

Democracy's College

Episode 5: Advancing Equity and Diversity in Higher Education Leadership

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Dr. Heather Fox from OCCRL talks with Dr. Pamela Eddy, a professor in Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership at the College of William and Mary, about advancing equity and diversity in higher education leadership.

Dr. Heather Fox: The first question that I am hoping that you can help us with is: leadership can be a ubiquitous term and that can evoke very different images for stakeholders throughout academia; can you characterize leadership in terms of roles, authority, contribution, and influence within that education context?

Dr. Pamela Eddy: I think one of the pieces of leadership is it matters how individuals are looking at leaders from the perspective of what role they are feeling they should be fulfilling. For some they want the knight on the white horse. I want this person to come in and tell us what to do. They have the vision, and they are going to take the institution by department, by unit, someplace that we could not go without that individual person. I think what we miss oftentimes, when we are looking only at those positional or authoritative positions, because they have certain power that comes along with it, is the kind of leadership that is occurring when we are not always looking. I had interviewed a vice provost once and she talked about the leading and the white spaces of the organizational chart. That has really stuck with me that we have a number of people that are in many ways this glue of an institution, or department, or a college, where they are fulfilling this role what we imagine of leaders, which often is providing direction, competency, and giving us something as individuals, but we do not recognize it or call it leadership. A piece of what we have been working on recently is this naming of leadership. Especially, when we come down to thinking of mid-level leaders, there is very big reluctance for people to say "well yes I am a leader." If I say I am that somehow makes me something I may not feel I am or moves me into a territory where I may be asked to do different kinds of things that I may not be ready for. The notion of how you are able to conceive of your own self as a leader ends up impacting how you are viewing others as leaders. I think often the default is simply looking at the organizational chart and thinking, "Who's in charge?" If you go to a campus, however, and you are a newcomer, and you start talking with people to say: "How do things get done around here?," and "Who would you really point to?," it often is not the person in the corner office. It is the person that has run a committee really well or the person that is the holder of the institutional knowledge and how things get done. I see a lot of leadership being enacted that is not always named leadership. In particular, in staff members, who are often invisible on campuses, and seeing the kind of leadership that they are providing both for their areas but also for students. The individual's location is going to make a difference in terms of how they view it, and you can imagine if you're looking at it from board of trustees' perspective, how they are looking for something. I think one of our limitations or concerns now is how do these boards of trustees really guide these future selection of leaders if they have a very narrow band of how they're visualizing what that leader is going to look like.

Dr. Heather Fox: Speaking of what a leader looks like, despite efforts to diversify leadership in academia, traditional leadership roles continue to be held predominantly by white males. What are some of the factors that contribute to this persistent, inequitable representation of women and other minoritized populations?

Dr. Pamela Eddy: I think when you look at the data it can be very discouraging. What I like to do is always paint a portrait by checking the numbers. What do the numbers look like? Within community colleges we have seen some improvement in terms of gender, in particular. What frustrates me is when people are using 1986 data to say “Look how far we have come: It used to be 8% and now we are 33%. We should be hosting a party of some sort.” You think it is still only one of three, when we look at some of the roles on campuses that are much more 50/50. Why is it that we are still seeing these barriers? We are seeing more equity in chief academic officer roles, which I think is really a good sign. The chief academic officer is typically that launching point up into a presidency. We are finding this still having a glass ceiling or some would call it a Plexiglas ceiling. I think there are a number of actions at play for that. One of them is how we start envisioning who leaders can be and what they look like. How sitting leaders often even describe their jobs as 24/7, the constant connection, the target on your back because you are the person that the stakeholders are looking at from your board to your community, etc. Many are reluctant to come into that public eye, especially when you have individuals that embrace a more collaborative leadership style. That is not attractive. Why would I want to do that and/or why do I want to take a position where my look is more outward versus inward? The chief academic officer position gets to be thinking about students and faculty in academic roles, and increasingly presidents are looking outwardly with fund development, policy development, and working with government liaisons, etc. So the view ends up looking different. The structural impediments are often not acknowledged. So when we think it’s just because there are not people trying for these positions or the only reason that we do not have more women or minorities in these roles is because they are not applying, it is not as simple as that. It really is a compilation of all these structural factors that are in place. The whole idea of secondary discrimination really gets at these subtle forms of discrimination. Either from phrases that say “I am not sure you should really think about that promotion,” or “You better wait,” which may not be any type of an overt discrimination; it is the way the culture is saying who can go and who should do that. So I think the structural barriers are aspects that we could actually really begin doing something to deconstruct them and to change them. It really makes us have to take a close look at saying, “Well what have we assumed about this?” You see this even in terms of opportunities to serve on really high-powered committees. Who gets chosen? We often see a small, select group of the chosen ones. And not always understanding, “Well what got them to that circle?,” or “How can I get in that circle?,” or “I did not even know that there was circle that I should be in.” And so the more we can bring down some of those barriers, the easier it is going to be for individuals to see themselves moving upward and across in other positions. For minority leaders it is especially disheartening because we cannot point to that same type of a change from an 8% to a 33%. We have been at 12 and 13 percent for probably 20 years. As we start looking at trying to bring more people of color into these roles, we have to actually look farther back more than we have been. We really need to start thinking of “What does that mean for faculty?,” because 70% of our presidents started in the classroom. How do we get more individuals of color coming into those teaching environments? I have been advocating recently that it would be good for current faculty to talk to students. We know how accidental it is even to get a faculty position at a community college. Many people never contemplated that. And more and more as we see people with doctorates coming into community colleges, there is not an easy pathway there because many of their

advisors are really trying to have them shoot for R1s or prestigious institutions, and if they even say they want to go to a community college, it is as if “Are you out of your mind? Why would you want to do that?” The focus on teaching can be really attractive. How we are able to show more individuals that that is a possibility starts feeding that pipeline in a markedly different way. That 30% of leaders that are coming from outside of higher ed. could also be an avenue where we could start seeing some increasing diversity both in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity.

Dr. Heather Fox: I am hoping that you can talk a little bit about the impact and the costs that are associated with this persistent lack of inclusivity.

Dr. Pamela Eddy: I think one of the things when we think of the costs is what happens when we have the loss of this talent. So on the one hand we do not even know the extent of the loss that we have experienced or what those good ideas may have been and how they could have advanced us as an institution. Without having an inclusive environment, you really get into these “group think” type of situations where you think everything is wonderful, and the person next to you thinks everything is wonderful, so nothing ever changes as a result of that. Having that diversity is that diversity of thought as well on a committee or in an institution, where people point out things that make you take a second look and say, “Oh, I had not thought of that before? How do I think differently and how might I change this experience as a result?” I will speak from a personal perspective: it is not always easy being in those kinds of environments because you would rather everybody thinks what you thought, because then you can go ahead and do this. But it is always that person that brings up that thought that is provocative that begins having a moment of dissonance for you. It is through those moments of dissonance that you see the most transformational learning occur. If we had difference in thought and difference in background, people would start seeing a range of assumptions be questioned, and as a result of that the organization would learn as well as the individuals within the institution. As we look at those moments of dissonance, trying to capitalize on that, we see organizationally it is easy to do incremental changes, where we basically do the same thing maybe a little better, or a little more, versus having a deep change. We will often espouse this desire for a deep change, but that really means we have to question some of these assumptions, and if we are in these situations where everyone thinks the same thing, everyone has had the same background, then we do not ask the hard questions that we need when we are coming in. I think from a student perspective, in particular, since we have the most diversity of all institutions of higher ed., community colleges provide a really rich environment to see a lot of change in society. The more students can see people that look like them and overcome situations like them, have some shared experience, they would begin believing, “Oh I can do this because so and so did that,” or “I saw someone that had done this,” and being able to share these stories. I had once given a talk at a session for McNair Scholars, which had a lot of first-generation students in there and students of color. I had a dad come up to me afterwards. He said, “This is first time in four years that my kid has been here that I ever understood anything someone said at one of these talks.” I thought, “Well that is first of all very sad that he had not felt like he was included in any of these environments.” And because I had come from an environment with not a lot of family members in college, and valuing education, and having to sort of fight for it, my approach was markedly different. I knew my audience, and I was not in an academic conference setting where I was going to be using two-dollar words when a 50-cent word was going to really do the job just fine. You come in with that openness, and people recognize that. Students are going to recognize that, and faculty are going to recognize that. The way you can do that is when you

have that kind of environment that welcomes that kind of inclusivity and hears that range of voices that come in.

Dr. Heather Fox: How do widely held conceptions of leadership lead to change, if we are going to embrace and benefit from the full range of talents that are held by diverse leaders?

Dr. Pamela Eddy: I think really in our minds we have these visions of a physical vision of what a leader is. Typically, a tall person with an imposing presence and a strong jaw line comes to mind. When we have these visions, it really makes it difficult for anyone else to come in and embody that as a leader role. It is the people that begin coming in and changing those conceptions that start changing our idea of what it can look like and how it acts. When top level leaders coming in begin to start addressing this by either modeling in their own actions or empowering others to have their own authentic leadership style, that matters. I had a president at one of my institutions and in the summer he would wear polo shirts and no tie. A board of trustees member was really dressing him down on this and saying, "You're the president, you need to be wearing a tie." So if we have the whole notion of leadership embodied because you can wear a tie, then something is wrong with this picture. How we begin trying to understand this differently can come to down to simple matters of dress. How do we even accommodate that people can look different in these opportunities. I think as we think of the language around this, leaders and individuals in administration or even faculty can begin using their own power of language to challenge some of this and to offer alternative ways. If we think of the sources of power, there are only very few that are associated really with position or authority. How do we allow others to realize they actually are leaders in a variety of capacities? I think we are running into the danger of names and limitation of language, when we start thinking of leaders, because of all this history and baggage. If we could call them something else, I often think of Yertle the turtle. I am thinking if we changed our whole idea of what it meant to be a leader and just called it differently, whatever it might be, that starts showing how this naming of it limits us in our thinking.

Dr. Heather Fox: What call for action would you issue to someone who is listening today and says, "I want to be part of making a more diverse set of leaders; I want to build an inclusive leadership environment; I want to be part of this change"? What would you encourage people to do?

Dr. Pamela Eddy: I think on an individual level people have to be willing to say yes and to expose themselves to situations that might be uncomfortable; they may not know how things are going to turn out, because it is through those kind actions that we actually can learn quite a bit. We really need to be thinking of "How can we be allies for others?" Often we have levels of privilege that we may not always be aware of, but when we are aware of them, they can be really used to leverage change in instances that are going to open up and become more inclusive for people who may be with us or follow after us. Recognizing that is important and being the person that raises the question [is important]. Taking on that role of saying "the emperor is wearing no clothes" is a part of that, and one that you can employ as an individual as you have been gaining credibility in your institution. It is a lot like the E.F. Hutton advertisement: when someone speaks they are going to listen, and it is because you have a reputation. Trying to think of "How do you leverage that and how do you in those individual roles act as a connector?" At the department level it gives one of those first opportunities, especially as department chairs, to be thinking about:

- How can I create an inclusive department setting?

- What is it that I can do to allow as many and varied voices to be heard?
- Obviously, there are some that are based on hiring and trying to do some hiring. What can I do in the meantime here?
- How do I act as that middle person that conveys up and down, acting as the voice of faculty for upper administration, and what policies are at that mid-level that I could influence, especially if they are promotion and tenure policies that could be more inclusive and more humane in some ways?

For upper level leaders, I think they sometimes underestimate their power of influence, in terms of even a small word to someone that is of encouragement, that says, “That was a great job you did on that project,” or “It was really great to hear how you mentored those students and they were able to go and do something.” On a personal level people just want recognition for the hard work that they are doing, and they want to feel valued. The power that leaders have in those situations is through their ability to tap into some of that human side of it, which I think is important. More so, they have the ability in a top-level leader position to be able to break down some of these structural barriers and to shine a light of them, saying “How are our policies being exclusive? What do we have in place that is acting as a barrier, even if it is an unintended barrier?” To be able to say, “Let’s change this. How do we look at it?” I think leaders could be well served looking at institutional data to understand some of these patterns.

- We keep losing all of the faculty in this particular school. What is going on over there?
- How do I start looking at changing some of the climate or practices there that can be more inclusive?
- What do the data say in terms of areas that have been very successful? What are they doing? How can we share that kind of information with other units?

It is easy for leaders to say “that is how the market is,” or “that is how things are.” We are in a place that we cannot attract people, and people do not want to stay, for all these reasons. Using those as excuses rather than being able to look underneath the covers and say these are really the reasons this is happening. The urgency on all of this needs to be heightened, and that can occur at any one of these levels. I think the biggest power is on that individual level, because ultimately even the president is an individual. How do we start having this kind of mindset that says this is not tolerated anymore? We need to go up and change it. Being that voice that comes up constantly and says this is wrong. We need to do something differently.

Dr. Heather Fox: I want to thank you again for doing this and for sharing all of that and giving us so much to think about.

Dr. Pamela Eddy: Yes, of course. It was a good time.

For more information about equity and diversity in higher education leadership, we recommend that you visit Dr. Pamela Eddy’s website at the College of William and Mary for a list of selected publications. For more podcasts, links to today’s recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit ocrl.illinois.edu/democracy or send them via Twitter @ocrl. Tune in to this month’s bonus episode when Chaddrick Gallaway from OCCRL will talk with Dr. Stephon Jon Quay from Miami University in Ohio about scholar activism and self-care. Background music for this podcast is provided by

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