An Exploration of Professional Learning for Chief Diversity Officers in Higher Education

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to understand the process of professional learning of Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) who work in higher education. Professionals who become CDOs come from a variety of backgrounds and rely on professional experiences, along with "on-the-job" learning rather than pre-service education to navigate the role of a diversity executive. Cervero (2001) stated the importance of continued professional education to continue learning so that individuals develop and enhance their practice. Professional learning is important for diversity executives who are in higher education because there is no pre-service formal education program, and the profession is still developing a common body of knowledge. For this study, professional learning is framed as a combination of continuing professional education, the context of work, and individual experiences. Daley (2000) supports the combination of the three areas to have optimal learning in professions. This roundtable discussion is a discussion about a study conducted to explore the process of professional learning for CDOs working in higher education institutions. At the core of the study is the process of learning as professionals function as a diversity executive.

A new profession of diversity executives in higher education has grown over the last decade to foster a stronger acceptance of institutional diversity. Gose (2008) stated that the chief diversity officer (CDO) profession continues to grow as more presidents of higher education institutions appoint executives to oversee diversity as an institutional initiative. Professionals who become CDOs come from a variety of backgrounds and rely on professional experiences, and learning rather than pre-service education to navigate the role of a diversity executive. Cervero (2001) stated the importance of continued professional education to continue learning so that individuals continue to learn. Professional development is important for diversity executives who are in higher education because there is no pre-service formal education program, and the profession is still developing a common body of knowledge. This roundtable discussion will focus on studies conducted to explore the process of professional learning for CDOs working in higher education institutions. At the core of the study is the process of learning as professionals function as a diversity executive.

Questions that frame our consideration of the professional learning undertaken by CDOs has to do with the contextually unique factors that shape the work of CDOs and the challenges posed by these factors to the performance of their roles. What is unique or idiosyncratic about diversity work? Are the factors that shape the work of CDOs similar to that of other academic or

higher education administrators? What are the implications for professional learning in terms of its processes as well as the content? We will begin the presentation with a brief overview of the conceptual model, followed by an overview of a pilot study. The pilot study examined the use of reflective practice as a professional learning strategy. We will do a short presentation, and then begin the roundtable discussion to collect: a) constructive feedback about the research idea; b) feedback about the research design; and c) helpful ideas that will enhance or refine the overall study. Next we will present information about a larger research plan. The purpose of the larger research project is to understand the process of professional learning of CDOs who work in higher education. The conceptual model is drawn on the literature from continuing professional education, individual reflective practice, and contextual factors.

Drawing on our review of the literature we frame possible research questions designed to conceptualize how professional learning among university CDOs' occurs. Key factors that influence the CDO professional learning process have to do with the professional preparation and background of the CDO; the particular responsibilities of the CDO role; and the institutional contextual factors relating to racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and similar systems of oppression. We frame professional learning as a combination of continuing professional education, the context of work, and individual experiences. Daley (2000) supports the combination of the three areas to have optimal learning in professions. Informal and nonformal learning theories are at the center of the research because both describe circumstances that don't involve formal structured educational environments. In fact, informal and nonformal methods are the most common approaches for adult learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

To conclude the session we will ask participants to share feedback that will potentially help us strengthen the overall research.
The fundamental goals of our argument are:
1. To present information about the chief diversity officer profession (diversity executives)
2. To discuss how and the strongest adult learning theory or theories that support my research (theoretical framework)
3. To seek critical feedback about the overall study an its design (structure and methodology)

References

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