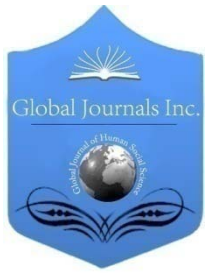
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Exploring a Diverse Team's Approach to Inclusive Leadership Program Design: An Action Research Study

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Exploring a Diverse Team's Approach to Inclusive Leadership Program Design: An Action Research Study

Linda M. Lyons [α] & Shelbee Nguyen Voges [σ]

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I. Introduction

Higher education institutions struggle to reconcile valuing diversity in leadership teams aimed at academic development and other institutional initiatives. In a recent survey about organizational leaders' opinions about diversity, data revealed that 98% believe that diversity and inclusion are supported by their organization, but, "few of the organizations surveyed have significant numbers of senior leaders of color-those representing a specific ethnicity-and very few have substantive, measurable practices in place to improve racial and ethnic diversity" (Koya, 2015, p. 1). The growing student demographics, which is nearly half of the total student population, require leadership development that reflects the interests of the communities they serve. Because of the disparity between the value for diversity and actual diversity in leadership, higher education institutions "may not be developing academic program solutions that effectively address the needs of the populations they're working to serve" (Brennan, 2015, p. 1).

To remedy this gap, a diverse team, comprised of undergraduate peer leaders, academic developers and instructors came together to participate in an action research project which aimed at developing an inclusive leadership academic development program. Carver and Klein (2013) note, "the use of action research to study leadership development remains uncommon, especially among leadership educators" (p. 162). Given the everchanging demographics across institutions of higher education, stakeholders are now asked to think intentionally about how collaborative, or team based, program leadership development manifests when there is a focus on diversity. The purpose of this research was to explore how action research can be used to discern the nuances of a team's collaborative efforts aimed at inclusive leadership program design. This examination was guided by the following probing questions:

- How did the team's demographic indicators influence the action research process?
- What team dynamics emerged while using the stages of action research process?

II. Relevant Literature and Conceptual Framework

As our continually changing, diverse globalized society calls for new emerging leaders across all industries and disciplines, planning and developing programs, which aim to develop inclusive leadership, can be challenging. Academic program development is comprised of a set of planned approaches, systematic activities that include analyzing program context and needs, collaborating with instructors in setting objectives, selecting and organizing learning activities and evaluating program effectiveness (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011; Knox 1990; Sisco & Guglielmino, 1997). There is no unique best practice for academic program design. A variety of factors, such as goals, needs, participating individuals or groups, and contexts will have to be considered when planning academic development programs for adult and higher education (AHE) learners (Fitzpatrick, Sander &Worthen, 2011). Oftentimes, collaborating or forming cohesive teams, can prove difficult, especially when engaging stakeholders across faculty, staff, student and

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administrative groups. Caffarella (2002) uses the following metaphor when describing program planning in a work team environment:

> *"Planning programs for adults is like swimming in the ocean. Some days the ocean is calm and welcomes people with open arms… On other days, when the surf is somewhat rough and the waves higher, the ocean provides challenges for even the best of swimmers" (p 1).*

Harland and Staniforth (2008) further suggest that the fragmented nature of the academic development field also creates additional obstacles when it comes to core values and shared vision of any given academic development program. These obstacles may be compounded as institutions are more intentional about incorporating diverse perspectives in leadership teams for academic development. Scholars conclude that academic program development must be individualized and contextualized to "suit local situations" (Harland & Staniforth, 2008, p. 670). These can include, but are not limited to the aforementioned institutional and individual goals, needs, and objectives. The aim of this action research project attempts to understand the dimensions of a team's collaborative efforts when developing an academic program in inclusive leadership.

a) Action Research

Calvin and Klein (2013) note that while there is much known about what constitutes a quality inclusive leadership preparation program "much less is known about how these features are implemented at the program level" (p. 163). This study explores nuances of building collaboration among team members comprised of various social demographics, such as race, age, and gender, and how this composition might be implemented at the program development level when employing action research. Action Research is a participatory process and democratic partnership that involves stakeholders-community of interest-to be engaged in systematic inquiry and investigation of a problem (Stringer, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Bish, Kenny and Nay (2013) note that that the participatory nature of action research and leadership development are natural partners, because awareness and adaptability garnered from workplace and life experiences, are not always acquired through formal training or even recognized by developers themselves. This is especially true when it comes to developing culturally inclusive leaders (Bennett, 2009).

The four phases of the action research, also referred as instructor self-study, allows the academic developers to examine their own practices for the sake of bettering that practice and overall program implementation. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) indicated four basic phases of action research are: (a) *constructing*: exploration of context and purpose; (b) *planning action*: describing how to implement the action; (c) *taking action:* implementing plans and creating interventions; and (d) *evaluating action*: examining the outcomes of the action. Utilizing the four phases of action research allows developers to explore both known and unknown dimensions of diversity in order to develop academic programs aimed at inclusive leadership. The four phases occur in a cyclical non-orderly movement that may or may not present intended results. However, incorporating evaluations of each phase allows the researchers to make appropriate adjustments based on evidence of actual behaviors and/or outcomes, and allows for evaluating of what is being learned through the process (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). This becomes centrally important as developers and stakeholders discover and navigate their own understands of cultural difference in an effort to foster inclusive leadership practices so that they can then implement these attributes at the program level for future student leaders.

The theoretical frame underpinning the four stages of action research is not approached as linear, but as a process that is a fluid cyclical movement between practice, reflection and learning (Jaipal & Figg, 2011). Similarly, planning academic programs, which aim to develop inclusive leaders, is seldom a step-by-step process. Like the stages of action research, academic program developers often work with a number of planning components and tasks simultaneously, which may not be conducted in any standard order. Additionally, employing action research is ideal as universities recognize the importance of utilizing collaborative, or team based, approaches to bring together instructors, administrators and academic developers as mutual stakeholders in program design and implementation that focus on inclusive leadership (Weber & Lupart, 2011).

b) Collaborative Teams

Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development serves as another component of the conceptual framework for this study. This action research project attempts to bridge understandings in academic development and implementation by asking questions about how a team's demographic indicators influence collaboration? Additionally, what team dynamics emerged while using the stages of the action research process? The foundation of any given academic development program relies heavily on shared vision and a collaborative identification of a problem (Zuber-Skerritt & Louw, 2014). While small groups of stakeholders across the higher education institution might come together with similar motivations to address the issue of inclusive leadership program development, collaborative relationships can be difficult to cultivate because of different backgrounds, learning styles and experiences (Ejiwale, 2014). In other words, not all groups come together to form collaborative teams. Kolowski and Bell (2003) note that the main

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distinguishable difference between groups and teams is that teams are interdependent on one another to achieve any given organizational task. Thus, for purposes of this research, the use of team is used to underscore the interconnected nature of team members in developing an academic program aimed at inclusive leadership.

Tuckamn (1965) posited that teams, like action research, encounter non-linear processes which become necessary to meeting task requirements. Those stages are: (a) f*orming*: acclimation to the task, (b) s*torming*: team resistance and divergences surface, (c) n*orming*: open communication to achieve mutual consensus and, (d) p*erforming*: interdependence around tasks and goal achievement. This can be hindered or made more complex depending on the diversity of any given team. Diversity of a team can be determined by the extent to which members are different from one another (Forsyth, 2010). However, teams which are diverse in their makeup can find increased perspectives, cognitive resources, problem solving approaches collectively improving decision-making (Grace, 2012). Diverse teams may also encounter a broader range of expertise, knowledge, insight and ideas, with informal communication and social integration occurring concurrently (Grace, 2012; Forsyth, 2010). Because this academic development program is aimed at developing inclusive leaders, it was imperative for team members to be able to gauge their own reactions and responses to cultural differences during the constructing phase of the study. Their experiences, individual role and lessons learned could then be an additional tool utilized in the facilitation of development program.

c) Inclusiveness and Intercultural Sensitivity

To establish a base line for how team members make sense of cultural differences, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was utilized. This would also serve as a diagnostic resource in the actual development program once implemented. The DMIS is a stage-based model defining degrees of intercultural sensitivity, and to what extent an individual is inclusive of those who are culturally different. Bennett (1993) defines intercultural sensitivity as the way people make meaning of cultural difference and the varying kinds of experiences that accompany these different constructions. Bish et al. (2013) comments, "the identification of issues that may influence leadership development is imperative" and can be helpful to overall program planning and design within the action research design (p. 286).The DMIS, used in wide popularity, provides a framework for understanding how people experience cultural difference through six distinct orientation stages: *denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration* (Bennett, 2009). These stages also suggest what individuals do not see or think; therefore, the DMIS also highlights how people's cultural patterns both guide and limit their experience of cultural difference and the degree to which they are inclusive in intercultural settings (Bennett,1986). Table 1 outlines the DMIS's intercultural development stages and the orientation levels in detail (Bennett, 2009).

Table 1 : Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural Stage	Orientation Level
Ethnocentric: one's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way.	***Denial:*** the state in which one's own culture is experienced as the only real one; disinterested in cultural difference ***Defense***: the state in which one's own culture (or an adopted culture) is experienced as the only good one; us vs. them mentality; threatened by cultural differences ***Minimization***: the state in which elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal; expect similarities and correct others' behavior to match their expectations
Ethnorelative: one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures.	***Acceptance***: the state in which one's own culture is experienced as just one of a number of equally complex worldview; not in agreement, but curious about and respectful toward cultural difference ***Adaptation***: the state in which the experience of another culture yields perception and behavior appropriate to that culture; one's worldview expands to include constructs from other worldviews ***Integration:*** the state in which one's experience of self is expanded to include fluid movement in and out of different cultural worldviews *(Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003).*

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), is employed in this action research study as a tool that measures the orientation levels of the DMIS, interprets an individual's or group's level of engagement in diversity and intercultural competencies, and identifies the associated transition issues around that specific

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orientation (M. J. Bennett, 2009). This theory-based instrument measures the first five levels of the DMIS—denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, and adaptation as defined in Table 1. Each stage indicates a particular cognitive structure that is expressed in certain kinds of attitudes and behavior related to cultural difference. By recognizing the underlying cognitive orientation toward cultural difference, predictions about behavior and attitudes can be made, education can be tailored to facilitate movement into the next stage and assist individuals and diverse teams in effective collective work (Bennett & Hammer, 1998). As the research team explores their own orientation level of the DMIS, using the IDI as a diagnostic tool, they can make sense of how to best facilitate progression through these stages for themselves and their program design as well as gain practical insights for implementation across a variety of student groups.

III. Methodology

This action research study attempts to shed new insight on academic development design and implementation that fosters inclusive leadership by asking questions about how a team's demographic indicators influence collaboration? Furthermore, researchers focused on what team dynamics emerged while using the stages of action research process. The research was conducted at a public comprehensive four-year institution of higher education located in the Southeast region of the United States where the current enrollment of full-time equivalent students exceeds 30,000. The institution offers baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degree programs, with a commitment to providing academic and co-curricular programs that contribute to students' academic development. Due to the increase growth in the demographics in the student population, there was a concern that additional programs and interventions were needed to enhance current multicultural education and programs that focused on intercultural competence development. Through the school's Quality Enhancement Program (QEP), programming started to focus on global citizenry and the development of cultural awareness.

a) Participants: The Research Team

The academic unit in this study is comprised of two academic developers, one instructor and two undergraduate peer leaders. The purpose of using peer leaders is to provide services and support to fellow students who are recipients of these development programs. As the result of interactions between more experienced and well-trained peers, students can develop a stronger sense of community, greater social and academic integration, and a rich network of resource and referral agents dedicated to their success (Shook & Keup, 2012).The academic unit, also referred to as the research team, was charged with providing interdisciplinary programs with the intent to cultivate meaningful and measurable experiences in leadership development, multiculturalism, and civic engagement for undergraduate students. The target academic development program was to be designed and implemented for a learning community that consists of high academic achievers in the Honors College. This group of learners consisted of first-year students just entering the institution for their four-year degree program. The action research team's primary task, which was established in the study's constructing phase, was to coordinate the design, delivery and evaluation of all curricular and co-curricular activities implemented to expose the students to learning that will promote inclusive leadership. The research team's demographics consist of two Caucasian males, two Caucasian females, and one African American female. Ages vary from 21 to 56 and all members identify as citizens of the United States. Table 2 offers more information about the roles and backgrounds of the members of the team.

Table 2 : Team roles and background

Title	Role	Profile	Years of Service
Manager	Oversees the three year program's operations; assists with class/module lectures throughout the year; coordinates external events; manages education abroad trips; and participates/supports the community engagement projects.	Caucasian Male	3
Instructor for Honors Courses	Serves as the instructor for the required honors courses which focus on global engagement, leadership trends and global leadership curricular. Also promotes student development through team building and prepare students for domestic and international engagements that will utilize intercultural dexterity.	Caucasian Male	7

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Facilitator/ Researcher	Serves as diversity subject matter expert and certified IDI assessor. Assist in the program planning/development of curricular and co-curricular activities with the attempt in building intercultural competencies. Additionally implement IDI and conduct assessment of participants' level of intercultural competencies; provide interventions to address gaps in intercultural skills as well as examine and obtain an understanding of learners' transformation process when incorporating innovative programs for using intercultural skills.	African-American Female	8
Undergraduate Peer Leaders	Peer leaders are upper class men who have been selected and trained to offer support and services to their peers. Additionally, peer leaders assist first-year students in their transition into college and support them in their efforts towards meeting educational goals both in their academic discipline and in the leadership program.	2 Caucasian females	3

IV. Procedure and Data Analysis

Mixed methods were employed to explore how the diverse leadership team builds collaboration to design and implement new academic development programs aimed at inclusive leadership. Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest that mixed methods can be useful in action research to offer more robust and descriptive insight. Additionally, a triangulation of sources helps to provide context and rich background so that results can be implemented into actual practice (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The leadership team took the IDI as a self-assessment diagnostic tool to measure their intercultural competence level as well as use the results as a tactical approach to determine their perceptions about cultural difference and how that influenced the creation of a cohesive team. By exploring their own orientation level on the DMIS theoretical framework, they could make sense of how to best facilitate progression through these stages for themselves, their program design and gain practical insights for implementation across a variety of student groups.

Qualitative methods were used to collect data from a variety of sources, and again, to optimize triangulation. During weekly team meetings the researcher would capture group discussions via audio recording devices and field notes. Data were also collected through direct observation of group dynamics and team interactions, as well as individual interviews with each team member. The purpose of the one-on-one interviews was to gain personal insights, observations, perceptions and feedback on the team's work and cohesiveness as well as their observation of the action research experience.

All data were transcribed and analyzed to reveal reoccurring themes and data discrepancies. When reviewing the data, the four general stages of qualitative data analysis was applied (Ruona, 2005): *Data Preparation:* organizing data findings; categories based on important/key findings (cleaning); create filing system; *Familiarization:* In-depth review of data collected to gain a sense of the information and reflect on its overall meaning; *Coding:* Assigning a label/designation to various aspects of the data to be easily retrieved; placing data into specific categories and; *Generating Meaning:* interpretation of the data; identifying reoccurring themes/messages. The coding process was helpful and reviewing data concurrently with data collection allowed for readjustments to the inquiry process as new discovery of data findings emerged.

a) Findings

There were a variety of salient findings which addressed the research questions that guided this study: 1) how did the team's demographic indicators influence the action research process and, 2) what team dynamics emerged while using the stages of the action research process? The study's results referenced that the diversity make-up of the team was not solely limited to cultural background. Although the team varied in age, race, ethnicity, and gender, findings indicate that academic background and the approach to the task of developing inclusive programs uniquely impacted the action research process. For example the researcher observed the steady increase in group engagement and the comfort level of the team's collective work during meetings, classroom instructions, and in social settings. Baseline data was collected on how the team perceives culture differences through the administering of the IDI as a pre and post assess. Although this brought awareness around the team's cultural differences, team dynamics that emerged, like building a safe and inclusive work environment, members felt were key elements to the collaboration process and were also among important findings.

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b) Diverse Team's Impact on Action Research

Tuckman (1965) suggests that a natural group environment occurs when groups are created to do a task or professional function. The team's intimate size and group dynamics influenced the work conducted through the action research process and the task to develop an inclusive leadership program. During the action research *constructing phase* the team was formed and discussed approaches to developing, delivering, and evaluating academic programs for their students. Additionally the team determined their timeframe for conducting the work and how to go about achieving the goals and objectives of their charge. This included initial conversations as it pertained to creating development programs for the students. For example, the members, mutually identified their purpose, established their tasks, acknowledged team roles, and recognized key stakeholders and resources needed to meet their goal. "It is important that the constructing step be a collaborative venture" (Coghlan&Brannick, 2010, p. 9).

The results of the group's pre IDI assessment indicated that the team identified themselves in the beginning stages of adaptation—the state in which the experience of another culture yields perception and behavior appropriate to that culture (Bennett, 1986). Most people assume that their proficiency level is high and tend to hold overly favorable views of their abilities in many social and intellectual domains; they expect to succeed at achievement tasks (Brown, 1990; Kruger & Dunning, 1999). This orientation on the IDI instrument is known as the "perceived orientation". Figure 1 shares the results of the team's pre IDI assessment results. This visual indicates how the leadership team perceives their collective orientation level in comparison to where they actually fall on the spectrum, which is known as the "developmental orientation."

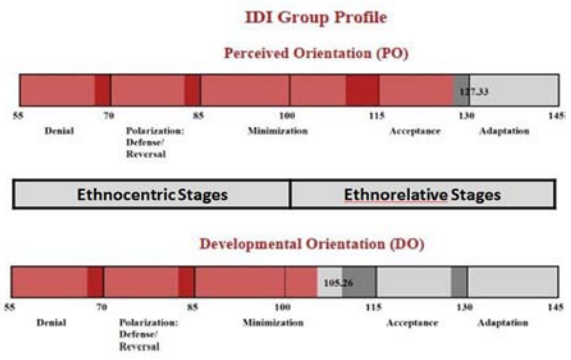


Figure 1 : Leadership Team's IDI Pre Group Profile

The developmental orientation results indicated that the team was actually located in the Minimization stage. As stated in the literature review, Minimization is the orientation stage within the DMIS that acknowledges surface differences, but only focuses on similarities among cultures, masking a deeper understanding of cultural differences (Bennett, 1986). In addressing how the team's diversity impacted the project, the researchers utilized Tuckman' (1965) forming stage to gauge how the team members made sense of roles and responsibilities in the beginning phases. The researcher and principle investigator (PI) recognized some of the formative influences of the team's makeup and how this might have influences the action research process. She notes in a private reflection:

> *"It is obvious I'm the only member on the team from an underrepresented group. But whenever we talk about potential topics around diversity or approaching race related issues with the learners, it seems like I'm the go-to person for this specific subject area."*

Tuckman (1965) explains that team interactions in the storming phase can be slow and less deliberate when developing inclusive programs due to: (a) assumption of levels in authority and positionality, (b) team cohesion was not yet established, and (c) rapport needed to be developed. It is possible that the nature of the PI's role as lead researcher, and the only group member of color present, challenged the group's productivity and collaborative efforts around designing inclusive module because of the team's assumption of having an expert in the field to address that specific area of program development.

During initial weekly meetings and through the team's constructing process, the researchers noticed from observations in team meetings and group discussions that full team participation and interaction were not evident. This is a normal phenomenon when teams are forming -- creating group norms and getting acclimated to the task-- for the first time (Tuckman, 1965). This promoted an increase in probing questions around the team's collective work and targeted feedback from those members who were less vocal so that the group could graduate into the next group development phase, which was the storming stage. An additional challenge that may have limited the group's collaborative engagement in the storming stage was members' perceptions of the PI. The PI reported:

> *"I wish Kevin would stop pointing out how the project is my baby and central to my research agenda. He keeps stating my expertise in the field, when really I'm just as new to this subject as well as this approach too. I want and need to also learn from other members."*

It is a strong possibility that being perceived as the subject matter expert, having held a position as the Chief Diversity Officer, and being centrally concerned with intercultural competence in her research agenda could discourage or limit the input from other members of the research team. Another team member echoed:

> *"At first I perceived that your work (PI's study) was the key component and driving force to our changes in the way we conduct our work, but I realized it really introduced us to another way of doing things and empowered us to work together towards something better."*

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It is evident that, the team's cultural diversity was not the only characteristic that had an impact on the research process. There were other elements in addition to different roles and backgrounds of the team members which influenced the action research process. Again, when reflecting on the group's IDI results the focused turned to the social demographics of the leadership team which are identified through gender, age, race and ethnicity. The team acknowledged their differences, but still recognized that the collective work done by the group created unity and synergy. One of the student peer leaders, Cindy shared:

> *"I think we are, as a team, all very different people so we bring different things to the group that strengthens our collective work. The combination in the variety of age, gender, and race, allowed for us to grow as a team when recognizing our uniqueness and how we can capitalize on bridging all those various traits, skills, and attributes together to achieve a common goal and task."*

Team members observed that there was an innate ability each member brought to the team that merged unique attributes into one cohesive unit. Amanda's and Cindy's responses indicate that once perceptions were acknowledged and shared, the team could leave the awkward stage of storming and graduate into the norming phase where differences amongst opinions and roles were appreciated (Tuckman, 1965). Strengths of each team member are recognized in this stage and celebrated as added value to the collaborative process and task development at hand. The collected talents demonstrated a sense of comfort and collective engagement when working with one another. During a series of weekly meetings, the group started to show incremental signs of bonding as a cohesive unit. The group further engaged in orientating themselves, as well as understanding the work and goals of the team. The other peer leader, Amanda noted:

> *"Diversity in age, gender, and race provided a beautiful array of perspectives in the collaboration process. Cindy and I, two twenty-year olds, were able to contribute perspectives on the curricular, more closely aligned with what the students might think while those members of the team who are older than us provided insights on the curricular that incorporated more 'real world' experience."*

After continuous team interactions and building camaraderie, trust, and rapport all members were able to recognize their individual strengths and contribution to actively engage and mutually commit to the task. Coghlan and Brannick (2010), indicate that this is an indication of the construction stage of action research, team members collectively explore the context and purpose of the task or project.

c) Team Dynamics

During the constructing stage, establishing a safe environment of mutual respect and open communication is important. This allows for all members to be comfortable in sharing insights on intercultural learning regardless of their assumed role or positionality within the team. As the planning process continued, there were new discoveries of team members' experiences around intercultural development and the sharing of new knowledge garnered further development of team cohesion. Team members shared:

> *"What I can appreciate about our work as a team, there is an openness atmosphere and respect we have for each other; everyone's input is equally considered regardless of your role at the institution"*
>
> *"As we work this out, I thought I would bring us donuts today to get us relaxed and going this morning with our work"*

Collaboration among team members can be a challenge if the ability to genuinely learn and work together is not present (Nissila, 2005). The team successfully used collective engagement by synthesizing the various degrees of experience and knowledge among the team membership. Regardless of power or position within the university, the team integrated the various levels of members' expertise to foster collective ownership of producing appropriate programs for the students. For example, during weekly team meetings, Kevin, would take the initiative in seeking everyone's input and made a point to always indicate that his thoughts and ideas might not be perfect; other insights were needed from everyone. This allowed for not only building rapport, but also established a safe working environment where all team members' input was heard and the use of free flowing ideas was not judged or criticized. The team continued to gain trust and a comfort level with each other where shared vision was developed and a collective dialogue was demonstrated when exploring the action research process. I shared this specific statement with a team member during a weekly meeting:

> *"There is a comfort level that makes me feel that we are all on the same page and an easy work flow as we learn more on how to merge our styles into a collective whole. I believe conflicts are naturally going to occur, but we as a group have minimal conflicts and work well together."*

In action research, the *planning* stage is a continuation of the constructing stage and allows for the leadership team to verify their work as well as to be in a safe working environment that promoted individuals to speak openly and engage actively without fear of judgment as well as obtain clarity and understanding of their work. The planning stage involved determining the individual and collective roles, creating a timeline for implementing specific program logistics, and establishing meeting dates/times. The team met weekly for planning sessions. Cervero and Wilson (1998) defines planning as a social activity whereby people construct educational programs by negotiating

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personal, organization, and social interest in contexts marked by socially structured relations of power. At this time, members discussed, evaluated and designed all programming functions appropriately based on students' learning needs and previous classroom observations. There is no more crucial aspect of the program development process than objective setting; the need to set objectives provides a forum for deciding on major program thrusts and levels of expected achievement (Galbraith, Sisco, & Guglielmino, 1997). During the team's brainstorming and planning process it was determined what new modules and/or restructuring of current modules were needed to produce effective learning materials and activities for the participants.

The collaborative team dynamics fused rapport within the team, transparent communication, roles established by the team members, and the deliberate use of individual skill sets when building team cohesion. The demographics of the team supported members to identify specific roles in the implementation process. For example, the instructor and academic developer respectively shared:

> *"I find learning from each other's experiences to be much more impactful to the team's process when collectively designing development programs."*
>
> *"The demographics of our team enable us to think deeper around intercultural learning, based on our own experiences and then collectively bridge our individual knowledge toward creating new knowledge for ourselves as a team and for our students."*

The team successfully used collective engagement by synthesizing the various degrees of experience and knowledge among the team membership. Regardless of power or position within the university, the team integrated the various levels of member's expertise to foster collective ownership of producing intercultural programs. For example, during weekly team meetings there was a safe environment where all team insights where heard and the use of free flowing ideas were not judged or criticized. The team continued to gain trust and a comfort level with each other where shared vision was developed and collective dialogue demonstrated when exploring the action research process.

Weekly sessions continued to focus on the student's learning needs, but also were used for both reflection on the work being done by the team, and an opportunity to continue to build and establish team cohesions. Those members, who initially thought that they posed less experience than more seasoned members, felt a mutual ownership to the team's process. This environment of mutual respect and transparent communication built on the group dynamics and encouraged members to learn from each other. When asked by the researcher of the team's working relationship, several members commented:

> *"This is a great team; I've never seen a group interact and work so well together."*
>
> *"The diversity amongst us creates synergy that helps with our work with the students."*
>
> *"Open communication and the comfortable work environment that we have established make the teamwork ease."*
>
> *"Your work (the researcher) has kept the team focus and reminds us that we have to continue to connect the learning as we go along; critical to have someone facilitate our learning because other members may miss vital aspects to the collaborative work being done"*

This focus was not limited to the work conducted for students, but also for the process that the team used to engage in a collective group approach to program design. Team members echoed these sentiments by noting:

> *"We must continue to be intentional in our process in promoting the learning and the development of academic skills in inclusive leadership."*
>
> *"Evaluating the team's process needs to be continuous to measure and assess our work; benchmark where we are, what is working, and what needs to be done differently"*

Team members indicate their graduation into the performing stage at this point with a clear commitment and frictionless orientation to the task of thinking about the development of the program, but also in the designing and implementation of that program.

d) Taking Action

Addressing social-category differences when team membership consists of a variety of diverse characteristics such as race, gender, and age, better navigates potential barriers in bridging team cohesiveness in order to effectively conduct the action research process. The third action research stage, *taking action*, consisted of implementing activities that the leadership team collectively planned for the students. This included on-going interactions with the participants of the cohort, facilitating the programs, re-evaluating the intervention's outcomes and administering assessments. Activities for the initiative included the students' welcome orientation and social events held during the summer of 2012, and the implementation of the honors course conducted in the Fall semester of 2012.

In addition to the taking action phase was the team analyzing the data collected for assessing the effectiveness of the activities developed and implemented for the program, which segued into the fourth stage, *evaluating the action*. When examining the outcomes of the action the team collectively evaluated the learning process for the students as well as assessed the collaborative efforts when designing and administrating the activities of the program. Throughout the implementation (taking action) stage the team was also evaluating and making changes as appropriate.

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During these team meetings were the opportunities to point out what was working successfully with the overall program as well as dialog around what needed to be improved. A major outcome for this portion of the team's collective work was to schedule a full day retreat in the summer of 2013 to review all findings around the work of the leadership team, the cohort's learning outcomes, and to revise procedures as needed to improve the leadership program for the incoming Fall of 2013 participants.

V. Discussion and Implications for Research and Practice

Student centered is defined as the need for individualizing instruction based on the recognition that learners differ in cognitive processing, personality, ways of making meaning, educational attainment, and other attributes (Nuckles, 2010). The team collaboratively acknowledged that students should be exposed to learning opportunities that would provide the knowledge and skills that are necessary to be inclusive leaders at the university, and beyond their college of experience. Although the group was socially demographically diverse, the group shared commonalties when being intentional in their approach to program development and teaching best practices. The team focused on designing, implementing and evaluating appropriate interventions and learning opportunities with the intention of developing student's knowledge, skills and attributes in intercultural settings.

Brennan (2015) writes about how powerful, effective and beneficial diverse teams, or teams that vary in cultural backgrounds, can be in leadership roles within the higher education organization. When participating in the process of academic development, the team discovered an appreciation of their own diversity and experiential learning. This promoted the merger of various concepts and ideas when designing, implementing, and evaluating development programs. When team members were asked to reflect on their experience of using the action research approach, several articulated that the process kept the team focused, allowed for all to take ownership in the process, enabled the team to use the expertise of members and shared vision to be intentional in their work, and continuous evaluation of the teams process allowed for readjustments as needed when working with the students.

Implications to the field can inform faculty and instructors on action research methods when developing programs through a collaborative approach and team interactions. It also provides an initial framework for the analysis of group dynamics when working on collaborative team initiatives and task. Findings indicated that team dynamics and demographics impact the forming stages in ways that influence team interactions and should be reviewed constantly when working collectively at the task at hand. Knowledge of the team dynamics, the group's intentionality, and their perceptions on working together and having a safe environment, emerged from the study as team influences when using the stages of action research in program development and can be used not only in higher education, but in other industries when cultivating team interactions and learning.

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