level prioritisation of collaboration - through language, resource allocation, and personal participation in collaborative efforts.
- External groups - accreditation agencies, grant funds, licensing and state agencies etc. increase pressure for collaborative efforts by creating funding incentives for collaboration and espousing the benefits of collaboration. Additionally, pressures from business and industry who value graduates who have learned to collaborate before entering the workplace.
- Values - campus cultures that embrace student-centered approaches, creativity, innovation and equity more readily adopt collaboration.
- Learning - understanding collaboration as an institutional charge/mission and learning how to collaborate is most effectively accomplished informally colleague to colleague i.e. brown bag lunches rather than through more formalised professional development opportunities.

Application of Kezar's theory at the programme level

While Kezar's elements are broadly defined and focus on the institution, we utilise these core elements as a scaffold and apply each to the MLK programme we collectively developed.

Mission

The creation of an MLK programme aligned with the university's strategic plan to "strengthen the Academic Program, specifically to enhance and affirm student, faculty, and staff diversity as central to the University campus experience. Experiencing diversity expands perspectives, contributes to multicultural competence, and becomes a key element in attracting and retaining students, faculty, and staff" (University, 2015).

Once the commitment to create a collaborative programme to recognise Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was made, an ad hoc committee was created. The members who volunteered to create this programme agreed that its development should not only engage faculty and staff, but also include student involvement.

Campus Networks

Given the social climate and the rise of Black Lives Matter, a faculty member in Education initiated the effort to celebrate Dr. King's legacy. Projects such as these that are not part of the cultural fabric of the university require a champion: an individual who believes in the cause and provides the initial burst of energy and leadership to launch the initiative (Amey, Eddy, & Ozaki, 2007). The knowledge that 50 years had passed since MLK Jr.'s assassination fueled a sense of urgency to create a meaningful way to honour him at our institution. With no initial institutional support, the programme's champion began talking to other like-minded individuals to develop a committee to plan a programme series.

The ad hoc committee members consisted of a cross institutional membership from various departments including both academic and student affairs. Group members included three student leaders, three faculty members, and one staff member.

Integrating Structures

Integrated structures as defined by Kezar weren't present. The everyday structures such as computer and email networks to organise meetings, schedule rooms, and to order food were available but there was no integration of these dedicated to this initiative. The administrative encouragement for this initiative was given, yet a budget and administrative support needed to be developed. Ultimately, administrative support and budget was provided. In total, twelve formal meetings were held whereby the group members were provided opportunities to form, norm, storm and perform their tasks.

Rewards

Based on Kezar's definition of rewards, there were few rewards provided in the planning and implementation of the MLK programme. Planning meetings were held during normal work hours, so faculty and staff on the committee were able to use work time to plan the events. However, the planning was in addition to their regularly assigned duties. There was no release time or course reductions. In essence, committee members volunteered their time.

The University's promotion and tenure requirements allow faculty to report their work as a service to the community. However, like many academic institutions, service is required but is not valued as highly as teaching and research. For

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students, the extrinsic rewards were even fewer. Students volunteered to be on the committee. They served on the committee as equals and were held accountable for their contributions in the planning process. In addition to their work on the committee, the students also had a full course schedule, participated in student organisations, and often worked part-time or full-time jobs. Also, students were able to record their experience and contributions on their resume. At this point in time, no extrinsic rewards have been identified for future participation on the committee. However, in the future, it would be interesting to explore the possibility of providing an independent study for students, and in exchange they would be able to assume a larger role on the committee such as co-chair.

While Kezar's theory of institutional collaboration (2005) focuses on extrinsic rewards like changes to promotion and tenure requirements, assistance with grant writing, and course releases, it does not address the intrinsic rewards. The MLK programme had intrinsic rewards for the committee members. Working together to develop a series of events to celebrate MLK increased efficacy and a sense of belonging. Committee members took great pride in the work they accomplished together which not only met their belonging needs, but they also created several forums for campus-wide conversations about cultural awareness and proficiency.

A Sense of Priority from People in Senior Positions

When presented with the idea to develop a campus programme to honour Dr. Martin Luther King, the University Provost fully endorsed it. The Provost initially attended several of the committee meetings and ensured that the committee received administrative support and a budget. As often occurs in institutions, a tremendous amount of informal support for this initiative occurred in the beginning yet waned after the first meeting. Fortunately, there was enough support from a core group of committee members to develop and implement the fully funded programme.

External Groups

As part of the planning process, several local community members were invited to participate on the committee. While they were enthusiastic supporters of the concept of an MLK celebration, they were unable to commit to assist in the planning process due to time constraints and other commitments. Although local community members did not serve on the planning committee, the panel session included local community members. Community artists displayed their artistic work including paintings of Dr. King, glassware etched with his image, and engaged the audience in conversations about how Dr. King's life inspired their art. For the screening and discussion of *Teach Us All*, our initial goal was to have teachers and administrators from area schools attend. In reality, this goal was not met and the primary audience members were teacher candidates and professors from the Education Department.

Values

An important component of the MLK programming was student involvement. As discussed earlier, students who are invested and feel a sense of belonging at the institution tend to persist (Tinto, 1993). Student leaders were intentionally invited to serve on the committee with the understanding that they were expected to fully participate in the planning. Often times, student membership on committees is seen as a token of inclusion, but their contributions are not expected or valued as much as their faculty and staff counterparts. On the committee, the number of students invited to participate was approximately 25% of the invitations extended. This did not go unnoticed by the student leaders who commented on their surprise at the number of students invited to be on the committee. As students recognised that their contributions were valued, they were invested in creating the best possible programme.

Student leaders were active participants in every aspect of the programme: selecting a keynote speaker, promoting the programmes using social media, photographing and chronicling programme events, planning logistics, facilitating the film discussion of the documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*, and participating on the panel discussion that addressed barriers to equity, justice, and peace. As leaders of student organisations, these students were accustomed to collaborating with other groups and departments on campus at a local level, however, this was the first time students collaborated on a programme to reach a broader audience.

For the MLK programme, they contributed to increasing their social and global awareness of pressing issues affecting society today. Instead of being a leader who advocated for themselves or local groups, they became leaders who could be a voice for those who may be marginalised. Student members came to realize that they could serve as leaders and ambassadors as a continuation of the legacy of MLK. It was as if the student leaders heeded the following words delivered in April of 1959 by Dr. King while he marched for integrated schools: "Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a better person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in".

Learning

As a new committee we worked to overcome several challenges. We learned how to adapt to situations when things did not go as planned because at times not all members followed through on assigned tasks. We learned about continuity and the importance of establishing a baseline, so we could continue to make progress. We learned that the programme needed an established budget at the beginning to provide a fiscal framework in which to plan.

As our group learned to work together, we were better positioned to create educational opportunities for the University and broader community. Throughout the planning and implementation we ultimately recognised the importance of working collaboratively, of bringing relevant stakeholders to the table who became equal partners in the collaborative effort to create

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the MLK programme. The entire experience is reminiscent of a quote taken from a Christmas sermon delivered by Dr. King in Atlanta Georgia in 1967: "If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective".

For a short moment in time, the collective effort of a handful of people working together to develop a programme to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King may have met the level of transcendence Maslow described in his extended theory of human needs.

Discussion

The discussion of this paper is twofold. First, we reflect upon Kezar's Model of Institutional Collaboration that we applied at the programme as opposed to institutional level. Second, we explore the impact of committee involvement on student sense of belonging and share student committee members' reflections about their experience. As we applied Kezar's model to our own programme, we identified three areas that we could improve upon in the future.

Rewards - Very often students use leadership experiences on their resume. However, we believe students should be rewarded for their leadership and contributions in a more meaningful way. We would advocate for a student to co-chair the committee with a faculty member and to include more students on the committee. For those students taking on larger roles within the committee, opportunities for students to receive independent study credit or a graduate assistantship should be considered.

A Sense of Priority from People in Senior Positions - Based on the success of the programme and the positive media coverage it received, institutional commitment to continue the programme on an annual basis was achieved. The Provost's office has committed to funding the programme and providing release time for the chairperson. We are optimistic that this programme will become part of the cultural tradition of our university, but also recognise that in order for it to do so, it must evolve from an ad hoc committee to a recognised University committee.

External Groups - The committee's goals were to have a diverse planning committee and audience. We were partially successful, but fell short on this goal. The opening session had a diverse audience of members from the local and campus community. For the panel discussion, several panelists represented the local community members and audience members included high school students. However, there were areas in which we could improve participation by external groups. Community members were invited to serve on the committee, but due to time constraints, they were unable to commit. We also hoped to have more teachers and school administrators from area schools attend the film screening and following discussion. Due to limited advertising, the audience consisted primarily of university participants. In the future, we hope to broaden the participation from local community members to ensure a more diverse perspective in programmes and audience discussion. Additionally, increased attendance by members of the university community is highly desirable. We saw many of the same faces at the events, many of whom were students receiving credit.

Although the role of students was not addressed in Kezar's initial model, we believed the inclusion of students to plan significant university events could contribute to their sense of belonging on campus. Goodenow considered student sense of belonging relative to classroom engagement, Strayhorn examined student sense of belonging as a human need required for social adaptation, Thomas investigated the impact of student sense of belonging on student retention, and we examined student sense of belonging as a result of student involvement on a university committee which according to Strayhorn (2012) can lead to increased sense of belonging. The following discussion includes feedback given from the three student committee members that was included in the final report and received through a follow-up questionnaire sent to these students a year later.

The celebration of Martin Luther King Day created an opportunity for community engagement within the University. At the close of the programme committee members were provided the opportunity to debrief at a meeting, to write an explanation of the role(s) they had played, and to reflect upon their experiences. At the meeting we took time to share praise and suggestions for improvement. To ensure continuity, a final report was written to present to the University Provost that included committee members' contributions and reflections, the positive feedback received throughout the programme from participants, audience members and the community-at-large, and the programme strengths and limitations.

Students involved in the planning process were provided the opportunity to reflect upon the impact of their experiences and recognised value as members of the university. A student while participating on the panel expressed the following sentiment:

... [we should] encourage people who already have the world counting against them to strive to go beyond what everyone thinks of them. Like when I was in high school they thought I wasn't going to graduate. Look at me now, I am talking about injustices on a panel at my university. It's amazing what can happen when a little care and attention [is given to student] demographics. . .

This student's comments highlight two aspects of Cooper's model of social engagement (2009). Cooper defines support as the care and nurturing of students. The student's comment emphasises the need for care and attention when he says "It's amazing what can happen when a little care and attention [is given to student] demographics. . .".

Cooper's final component of social engagement is recognition. The student's comment. "Look at me now, I am talking about injustices on a panel", clearly demonstrates the importance of recognition. He goes even further to say "at my university" not

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at the university. The use of the word “my” over the word “the” suggests he feels a sense of ownership and belonging fostered as a result of his participation.

Sense of belonging includes feeling valued and appreciated by others and can yield additional positive outcomes such as an increase in well-being and sense of achievement (Strayhorn, 2012). A year later when asked to reflect further upon his experiences, the same student stated:

Participating in the MLK programming committee did make me feel more connected to the University. For the first time, it allowed me to be more than just an everyday student. I sat on a panel alongside my peers, professors and community leaders. My peers sat in the crowd and many choose to ask me additional questions after the panel. I felt like a resource to the younger students and I felt I had an additional way of giving back to the community.

Additionally, he stated, “I offer advice to my younger peers and give them encouraging words when facing hurdles.” This student’s experience represents Maslow’s level of self-actualisation which Strayhorn also includes in his definition of belonging.

Thomas (2012) found that student satisfaction with higher education was dependent upon student sense of belonging which could be established through meaningful interactions between faculty, staff and students. Another student who served on the committee recognised that faculty and student interactions were important to personal satisfaction and indicated it increased her engagement in the university. In her reflection she stated:

We pride ourselves on creating conversation on campus between students, faculty and staff, and the entire community. The more we put that mission out there, the more opportunities we find ourselves involved with. Having student voices on committees should be a [xxxxxx] tradition.

She went on further to say, “After sitting on this committee as an undergraduate student, I was motivated to join the Women’s History Month committee as well”.

One student also valued the faculty, staff and student interactions and felt that the experience on the MLK committee helped her feel more connected to the university, stating: “I got the opportunity to be part of a campus event that [wasn’t solely sponsored] by the Black Student Union”.

Another approach to increase student sense of belonging is providing opportunities for students to develop knowledge, confidence, and identify as successful learners (Thomas, 2012). Confidence comes through understanding that one’s individual identity is valued and acknowledged as separate from the social groups one may be part of. This is illustrated by a student’s comment during panel discussion, in response to being asked what strategies have you used to overcome injustice and inequity. The student responded, “In classes you might be the only woman, or person of color in the room [and you are] expected to represent the entire group and it is hard and it’s alright to say it is hard”. The confidence shown by the student through this statement indicates an awareness of her individual identity and her ability to recognise she doesn’t have to represent the group. This statement also reflects elements of Tinto’s (1993) work on student belonging. Tinto revealed how the value of participation builds confidence, stability and persistence.

This paper contributes to the discussion on institutional collaboration through the application of Kezar’s model at the programme level. We also discuss the benefits of student involvement in the planning process, and as participants in the programme sessions to demonstrate how institutional collaboration that encompasses true student involvement can positively impact students’ sense of belonging at the university level. This reflection draws on anecdotal evidence collected from three students who participated on the committee and panel session to demonstrate how student involvement in university programming can contribute to students’ sense of belonging. We did not draw conclusions from formal data collection. Future studies should include formal assessments that evaluate the programmatic impact on student belonging at the planning level. We suggest the possible use of established survey instruments such as the *Sense of Belonging to School Scale* (Vural, Ozelci, Cengal, and Gomleksiz, 2013) and *The Student Engagement Instrument* (Appleton, Christenson, Kim & Reschly, 2006).

Conclusion

Student retention and graduation in a timely manner requires more than strong academic support. For many students, the key to success is feeling a sense of belonging and becoming active contributors to the campus community. Collaboration and greater efforts to involve students is encouraged and should be adopted by other institutions of higher education to strengthen the frayed social fabric that can result from a lack of student belonging often found on university campuses.

Some might wonder whether the time, energy and effort exerted during collaboration was worth it. Despite the glacial pace of the collaborative process, the final product was stronger because the end result represented many people’s ideas. The individual commitment of time, energy, and effort may inspire and prepare other community members to develop, participate in and experience collaborative university programmes that seek to strengthen students’ sense of belonging, such as the one created to honour the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One panelist stated, “I believe that Dr. King’s talk about a beloved community, so for me when I think about the work that needs to happen I just see it, as we are all connected

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and interconnected. We all need to be thinking about each other because your success is my success, your weakness is my weakness...this is unfinished business”.

Biographies

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