Mars Hill University, DCLA Reporting Questions, January 2020

Report prepared by Elizabeth Whiting Pierce

1. How and with whom (faculty members, staff colleagues, others) have you shared what you learned at the Institute? Please describe briefly:

a. The main topics, readings, or themes you shared;

b. The vehicles, venues, or occasions for internal dissemination;

c. The audience(s) you reached (approximate number of individuals and their roles at the institution);

d. Key observations from any evaluations or feedback you gathered.

**Importance of identity-based student groups**

This fall, MHU created two sections of First Year Seminar (FYS111) open only to African American men (no students were assigned to these sections without opting in). The theme of these sections was leadership (each FYS111 section has its own theme). Also under development—among a subset of the same students—is a peer mentorship program. To prepare them for this program, the Center for Ethics and Student Life co-sponsored a leadership development retreat weekend with Guilford College’s student organization for African American men.

In the past, identity-based programming has controversial at MHU. Julia Park’s *Race on Campus* has informed our decision to pursue such programming in the face of that controversy. Park emphasizes the importance of “ethnic student organizations,” arguing that identity-based groups “provide social, academic, and emotional support for their members.” Contrary to many white educators’ fears, these groups tend to encourage interracial interaction, too. Once students feel a sense of belonging in one group, they feel better equipped to experiment with other social groups and encounters. That, at least, has been the DCLA team’s argument in support of identity-based programming and course offerings.

**Changing demographics of students**

MHU’s DCLA team has drawn attention to the changing demographics of college students in multiple venues, borrowing liberally from Julie Park’s presentation at the DCLA Institute. These venues include the yearly all-faculty forum, a pedagogy workshop with composition instructors, and a discussion with the Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees. In response, this trustee asked Dr. Pierce to craft a proposal for a BOT-Student mentorship program. That proposal includes student recruitment practices that create a demographically representative pool of student mentees.

**“Bandwidth recovery”**

Thus far, MHU’s DCLA team has discussed Cia Verschelden’s “bandwidth recovery” strategies on two occasions—in a presentation to the entire faculty in August 2019 and in a workshop for composition instructors in October 2019. A commitment to bandwidth recovery pedagogy also informed discussions among the Provost, President and other senior leadership that led to the creation of a new Center for Teaching and Learning. Dr. Chris Cain will direct the center. Dr. Cain will promote pedagogical theories (ex. growth mindset) and techniques (ex. universal design) eminently compatible with Verschelden’s recommendations in *Bandwidth Recovery*.

**Impacts of higher education on first-generation students’ familial relationships**

Discussion of Kwame Appiah’s presentation at the DCLA Institute prompted us to consider more carefully how matriculation impacts first generation college students’ relationships with their families of origin. This interest lead us to organize a spring reading group of the book *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* particularly aimed at faculty who teach first year students (20 instructors). This discussion also generated a conference paper “Cultivating Ethical Family Members, Not Just Citizens and Workers,” presented at the Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum’s Annual Conference, which Elizabeth Whiting Pierce hopes adapt into an article for the journal *Teaching Ethics.*

2. How has participation in the Diversity Institute (including the internal dissemination described above) affected the student experience at your institution? Please describe any changes already made *or* anticipated to the curriculum, pedagogical approaches, course content, advising, student orientation, co-curricular programming, or other important aspects of student learning and development. Please be specific about the student population(s) affected by these changes (e.g., all first-year students, students completing specific courses, students participating in particular co-curricular activities, etc.).

**Pedagogical approaches**

MHU’s brand new Center for Teaching and Learning will promote universal design and inclusive pedagogy, compatible with “bandwidth recovery” practices, throughout the faculty.

**Course content**

MHU implemented two changes to course content. First, we offered two sections of First Year Seminar 111, reserved for African American male students, taught by African American male instructors. These sections focused on campus leadership practices for African American men at a PWI. Second, we offered two sections of GE112: Ethical Reasoning dedicated to studying and discussing racial conflict in the US and ethical responses to it.

**Policy changes**

The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, led by Jonathan McCoy, has implemented/will implement four policy changes this year relevant to the DCLA Initiative. First, Mr. McCoy created a system for the Black Student Association, Latinx Student Association and Native American Association to appoint faculty advisors (rather than the DEI Director serving automatically as advisor to all of them). Second, Mr. McCoy began meeting monthly with the VP of Student Life and the Mayor of the Town of Mars Hill, in order to prevent and address town and gown conflict. Establishing this channel of communication is important since the Town of Mars Hill and Madison County are overwhelmingly white while about a third of MHU’s student population are persons of color. Third, Mr. McCoy implemented a new system of recruiting faculty members for the University Intercultural Council, the advisory board to the DEI Office. Fourth, Mr. McCoy, the UIC and Student Success Services are currently developing a yearly campus climate survey to learn how welcomed and included persons of color and LGTBQ persons feel at MHU.

**Co-curricular programming**

MHU has created and/or deepened support for the following programs as a result of our DCLA Initiative: a peer mentoring program for approximately 15 African American male freshmen per year, including fall and spring leadership development retreats; a faculty-student research project and public presentation on the history of slavery at MHU; MLK Day film festival, volunteer activities, candlelight vigil, reflective hike, and community breakfast; and public discussion of the play *Clybourne Park* facilitated by the DEI Office Director.

3. How will you evaluate the quality and impact of your efforts, both during and after the implementation of specific activities?

**Participation rates**

Our most basic way of measuring the success of several DCLA Initiative programs is tracking who participated in them. While this measure does not tell us much about the quality of each program, it at least tells us which groups MHU’s DCLA Initiative has engaged (i.e. identity based student groups, administrative departments, first year instructors, etc.) and how broadly (i.e. ratio of participants to entire population) we have engaged them.

**Focus group feedback**

Our primary way of gauging the quality of each program is through focus group discussions. For instance, at the end of the *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way* book group, Dr. Pierce will ask instructors 1) what their main take aways were, 2) what (if anything) they plan to change about their pedagogy as a result of the book group, 3) possible books or topics for future reading groups, 4) general ways to improve the instructors’ experience. Similar focus group discussions have been and/or will be conducted with the following groups: MHU’s African American peer mentoring program; the Latinx Association, the Black Student Association, and the Native American Student Association, who have been impacted by changes in the advising structure of identity-based groups; and the sections of GE112 focusing on ethics and race.

**Campus climate survey**

While focus groups indicate the successes/failures of particular programs/policies, an annual campus climate survey will allow MHU to gauge the overall impact of our efforts to make MHU more inclusive and the trajectory of those impacts over time. Mr. McCoy and the University Intercultural Council have designed such a survey with a particular focus on bias incident reporting. It will roll out spring or fall 2020.

**Retention rates**

Our ultimate indicator of success is 6-year graduation rates, particularly for African American men. In the nearer term, we will pay close attention to first-to-second year retention rates for students of color.

4. In your view, what have been the most successful aspects of your project to date? What are the indicators of success? What factors have contributed to this success?

That MHU successfully designed and followed through on programming for African American male students is, in itself, an important step forward. MHU had toyed with similar programming ideas for several years, but had been unwilling to invest the needed time or money. The primary indicator of the program’s success will be student retention rates from spring of 2020 to fall 2020. A secondary indicator of this programming’s success is student feedback. In a focus group discussion debriefing a weekend leadership retreat, students expressed strong enthusiasm for the program. They expressed the desire to be seen as a group of responsible and academically strong students, leaders on campus. They saw belonging to their cohort as a way to promote those qualities in themselves and to achieve that reputation on campus. One student said “Being African American, others look bad at us…jail…selling drugs…If we lead this group, we show we are more than that.” Another wrote “as black men we wanna show you don’t have to be an athlete to stand out.” This feedback suggests students’ are embracing their academic identities. We expect this trend to deepen through next semester’s and next year’s programming.

One of the key factors contributing to the success of this programming was the active leadership of African American male student life staff, Darryl Hylton, DeAndre Howard and Jerel McDaniel. Another factor was access to funding, around $2000.00. This modest sum of money allowed staff to pair curricular with extra-curricular experiences. “Bowling and messing around with each other” and “going to the museum” were important parts of the group’s cohesion.

5. In your view, what have been the most challenging or difficult aspects of your project to date? What made them challenging? What advice do you have, if any, for other institutions confronting similar challenges?

Funding has been quite tight across the university this year. Small budgets have limited our programming options, but they have also prompted us to build cross-campus partnerships we might not otherwise have considered. Since we had very little money ($2,000), we did not try to build much programming from scratch. Rather, we found partners on campus with whom to pool resources.

6. What is your current assessment of the likelihood of *lasting* changes at your institution as a result of participation in the Diversity Institute? What is the likely nature of the changes at your institution? Please be as specific as possible.

The DCLA’s most obvious and lasting effect on MHU will likely be through the new Center for Teaching and Learning. The DCLA Institute helped MHU’s leadership frame the goals of the CTL. Also, DCLA Institute-inspired reading groups and workshops are helping set the CTL up for long term success; they are introducing inclusive pedagogy concepts and practices which the CTL will continue to promote. We cannot, of course, predict all CTL’s impacts at this early date, but we believe it holds great promise.

MHU’s identity-based programs will likely endure if they show a demonstrable, positive, cost-effective impact on student retention. In order to accomplish that very tangible goal, these programs will inevitably have less tangible impacts: student participants’ improved sense of the institutions’ commitment to them; closer relationships with faculty and staff advisors; closer connections with members of the peer groups; and deeper commitment to academic success.

7. What strategies are you pursuing in order to ensure that desired institutional changes are actually sustained and supported? (These strategies might include new or reallocated resources, new or reassigned staffing, professional development opportunities, student programming, policy development, curricular requirements, use of facilities, etc.)

In the short term, President Floyd has agreed to allocate a space (three meeting/office rooms and a kitchenette) to be the new home for the DEI Office and identity-based student groups. Long term, in 2020-2021 Provost Omachonu and Mr. McCoy will both serve on the Strategic Planning Update Committee. They will actively advocate for greater resource allocation toward DEI initiatives over the next five years.

8. Please share anything else about the implementation of your project that might be helpful for CIC staff or for others participating in the project.

The DCLA Institute’s team composition requirements showed a great deal of foresight. We needed a Provost, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and two professors accustomed to organizing extra-curricular activities just in order to know the relevant changes happening on campus.

9. What recommendations do you have for future CIC initiatives to address diversity and civility? What else might CIC do to promote lasting change on your campus around the issues of diversity and civility?

It would be helpful if CIC drew clearer causal links between inclusive programming and student retention. What colleges retain and graduate students of color most successfully? What do they do on campus? What do they do in the classroom? It would be especially interesting to compare the practices of PWIs and HBCUs that successfully retain and graduate first generation students and students of color.