Conflict and Cross-Cultural Mentoring

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Abstract

The area of multicultural issues and competence within higher education is incredibly complex. Universities and colleges often state that diversity and multiculturalism are goals for which they strive, yet year after year, dissatisfaction arises from students, staff, and faculty. Why does it seem as if higher education is treadmilling on the issue, addressing differences between cultures and issuing recommendations without systemic change taking hold? The following paper seeks to examine conflict between cultures at the root level, taking on theories surrounding intercultural communication, the social construction of trust, and racial identity development. Furthermore, the paper discusses how research has shown that cross-cultural mentoring serves as a way to bridge gaps in trust and cultural fluency. Recommendations as to how to implement effective cross-cultural mentoring programs will be discussed at the end.

Keywords: multicultural issues; diversity; cross-cultural mentoring; trust; intercultural communication; conflict

Conflict and Cross-Cultural Mentoring

Conflict is a natural component of life. Whether one works in higher education, the corporate world, or even within one's household, conflict is sure to surface. One sensitive area encompasses conflict in the context of cultural conflicts, primarily race-related conflict. Student affairs professionals, by nature of the profession, often find themselves in the middle of conversations surrounding multiculturalism and conflict (Laker & Davis, 2009). As such, there is a certain level of responsibility and potential impact on students' lives. Student affairs professionals can work to improve inclusiveness, create communities, and "influence policies and institutional structures that promote systematic organizational change" (Laker & Davis, 2009, p. 242). Given this basis, it is reasonable to expect that student affairs professionals will encounter situations of cultural conflict.

Student affairs professionals can help to manage and mitigate cultural conflict methods found in cross-cultural mentoring. This essay seeks to explore why cultural conflict can arise, as well as how cross-cultural mentoring may serve as a support system for overcoming the challenges of conflict, particularly on the college campus. A short literature review of cross-cultural mentoring research will examine the benefits of mentoring in a power dynamic, namely in the student-administrator dynamic.

Rationale for Topic and Study

Defining "Conflict" and "Culture"

In order to frame an effective examination of conflict, culture, and the proposed method of management and resolution, cross-cultural mentoring, one must first understand what is meant by *conflict* and *culture.* For the purpose of this essay, *conflict* is defined as "a difference within a person or between two or more people that touches them in a significant way" (LeBaron & Pillay,

2006). Conflict, in this sense, goes beyond verbal disagreements, creating a much more comprehensive concept to address.

Culture, for intents and purposes of discussion, is "the shared, often unspoken, understandings in a group" (LeBaron & Pillay, 2006). It is within culture that meaning-making happens, shaping what is valued or important, and giving rise to beliefs, values, and attitudes. Furthermore, people are made up of various, intersecting identities and co-cultures; for the purposes of this essay, the *culture* in question will be racial and ethnic cultures.

Historical Context

Conflict between cultures within the American college is not a new phenomenon. Institutions of higher education, at least in the United States, were originally designed to educate young White men (Thelin, 2004). In some areas, experimental programs were created to educate Native Americans—often with an accompanying goal to convert them to Christianity. Even in these early days, cultural conflict was evident; Thelin (2004) states that many of the Native American students "became trapped between worlds" (p. 30). Tribe leaders felt as if the Euro-centric university methods "had rendered their future chiefs 'good for nothing'" (Thelin, 2004, p. 30). Of course, the tensions between the cultures were not contained to only the college environment.

Throughout time, other minority populations have struggled within the American college, including students identified as Black, Asian, Latino, and Middle Eastern. By no means an exhaustive list of minority populations, these racial groups have met new challenges as society evolves. For example, Thelin (2004) explains that Black students were effectively excluded from higher education due to slavery and race relations; post-Civil War legislation relaxed barriers to college for Black students. However, even in contemporary society, one does not have to go far

to find research showing that Black students struggle (Thelin, 2004). It is essential to understand that although attitudes about inclusion of minority students in higher education have drastically shifted from the beginning of the American institution, minority populations are still largely underserved and struggle in college.

A Brief History of "Education for the Culturally Disadvantaged."

Cultural conflict is a topic that is not limited to the scope of higher education or to a narrow scope regarding one population of students against another. Literature on how to educate the "culturally disadvantaged" has existed for an extensive amount of time. For instance, in 1967, Hamblin wrote about a theory that was to aid teachers working with the "culturally disadvantaged"—populations practitioners would refer to as "underrepresented" or "underserved" in contemporary society. Hamblin (1967) relays that certain teaching methods would yield improvements in classes full of culturally disadvantaged students; however, indicative of the times, the methods used were highly ethnocentric, disregarding cultural differences and instead aiming for results based on the successes of White, upper-middle class students. Although extremely outdated, Hamblin's (1967) report demonstrates the strides education has made in striving for multiculturalism. The danger lies in ceasing to develop further models of cross-cultural engagement.

Although student affairs administrators do not use the phrase culturally disadvantaged to describe minority students, the phrase nonetheless evokes further thought. Student affairs practitioners often work with ideas of racism and privilege to understand why misunderstandings arise and persist throughout higher education. Reason, Scales, and Roosa Millar (2005) state that first understanding race as a social construction is imperative if progress is to be made toward inclusiveness. With that understanding comes the further analysis of which cultures are valued or

privileged and which cultures are not. White privilege is the privilege most pertinent to the topic at-hand, which is conflict across cultural boundaries. Due to social construction of dominance and power, Whites are able to "remain oblivious to... unearned assets and ignore the obstacles presented to people of color" (Reason et al., 2005, p. 56). It is the obliviousness to privilege and power that can give rise to conflict.

Diversifying Higher Education

As Laker and Davis (2009) point out, "diversity, access, and inclusion continue to be among the most pervasive and contentious issues facing institutions of higher education" (p. 242). Additionally, Laker and Davis state that there is general consensus throughout literature that interactions which cross cultural boundaries and identities help in cognitive development within individuals. It is then obvious that we, as emerging professionals, should not debate whether or not multicultural engagement is necessary or beneficial. Instead, we should focus our energies on how to effectively foster cross-cultural engagement.

In addition, Barker (2007) makes an excellent point that cross-cultural mentoring is necessary when the issue is reduced to simple numbers. Although efforts are in place at most colleges and universities to diversify student and faculty populations, the fact of the matter is that minority faculty are still difficult to find. Black students often seek out Black faculty mentors; however, these faculty members are low in numbers, resulting in the need for White faculty members to step up as cross-cultural mentors (Barker, 2007).

<center>**Theoretical Foundations**</center>

Social Construction of Trust

One cannot reasonably tackle the topic of mentoring, especially across different cultural lines, without first addressing *trust.* According to Weber and Carter (2003), trust is "an

orientation between self and other whose object is the relationship. Trust's premise is the belief that the other will take one's perspective into account when decision-making and will not act in ways to violate the moral standards of the relationship" (p. vii). Three components work together to construct trust: (a) social structure; (b) power; and (c) time (Weber & Carter, 2003). Even before delving deeper into how trust is constructed between people, it becomes apparent that differences in social structure and power, particularly in regards to privilege, affect trust between people from varied cultural backgrounds.

Social structure, as discussed by Weber and Carter (2003), is a pattern of interaction that "typifies interdependent status-roles" (p. 19); these ways of interacting are a manifestation of "social facts" or truths. One example of a social structure is how one expects a mother or father to act in that particular status-role. Weber and Carter go on to say that "culture dictates that mothers and fathers should act in certain ways, ways that promote and reinforce the initial orientation toward trust that is a necessity due to dependency" (p. 20). In a similar fashion, cultural norms may dictate the status-role a student expects from an academic advisor or a professor; with cultural variations comes different expectations, and with different expectations comes heightened potential for trust violation and conflict.

Power is another dynamic present in trust formation. In the ideal relationship, power is equal in order to make trust a possibility (Weber & Carter, 2003). However, in cases where power is not equal, for one reason or another, trust formation meets problems. A person with greater power does not have to trust the other person; with more power comes more freedom to do as one pleases. This can be used "benevolently or maliciously" (Weber & Carter, 2003, p. 21).

Time is Weber and Carter's (2003) third framing construct, stating that "time orders social life" (p. 25). This construct accounts for the development of relationships and, consequently,

trust. Weber and Carter emphasize that when people come together is important, and this is transferable to relationships students may come to form in college. Additionally, there are differences between how time affects a student coming straight out of high school as opposed to a non-traditional student returning to school after several decades in the workforce.

Racial Identity Development

Understanding racial identity development theories is beneficial for the student affairs professional seeking to become culturally fluent. Since Barker (2007) points out that most faculty members identify as White, it is pertinent for these educators to become versed in White identity development, namely theories developed by Helms and Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Helms (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) developed a model of White identity development in the 1990s in order to "raise awareness of white people about their role in creating and maintaining a racist society and the need for them to act responsibly by dismantling it" (p. 260).

Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) developed their White racial consciousness model (WRCM) in order to manage concerns with previous White racial identity models. The WRCM categorizes ethnic identity consciousness into two categories, *unachieved white racial consciousness* and *achieved white racial consciousness*. Rowe et al. (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) noted that the two types are fluid categories, meaning individuals "may move from one type to another contingent on the experiences they encounter (p. 262).

In unachieved white racial consciousness, individuals have not actively considered about their own race or the experiences of other racial groups (Evans et al., 2010). On the other hand, individuals in achieved white racial consciousness fall into four sub-categories: (a) *dominative;* (b) *conflictive;* (c) *reactive;* and (d) *integrative.* Individuals with *dominative* attitudes are

ethnocentric, while *conflictive* individuals showcase opposition to programs that are designed to

decrease discrimination; *reactive* attitudes "recognize that inequities and injustices exist," while

also holding "genuine concern" for people of color (Evans et al., 2010, p. 263). However,

reactive individuals may not have close contact with people of color, making it difficult for them

to tackle issues surrounding the status quo of White dominance. Lastly, Whites with *integrative*

attitudes have "come to terms with being white" and recognize the complexity that comes with

living in a White-dominated society (Evans et al., 2010, p. 263).

Intercultural Communication and Conflict

Laker and Davis (2009) acknowledge the unarguable need for intercultural

communication in higher education and furthermore acknowledge that conflict across cultures is

inevitable. LeBaron and Pillay (2006) posit that "conflict and culture are intertwined at every

level" (p. 17), meaning that conflict in any given situation is the result of a cultural clash.

Conflict naturally occurs when individuals' values and ingrained beliefs are challenged by the

introduction of new perspectives (Laker and Davis, 2009). For example, a college student may

become frustrated with his or her advisor's input; the reason behind this, according to LeBaron

and Pillay (2006), is due to a misalignment of cultural values. In this case, the student and

advisor's cultures could simply be attributed to generational differences. What happens, though,

when conflict arises because the student is Black and the advisor is White?

One must remember that it is not enough to simply navigate through conflict; student

affairs professionals must remember that students are products of intersecting and multiple

identities (Laker and Davis, 2009). Furthermore, LeBaron and Pillay (2006) state that analysis of

conflict often ignores embedded influences and issues. They go on to state that "acknowledging

culture and bringing cultural fluency to conflicts can help... people make more intentional,

adaptive choices, whether they are... people on either side of divisive social issues, or people from different identity groups" (LeBaron & Pillay, 2006, p. 17). In other words, ignoring dynamics of culture and race will only function to deepen conflict, placing resolution and management further out of reach.

Synthesis

Looking at theories of trust, racial identity development, and intercultural communication and conflict together gives one a strong basis for understanding why conflict occurs across cultures. For example, if one were a Black student, one would hold a particular set of cultural beliefs and values that differ from a White faculty member's own cultural beliefs and values. Additionally, the White faculty member may fall into any number of categories within Rowe et al.'s (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) WRCM, affecting his or her views on the struggles people of color face. Furthermore, even if the White faculty member holds a *reactive* or *integrative* attitude, the relationship between the Black student and the White faculty member may lack in trust; for one, the White faculty member holds a certain amount of privilege and power due to social constructs. As Weber and Carter (2003) note, this means the White member has the option to act or not act, in terms of trying to foster beneficial communication in the relationship. The intersecting theories create a complex dynamic seen across the higher education field. It is precisely the complexity that draws the author to recommend building cross-cultural mentoring programs as a way to enhance trust, raise identity consciousness, and encourage intercultural communication and dialogue.

Cross-Cultural Mentoring

Existing Research

A *mentor* is an individual, usually in a senior position, "who provides psychosocial and professional or academic support to a junior person" (Barker, 2007). As such, a mentor in higher education is someone who serves to guide a student through the college experience. Barker (2007) proposes that cross-cultural mentoring at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) is necessary given the institutional context. As stated earlier, Black students at PWIs routinely seek out same-race mentorship and guidance; due to a shortage of Black faculty members, however, these students must either choose to forgo mentoring or seek out a mentor from another group (Barker, 2007).

Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) use a narrative of their mentor-mentee relationship to examine the potential for cross-cultural mentoring. Cervero (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004) recalled his realization that "as a white person, I have the privilege of choosing whose side I will be on in the struggle against racism. Juanita does not" (p. 9). Members of a privileged group have the ability to make a conscious decision on whether or not they will actively participate in resolving social injustice. As Weber and Carter (2003) point out, the person with more power in a relationship has the ability to choose whether or not to act and whether action is used for beneficial or harmful intent. Trust is a large component in the foundation for cross-cultural mentoring.

A notable passage from Johnson-Bailey and Cervero's (2004) autoethnography states that by regularly discussing the reality of racial barriers, the mentor and mentee were both free to act as if those barriers did not exist. An interesting juxtaposition of concepts, this speaks to the power of acknowledging racial dynamics in the struggle towards multiculturalism. LeBaron and

Pillay (2006) support the notion that acknowledging cultural differences is beneficial in creating cross-cultural understanding; using the image of an iceberg as metaphor, LeBaron and Pillay share that acknowledging the impediment to smooth sailing is helpful to all parties. By pretending the iceberg does not exist, parties put each other in danger of greater damage.

Barker (2007) developed a simple model which helps to illustrate the complexity surrounding cross-cultural mentoring relationships. As discussed earlier, both parties should acknowledge the differences between their cultures in order to develop effective relationships. According to Barker (2007), the major factors a mentor and mentee should examine are: (a) level of racial identity; (b) cultural ideology and perception; and (c) experiences (Figure 1).
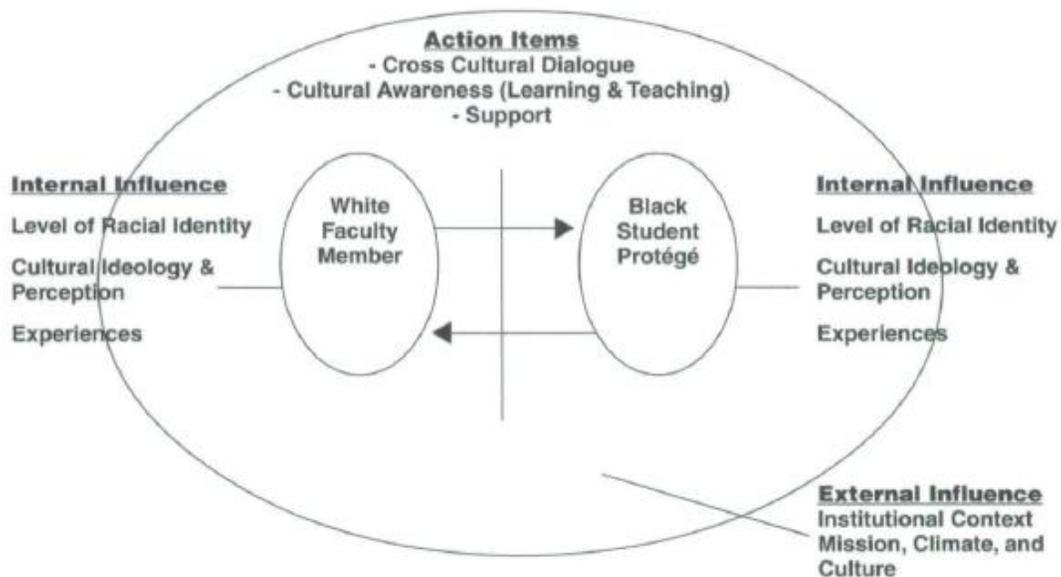

Action Items
- Cross Cultural Dialogue
- Cultural Awareness (Learning & Teaching)
- Support

Internal Influence

Level of Racial Identity

Cultural Ideology & Perception

Experiences

White Faculty Member

Black Student Protégé

Internal Influence

Level of Racial Identity

Cultural Ideology & Perception

Experiences

External Influence
Institutional Context
Mission, Climate, and Culture

Figure 1. Barker's (2007) Cross-Cultural Mentoring Dyad with Individual Cultural Ideology and Institutional Context.

Developing the Cross-Cultural Mentor-Mentee Relationship

Effectively developing cross-cultural mentor-mentee relationships requires certain, deliberate thought. Again, keeping in mind the role trust plays in the cross-cultural mentoring relationship is necessary. With the goal being to foster understanding and trust, it makes sense that White students, faculty, and staff with *reactive* and *integrative* attitudes are most suitable for participation in these programs. Barker (2007) proposes that both White and minority group faculty must become more culturally competent—aware of both their own cultures and of other cultures—in order to serve as effective mentors. This is similar to what Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) and LeBaron and Pillay (2006) believe, that acknowledging areas of deficiency and possible misunderstanding is more helpful than ignoring issues of racial and cultural difference. Barker (2007) further states that a mentor is different from a role model or an ally in that there should be an emotional investment by the senior mentor in the junior person. Otherwise, there may be disappointment from the mentee after expecting a more invested relationship.

Student affairs professionals looking to become cross-cultural mentors may benefit from exercises and questions outlined by Bhangoo and Pillay (2006). For example, different cultures hold different values and beliefs. One way to practice cross-cultural understanding is to view different situations with a new set of lenses. One set of sample questions, asked in the presence of a difficult situation, are as follows: (a) Why do you hold this belief or view? Where does it come from?; (b) How does this belief influence you and your life?; (c) Assume the completely opposite view to the one you hold. What is it? How does it make sense for those who hold this view? What can you imagine might reinforce this view for those who hold it?; (d) With this alternative belief, what would your world look and feel like now? (Bhangoo & Pillay, 2006, p.

117). Applying these questions could be helpful in relating to a student from a different background; instead of simply imposing long-held views on the student, the student affairs professional may be able to adjust his or her advice to mesh with the student's own culture.

Limitations in Existing Research

Barker (2007) notes that there is limited research on cross-cultural mentoring relationships outside of the Black student-White faculty member dynamic within higher education. Most other research focuses on faculty-faculty relationships or relationships forged outside higher education. This speaks to the need for institutions to begin creating more formal programs, as well as the need to assess how different cultures interact. Starting points in this area of opportunity include looking at different minority student populations, e.g., Asian and Pacific Islander, Latino, and so forth, mentored by White faculty members. Additionally, of great interest would be the minority student-non-same group minority faculty member relationship. All dynamics hold the potential to share insight for crossing cultural lines and creating understanding—and ultimately, creating welcoming environments in which students may succeed.

Applications to Student Affairs

Current Issues: Limitations in Creating Inclusive Communities.

One problem in traditional conflict resolution is the artificial duality present in cases of oppression. As Laker and Davis (2009) note, "social identities are commonly discussed in student affairs circles in terms of privilege and oppression," and typically that those in the majority "enjoy privilege, whereas those whose identity is in the minority experience oppression" (p. 243). In other words, the duality is that each person is in one of two categories: privileged, or oppressed. This binary can actually harm discussion and critical thinking, effectively shutting

down all discourse. Laker and Davis propose that student affairs professionals must move beyond the binary to create truly multicultural communities.

Barker (2007) presents research which seemingly demonstrates that cross-cultural mentoring can be effective, but that institutional culture can affect the experience positively or negatively. For instance, students at Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBCUs) perceive the climate to be more welcoming and supportive (Barker, 2007). On the other hand, minority students at PWIs assume the institution to be less supportive; this sentiment can then project onto White faculty members. Incorporating the construction of trust into the equation, one sees that minority students can be hesitant to trust potential mentors (Weber & Carter, 2003).

Recommendations

Cross-cultural mentoring, particularly at PWIs, should be put forth as deliberate and formal programs. While it is natural to see how mentor-mentee relationships could be constructed within specific disciplines, it is also advisable to apply cross-cultural mentoring to student affairs functional areas. One such functional area is academic advising and academic counseling. While the mentor-mentee relationships examined by Barker (2007) and Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) were primarily research-related roles, academic advisors and counselors prove to be individuals that could benefit greatly from cross-cultural mentoring relationships. Due to the intrinsic guiding roles advisors and counselors take on, developing meaningful relationships with students—especially those from different cultures—is a way to develop trust in the greater institution. Academic advisors and counselors take some responsibility in creating students' schedules and planned programs of study; as such, there is bound to be some frustration if a student learns his or her original plans will take longer than expected due to unforeseen circumstances. Some students may interpret such an event as

disrespectful or having root in cultural differences. An advisor or counselor that also serves as a cross-cultural mentor will hopefully be able to diminish those notions or explore why those notions exist.

Furthermore, academic advisors and counselors that are committed to developing cross-cultural mentoring relationships with students will gain insight into how to better perform their jobs. Evans et al. (2010) often use scenarios in which collectivist and individualistic cultural values clash in college, including scenarios where, for example, an Asian-American student has trouble reconciling familial values and expectations with her own expectations for college and beyond. Academic advisors and counselors involved in cross-cultural mentoring relationships will have a better chance of making appropriate recommendations that are in-line with cultural expectations while still working towards the goal of a college degree for the student.

Secondly, cross-cultural mentoring makes sense in the context of multicultural outreach and diversity development programs. Staff and faculty working within these types of programs may be of various backgrounds, but it is naïve to believe that there will be a potential mentor from every particular racial and ethnic background. Instead, students may have to seek guidance from leaders outside their racial group; putting forth a program that encourages these exchanges and relationships will help students—especially those that may already feel isolated—feel more comfortable in seeking out guidance.

In similar fashion, cross-cultural mentoring can be a valuable tool in the housing realm. Resident directors and other staff members often work with students from very different backgrounds, with an overarching goal of building cohesive communities. Forming relationships with minority students will be one way to keep these students engaged and feeling valued, going beyond multicultural programming that other residents may or may not attend. Placing value on

intercultural communication within the residence halls will likely help to decrease the negative impact of conflict and confrontation between residents. When a resident director is able to acknowledge differences and speak to them, as well as offer emotional support, minority students have a greater chance of overcoming obstacles put in place by social boundaries. By cultivating these mentor-mentee relationships, resident directors can deconstruct negative views of the power they hold and help students better navigate the university system.

Lastly, administrators must be mindful when creating cross-cultural mentoring programs. It is essential to acknowledge that not every faculty or staff member will be at a point where he or she is capable of serving as a mentor. Whether this is due to refusing to explore one's own cultural identity or a lack of interest in emotional investment, it is recommended that prospective mentors in these positions do not take on the role of mentor. Barker's (2007) assertion that lack of emotional involvement is detrimental to student mentees holds weight when considering how to best serve students. Administrators should seek to create understanding, as well as acknowledge how power and privilege held by Whites is detrimental to minorities in terms of trust and general success (Weber & Carter, 2003).

Conclusion

Institutions interested in creating formal cross-cultural mentoring programs should be careful to evaluate mentors' racial consciousness and willingness to invest in students emotionally. Mentors must recognize that power dynamics do exist and can hinder students' perception and trust. Choosing to act as support is also necessary, much like Cervero did after realizing that as a White person, he had a choice to join in the struggle against racism, whereas his mentee did not (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). By addressing racial identity, the mentor was able to perform his role with more investment and ultimately, effectiveness. The relationship

continues to exist, now in the context of senior faculty-junior faculty, showcasing how powerful

cross-cultural mentoring relationships can be in the long-run (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004).

However, despite these instances of benefit, research is lacking in several crucial areas, namely

how cross-cultural mentoring affects student populations other than Black students, and how

non-White faculty mentors can aid in student development. Student affairs professionals should

take note of the lack of information in these areas and supplement what is missing from current

practice with existing theory and deliberate pushes for more cross-cultural engagement.

As Barker (2007) notes, "the cross-cultural mentoring relationship provides the

opportunity to blur those cultural lines, creating greater understanding between and among those

different cultures" (p. 96). By developing relationships which address not only academic issues

but issues of cultural conflict, distrust, and misunderstanding, both students and professionals

within higher education will benefit. Promoting trust and understanding will help to alleviate

conflict across cultures; to do so requires structured consideration of one's own understanding of

culture and experiences, difficult work for those without previous experience in this type of

reflection. As Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) demonstrate, though, working through the

realities and implications of racial identity development is beneficial in the long-run; talking

about the boundaries and constraints put in place by social constructs allows the mentor-mentee

relationships to flourish beyond constraints. As long as disparity exists between racial groups, the

need for cross-cultural engagement remains; cross-cultural mentoring offers a way for

institutions to move forward on their initiatives and visions for truly multicultural universities.

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