

EXEMPLARS OF JUSTICE: SUPPORTING COLLEGE STUDENTS' CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CROSS- INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

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We examine a novel intervention inspired by events in the Civil Rights Movement that was designed to create a cross-institutional college program engaging students from different universities with moral exemplars and other strategies that support character development and intercultural understanding. We describe how a critical consciousness framework aligns with the program design and analyze how using multiple pedagogical approaches, including compassionate listening, working towards a common goal, and engaging with moral exemplars, may have the ability to support students' character development, particularly growth in the virtue of justice. After offering a detailed account of the various events included in the week-long program, we present some preliminary evidence for their impact based on in-depth reactions to the experience from select participants. Observations of students during the program and participant reflections afterward suggest that cross-institutional, community-based initiatives designed to promote critical consciousness and intercultural understanding among university students seem effective. Understanding the design, function, and potential impact of this program may promote similar experiences in other institutions.

Key words: Justice, Exemplars, Civil Rights Movement, Critical Consciousness, Character, Leadership, Higher Education

Over the past decade, long-standing inequities and violence towards Black Americans have increased and become more visible. Racially motivated hate crimes rose 22.96% from 2015

(4,029) to 2019 (4,954), with an 8.62% growth in hate crimes motivated by anti-Black bias between 2015 and 2020 (FBI Hate Crime Statistics, 2020). A long history of police violence

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has become a matter of widespread public action (Edwards et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2021), resulting in the growth of racial justice movements. The pandemic made racial inequities more pronounced, with Black Americans experiencing significantly higher rates of COVID infection, hospitalization, and death compared to White Americans (Centers for Disease Control, 2021; Rubin-Miller et al., 2020).

In promoting healing from years marked by systemic racism and publicized violence against Black Americans, it is important for college educators to incorporate pedagogical practices inside and outside the classroom that explicitly address racial injustice and emphasize the obligation to secure justice for all. Using a critical consciousness framework (Diemer et al., 2017; Freire, 1970/2000), a novel week-long character intervention program was created to engage students from two universities, one of which is a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and the other a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), in learning about local moral exemplars from the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and their pluralistic, participatory model for promoting justice (Hubbard & Swain, 2017). Very limited research suggests that moral exemplars, or role models that demonstrate moral character through their behavior (Lamb et al., 2021), can have a significant impact on character development (Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017; Han et al., 2017). Moreover, since the relatability and attainability of exemplars seem to be the key to their effectiveness in fostering positive change, peer exemplars may serve a crucial role in this development (Han et al., 2021). However, with such a paucity of studies, a substantial gap exists between theories touting the pedagogical value of exemplars and examples of how they may promote character development in practice. This pilot intervention, named the “Legacies of Leadership” series, was designed to understand the functionality and potential impact of this pedagogical approach by creating a cross-institutional college program engaging students from disparate universities with moral exemplars and other strategies of character development. The aim of the study was to ex-

plore the feasibility of the multi-event program before conducting this work on a larger scale in the future.

In our presentation of the program, we first explain how a critical consciousness framework aligns with the program we created. We then provide an overview of how using moral exemplars and other key strategies may have the ability to support students’ character development, particularly growth in justice. Next, we give a detailed account of the various events included in the week and present some preliminary evidence for their impact based on in-depth reactions to the experience from a few of the participants. We include an analysis of how their perceptions of themselves and others changed after a cross-institutional engagement with historic moral exemplars and peer exemplars as well as with other pedagogical methods and mechanisms. Observations of students during the program and participant reflections afterward suggest that cross-institutional, community-based initiatives designed to promote engagement with historical and contemporary moral exemplars can be an effective way of developing critical consciousness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework for the Program

The theoretical framework provides an understanding of program choices and the critical lens with which to examine program effectiveness. Based on goals for positive student growth, the program was aligned with an interdisciplinary social justice education framework designed to analyze multiple forms of oppression and how they intersect (Bell, 2007; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Social justice education supports individuals in understanding, navigating, and challenging social practices and policies that have limited the equity of individuals and groups of people (Applebaum, 2010; Cammarota, 2011). Within social justice education, the development of critical consciousness (CC), defined by Freire as “learning

to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (2000, p. 35), is an essential factor in promoting social justice. This lens is most often used to support students from marginalized social groups who face oppression, yet these processes may take place in modified forms when students from a majority group develop the same strengths and understanding (Diemer et al., 2016; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). As Diemer et al. (2016) observe, “More privileged people would not develop CC about their own oppression (except when personal social identities that are more marginalized are involved), but rather about the oppression of others—and about how their own privilege is maintained through others’ oppression” (par. 25). Critical consciousness allows people from diverse social and intersectional positionalities to understand and act against oppressive practices and policies that have shaped their experiences individually and as part of communities with which they identify (Diemer et al., 2016).

The two key components of critical consciousness are critical reflection and critical action (Diemer et al., 2017). The first dimension—critical reflection—refers to an individual’s ability to examine the relationships between personal experiences and broader social forces that perpetuate injustice and limit human flourishing (Diemer et al., 2017; Hatcher et al., 2011; Watts et al., 2011). Critical reflection includes (1) thinking critically about accepted beliefs, feelings, thoughts and assumptions; (2) identifying the hidden social interests underlying these beliefs, feelings, and thoughts (i.e., class, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.); and (3) recognizing how history has impacted these interests and how these ways of thinking and being perpetuate systems of injustice (Diemer et al., 2006; Watts et al., 2003). The second component—critical action—is sometimes referred to as civic engagement or social action (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Diemer & Li, 2011; Windsor et al., 2014). This domain refers to overt engagement in action, individual or collective, to challenge unjust elements of

society with the aim to produce sociopolitical change (Diemer & Li, 2011; Watts et al., 2011). Through the use of moral exemplars and other pedagogical strategies, the intention of the program was to guide students in both critical reflection and critical action.

Character and Exemplars

Moral exemplars, or role models as they are often called in ordinary discourse, are defined here as individuals who are perceived as embodying certain character virtues in a way that is both relevant and noticeable. Scholars have long theorized that engagement with exemplars is a key method through which character can be developed (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2006; Lamb et al., 2021; Miller, 2018; Zagzebski, 2017). Within this literature, character is considered a multi-dimensional “set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable one to function as a moral agent, to perform optimally, to effectively pursue knowledge and intellectual flourishing, and to be an effective member of society” (Berkowitz et al., 2017, p. 3). In support of this theory, educators and scholars often use stories of moral leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Malala Yousafzai, among others, to inspire people from disparate cultures and social groups (Gushee & Holtz, 2018; Han et al., 2022; Rhode, 2019). Conflict intervention work suggests that moral exemplars can break barriers imposed by ethnic and racial divisions to help individuals in insular cultural groups be more open and understanding toward those with whom they have had discord in other groups (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020). Compellingly, exemplars modeling positive behavior who are perceived to be more relevant (i.e., proximal in age, race, gender, cultural affiliation, values, etc.) or who model more achievable behavior, as opposed to what may be considered extraordinary or unattainable, may be more effective in strengthening moral motivation and emulation, thereby supporting the use of peer exemplars (Han et al., 2017). Peer role models, for example, have been

shown to be more effective than adult role models when influencing adolescents' behavior around fairness (Ruggeri et al., 2018). It is therefore important to consider developmental differences when choosing moral exemplars or role models to use.

Drawing from this extensive research, Lamb and colleagues (2021) suggest various ways in which exemplars may affect developmental change. Along with other scholars, they theorize that exemplars may personify specific values and virtues that evoke admiration and emulation and, in doing so, inspire people to emulate the exemplars' actions or characteristics (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Colby & Damon, 1992; Colby et al., 2007; Cox, 2010; Immordino-Yang & Sylvan, 2010; Miller, 2018; Zagzebski, 2017). Further, exemplars may increase cognitive understanding of how specific virtues may be exercised in various contexts and help students comprehend what they encompass and how to practice them (Miller, 2014, 2018). Exemplars normalize standards and provide evidence that abstract ideals or virtues may be possible to manifest or achieve (Colby et al., 2007; Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon & Colby, 2015). Lastly, exemplars hold the power to expand and transform people's perspectives (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020; Miller, 2018) and thereby prompt a desire to dispute an unjust status quo in order to do what is right (Engelen et al., 2018).

Scholars have appealed to exemplars to challenge dominant narratives around moral education (Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004) and promote the virtue of justice (Rhode, 2019), which can be understood as a trait of character that predisposes one to give others what they are due, including basic rights, recognition, and respect. Exemplars such as Nelson Mandela and Thurgood Marshall manifested a commitment to justice in their work for social justice (Rhode, 2019). Falling under the broader concept of justice, social justice is characterized as comprehending the social policies and practices that serve to limit the commensurate equity and equality of both social groups and individuals and the subsequent navigation and

challenge of such policies and practices (Applebaum, 2010; Bell, 2007; Hackman, 2005). Social justice education "does not merely examine difference or diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality" (Hackman, 2005, p. 104).

Empirical research has demonstrated that engaging with people or stories of people who embody commitments to social justice helps to support youth's commitments to it (Bañales et al., 2020; Diemer & Li, 2011; Fegley et al., 2006; Fullam, 2017). For example, Watts and colleagues (2002) study of the Young Warriors intervention found that youth engagement with social commentary of hip-hop artists such as Common supported participants' critical consciousness development, which could lead to social justice activism. Similarly, Cervantes-Soon (2012) found that students in a Mexican high school where teachers modeled a commitment to social justice and addressed inequality were more likely to display similar commitments. Bell's (2019) Storytelling for Social Justice Project highlights White students' ability to reflect critically on their racial socialization and recognize their role within racist social structures after listening to others' experiences and reflections of racism. These studies highlight the role that exemplars can play in promoting social justice and critical consciousness.

Pedagogical Methods and Mechanisms

Beyond exposure to various types of exemplars, other theories and mechanisms support the particular design of the program to maximize positive student growth. For example, the contact hypothesis proposes that contact between diverse groups effectively reduces prejudice (Kende et al., 2018). Further research demonstrates that when disparate groups move beyond mere contact to cooperate with one another towards a common goal, intergroup prejudice is reduced and intergroup acceptance is increased (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Mousa, 2020). This research supports the pro-

gram's attempt to promote critical reflection and intercultural understanding by developing a cross-institutional approach that engaged students from different social groups and encouraged them to develop shared art projects to accomplish this aim.

In addition, research examining empathy and compassion in intergroup relations suggests that using more empathy and compassion leads to higher levels of prosocial behavior between people and more positive attitudes with greater willingness to reconcile in multiple group settings (Klimecki, 2019). In particular, compassion when listening to others reduces conflict by connecting individuals across boundaries who then have a shared goal of mutual understanding (Furman, 2010). These insights align with the program's efforts to encourage empathy and compassion across social groups through intentional cross-institutional engagement.

Another effective way to bring students together in learning about both subject content and each other is by using active learning strategies. Such techniques suggest that deep learning is possible and inclusive spaces may be created when meaningful interactions between students take place with hands-on learning that involves an authentic exploration of content and may be particularly effective when teaching critical consciousness (Dewsbury & Brame, 2019). Different methods of active learning, such as role playing, can be an effective teaching and learning strategy (Stevens, 2015). In particular, embodying another person, or character, can be very effective in developing a better appreciation and perception of their life. Using a role-playing technique, where among other things individuals are asked to participate in simulated scenarios or circumstances (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997), has been found to be effective in promoting reflection on moral problems and social responsibility (Doorn & Kroesen, 2013). Research suggests that role playing can be particularly effective when students are better prepared (Stevens, 2015) and the facilitator is competent (Hunger, 2013). Scholars and practitioners are

exploring whether using the acting technique seminal dramatic theory, in which actors are encouraged to experience a role by embodying the character and feeling their feelings and perspectives, would have greater impact when individuals embody moral exemplars (Phelps & Brown, 2023). This research on active learning and role-play supports the program design, which, as we will detail below, included structured discussion by competent facilitators, a joint art project to encourage active learning, and opportunities to play the role of marchers and demonstrations during the vigil to encourage empathy and solidarity.

This feasibility study aims to explore the role of moral exemplars and the mechanisms through which exemplars can support college students' critical consciousness development and effectively develop the virtue of justice.

PRACTICAL INTERVENTION

Legacies of Leadership Series

Although a growing body of research explores inter-institutional partnerships between HBCUs and PWIs, most of the scholarship is limited to topics such as diversifying the STEM workforce (Smith & Dumas, 2021) or specific health disciplines (Campbell et al., 2021; Price, Robbins, & Valverde, 2020). Warren and colleagues' (2019) study examines an HBCU/PWI partnership within the context of health research offering a broader critical perspective on best practices, benefits, and drawbacks of these collaborations. HBCU publications and PWI openness to HBCU students are benefits, but significant drawbacks are noted, including inequities in social justice and other areas.

For the purposes of our program, it was important to consider the expertise of these scholars when seeking to create and establish a unique, meaningful, and impactful experience for students across both institutions that respects the unique perspectives and lived experiences of both groups (Livingston, 2023). The impetus for the collaboration was the 60th

anniversary of a sit-in that took place in 1960 to protest segregated lunch counters in a mid-size southeastern city in which students from the two universities (one HBCU and one PWI) originally participated together as part of the larger Civil Rights Movement. Parlaying the 60th anniversary to promote connections and goodwill between the two current student bodies, the intervention focused on the use of moral exemplars who took part in the Civil Rights Movement, some of whom were alumni of the institutions, to promote college students' commitments to justice. The week of engagement was carefully crafted to not only provide opportunities for exposure to historical exemplars, but also to create the chance for students from the two institutions to have contact, cooperate on shared projects, and act as peer exemplars for each other.

Importantly, the program was jointly designed by a team from each university. Through this collaborative effort, it was possible to ensure that the effectiveness of the program was being tailored to a wide range of students and that neither institution was dominant in the planning.

The first event was a guided tour of a civil rights museum in a neighboring city, including active-learning activities followed by an inter-group discussion reflecting on student experience. This was a powerful event for participants given that the museum is housed in the historic building that was the site of the first sit-in that ignited the larger sit-in movement in 1960. Students were aware of the history of how Black students from the HBCU joined sit-ins at lunch counters in their own city and how students from the PWI soon joined the movement in solidarity as White allies. Before the tour, students were divided into blended groups with students from each university present to encourage inter-group contact, in accordance to the contact hypothesis and research related to inter-group cooperation and compassion. The tour provided an excellent opportunity for critical reflection as the expert tour guide posed many questions throughout the tour, challenging students to consider what

the experience would have been like for those living it. Critical reflection was then enhanced by an hour-long discussion where cross-institutional groups of students joined staff and museum leaders for an in-depth discussion of what they experienced in the museum tour and how the history might inform their own leadership in the present. For many of the students, it was their first experience engaging in this type of reflective dialogue in a multi-racial and multi-ethnic group. Both conversational experiences allowed fellow participants to act as peer exemplars. Hearing one another's reflections and life experiences was crucial in developing empathy and compassion among the students in the groups.

After the discussion, smaller groups formed consisting of relatively equal number of participants from each university to brainstorm ideas for joint art projects that would be displayed in the museum lobby to provide the opportunity to actively work together towards a common goal. Students were given a prompt asking them to design an art project to identify and address a social issue facing people in or around their campuses (see Appendix A). Importance was placed on student reflection and continuing to (re)imagine what civil rights and social justice look like in the twenty-first century. This project was designed to provide students an opportunity to get to know group members from the other university better through cooperation toward a shared purpose and to encourage them to move from critical reflection to critical action. (Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of COVID 19, students were unable to complete the art projects).

Two days after the museum visit, students were invited to attend a film screening of a documentary highlighting historical exemplars from their universities who participated in the 1960 sit-ins. The film was produced by one faculty member and one staff member from the PWI. Watching the story of the sit-in and hearing reflections from alumni from both institutions provided an opportunity for critical reflection and understanding of other groups' lived experiences. After the screening, a panel

consisting of a local journalist and professors from both universities discussed the film, the history of the sit-in movement in the city, and its implications for justice today. The screening and discussion highlighted the past joint leadership, participation, and inter-group contact of students from both universities and was an important opportunity for students to learn about relevant historical exemplars who were their age, practice critical reflection, and discuss topics such as social justice, activism, and education. Since the film screening and panel discussion were widely advertised and open to the public, not all of the same students who were at the museum were necessarily in attendance, but for those who were, the event was a time to build on previous connections and reflections from the museum.

The night after the film screening, an open mic was planned at the HBCU as part of an annual open mic event featuring community poets. The event was open to students from the HBCU, the PWI, and local K–12 schools. The event aligns with research in higher education that highlights the importance of People of Color using their voices as a way of meaning making and the value of offering traditionally marginalized groups a place to share their understanding and lived experiences (Livingston, 2023). Livingston (2023) suggests that having an understanding of critical consciousness is a prerequisite for engaging in an art form such as hip hop when dealing with topics that challenge social justice. In line with such research, the open mic at the HBCU was designed to provide the diverse student groups a place to learn from one another using lyricism. After two events that focused more on critical reflection, the open mic night was meant to give an active opportunity for students to again move towards critical action by sharing their voices and visions. Due to harsh weather that caused school closures, however, the open mic did not take place during this week, but there was observed student enthusiasm in preparation for the evening.

The culminating event was a commemoration vigil hosted jointly by both universities

honoring the original members of the sit-in movement and celebrating the advances in civil rights won through it. Like the museum visit, this event was designed by a team of faculty and staff from both institutions and involved a cooperative effort so that students from both universities could take an active part in the vigil. In line with research on role-play, one key goal was providing students the opportunity to embody the actions of the historic exemplars in role play and provide the opportunity to habituate the virtues of the original participants such as courage and justice and promote a movement towards incorporating them into their own self-construal (Phelps & Brown, 2023). In addition, this community-wide event provided all students with the opportunity for civic reflection and for civic engagement through participation in the vigil. The vigil began with speeches given by leaders of the HBCU and PWI that prompted critical reflection, followed by a performance by a choir from the HBCU. The choir then led a procession through the city where all joined in singing freedom songs. The procession ended at a historical marker commemorating the first sit-in victory of the country. At this point, some students from both universities who had participated in the museum visit sat in chairs representing the original members of the sit-in movement. They were joined by one participant from the original sit-ins in the city. Other community members, university leaders, and students stood to honor the anniversary. The vigil offered moments of reflection that provided an opportunity for critical consciousness development, and the march and role-play encouraged an active commitment to social justice.

Reflecting on the week's events, one crucial aspect of the civil rights museum visit was the expert tour guides who shared historical details, shared stories about the Civil Rights Movement, and pushed students from the PWI to inhabit other perspectives without being confrontational. In particular, the question-and-answer sessions were vital in beginning to encourage students to understand the lived experiences of diverse groups of people.

Moreover, listening to the responses of some students encouraged a view of them as peer exemplars for the rest of the group. As the research on skilled facilitation and active learning suggests, the competence of the facilitators was essential to the development of critical consciousness. Two of the discussion leaders, who were also part of the planning team, are experienced in facilitating transparent, inclusive, and constructive conversations among diverse racial-ethnic groups. As a result, they were able to guide an open conversation in one group where students felt safe not only to make themselves vulnerable among strangers, but to act as role models to one another. The other group was guided by one of the resident scholars at the museum and another member of the planning team. After the initial discussion and reflection in both groups, much of the awkwardness that students seemed to initially display dissipated, and the conversations allowed for more productive meetings in actively planning their art projects while opening the door to further interaction. Opportunities for active learning seemed key and may have encouraged students to reflect on the importance of civic action as well as helped the events of the past seem more relevant to students today.

PILOT DATA

To get a preliminary sense of the impact of the intervention, we collected pilot data through in-depth interviews. Despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent campus closures soon after the week-long events, we were able to interview three participants from the PWI to begin to determine program efficacy. Using in-depth interviews, the students provided rich insight into student experience and perceived effectiveness of the program for students from the PWI.

Student Characteristics

Amy is a self-identified White upper-middle-class, first-year college student from a small town in Massachusetts which she described as being very homogeneous with a majority White population and lacking diversity. According to her, she did not have many experiences with other racial and ethnic groups until the museum tour. She described her town as progressive, but her family as conservative.

Ben is a self-identified White middle-class, first-year college student from a small southeastern coastal city. He did not share his past experience with diverse racial and ethnic groups, but he described his family as conservative and unwelcoming toward his newfound desire to challenge racial and social injustice.

Riley is a self-identified White middle-class, first-year college student from a small rural town in the southeast which she described as being humble but very diverse. She mentioned that she was more comfortable with the students from the HBCU than she is with students from her own university because they were more like the students with whom she went to school in K–12.

PARTICIPANT INSIGHTS

Critical Reflection

In interviews following the Legacies of Leadership events, students described how the events fostered critical reflection. For example, Amy explained how spending time with students from the HBCU supported her in thinking critically about her accepted beliefs and biases after growing up in an upper-class, majority culture racial environment. She said that her interactions with historical and peer exemplars at the sit-in events prompted her to think critically about her assumptions and to reflect on how the hidden class and racial interests of where she grew up had given her “privilege.”

Ben reflected on how the event had exposed his lack of awareness of specific past and present racial injustices and his desire to become more informed. He felt that the students from the HBCU were much better educated on this topic. Ben's reaction reveals the admiration he felt for the students from the HBCU and how this admiration evoked compassion for those negatively impacted by racial injustice. His compassion for those who died in the fight for civil rights and his admiration for peers from the HBCU motivated him to reflect and reach a deeper level of understanding about racial injustice.

Riley's deep self-reflection about her own life and situation allowed her to confront her discomfort and defensiveness and look at herself more objectively. She recognized that students from the HBCU were much humbler than her own classmates, which prompted her journey of critical reflection. In particular, the week-long experience helped her to identify and address her feelings of White guilt so that she could move forward to advance the cause of civil rights in a more constructive way.

Overall, the three students' impressions focused on aspects of the program that encouraged the development of both dimensions of critical consciousness (critical reflection and critical action). Touring the civil rights museum with a guide promoted the critical reflection of students at the PWI because students heard about the complex factors that shaped the historical oppression that was ultimately challenged by civil rights leaders while contemplating the relevance and power of these historical experiences for students currently at the HBCU. By touring together with students from the HBCU, students from the PWI started to consider how their own upbringing and experiences informed their thinking about contemporary racial issues. Students specifically articulated how the events had prompted them to think more critically about their beliefs, feelings, and assumptions and the latent social interests and biases that informed these beliefs, particularly those grounded in their White racial identities. Historical and peer exemplars

helped students begin to analyze the oppression faced by others at the same time as they were learning about it, which formed a foundation for them to challenge oppression.

Critical Action

For both Amy and Ben, the events over the week were key catalysts in beginning to actively participate in current social justice movements and protests for racial justice. The initial process of reflection that began during the museum visit led to analyzing oppression and propelled them to act in accordance with their new understanding, inspiring them to stand up for what they believe is right by working for a more equitable society. The experience of seeing historical exemplars of courage and resilience represented in the museum inspired the students to find their own courage because they saw that it was possible to stand up for justice.

Beyond prompting them to join a public protest for justice, the Legacies of Leadership events gave students the courage to defend views and actions that are different from the families in which they were raised. These students reported not only earnestly participating in protests for social justice with groups in small cities, but also engaging in broader conversations with those around them, even going against parental beliefs to advocate for their perspective and uphold the beliefs established as part of their independent thought processes. Inspirations for this change included seeing how historical exemplars knew what was right for themselves despite social norms and sitting with the actual sit-in participants during the vigil and reflecting on the strength of their past actions. As these students discover and solidify their identities, these conversations may increase their realization of their privileged identities (Gurin et al., 2004) and, based on research with college students (Watt, 2007), may even promote their ability to live and work better in a multicultural society.

Riley shared a final crucial message about actively participating in a movement demon-

strating solidarity among diverse groups. Her words speak to the impact of the events and how they transformed her.

Riley: I think marching down the street till we got to the stools [during the vigil] was the most powerful [aspect of the sit-in events]. On Saturday when I went to that protest, that was the first real protest that I'd been to. . . . But I think the [experience] at the vigil, even though it wasn't a protest, was the first time I had ever done something like that... I think it was a really humbling experience to be able to march [together] and hear the choir sing. I think I liked that most because it made me feel like I was actually doing something. And ... it really connected me with the whole experience overall.

Riley's words and the other students' reactions reflect the importance of practicing character virtues by acting them out in a group and feeling the collective power of acting by doing. Marching with individuals whom students perceived as representing character virtues was reported by all as encouragement to connect with others and feel part of a joint movement. This practice of a character virtue aligns with research suggesting that virtues, like skills, are acquired through habituation and repeated practice (Annas, 2011; Lamb et al., 2022). Moreover, student feedback suggested that engagement with moral exemplars also supported the students' critical action (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Diemer & Li, 2011; Windsor et al., 2014).

Observer Notes

While students' reflections are a crucial way to gauge whether planned events were having the desired effect on student growth, researcher observations are able to offer an additional perspective based on a broader cross-institutional dynamic (Busetto et al., 2020; Mulhall, 2003). Based on field notes taken during the museum tour and subsequent facilitator-led discussion, there seemed to be a shift in student behavior from the beginning of student interactions to the end of the discussion groups. Initially,

groups of students from the PWI were standing behind groups of students from the HBCU looking at the museum exhibits depicting the atrocities experienced by African Americans in the United States. Responding to the guide's questions, the HBCU students excelled in offering a number of responses based on their previous knowledge, which seemed greater than those from the PWI. Interestingly, during the discussion groups following the museum tour, students from the HBCU also opened up and initiated conversations about negative racial perceptions between the two institutions. This was a critical moment in the group's interaction. Once an HBCU student shared that they were nervous about how their opinions would be received, other students from both institutions entered a productive dialogue regarding racial stereotypes and misconceptions. This open dialogue turned out to be key for inter-group understanding, empathy, and growth as both groups verbally commented on how their biases and prejudices were being changed because of the conversation.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the week-long series of events were met with observed enthusiasm and positivity by the participants and the community at large. The skilled event facilitators were key in engaging the students in thought-provoking activities and conversations. University and community-wide support added to the inter-group feeling created by the Legacies of Leadership series. By engaging leaders outside of just one university, the community was able to deepen mutual understanding and encourage openness and dialogue among disparate groups.

Despite the lack of generalizability of student comments, the accounts of their experiences both during and after the sit-in events were very positive. They suggest that engagement with historical and peer moral exemplars during the sit-in event promoted critical consciousness development by inspiring admiration, deepening cognitive understanding,

helping them see and accept different perspectives, and demonstrating that achieving moral ideals is possible. The initiative was designed with a focus on the effects that historical moral exemplars from the original sit-ins may have on students, but, unexpectedly, contemporary peer exemplars seem to have been even more effective in promoting critical reflection. These effects may reflect the relatability and accessibility of peer exemplars, which Han and colleagues (2017) found to be more effective in promoting active service engagement than historical exemplars. Thus, incorporating relatable exemplars may be a crucial element when designing effective programs of this kind.

Student admiration also emerged as important when participants commented on virtues that the exemplars embodied and then spoke of both historical and peer exemplars with admiration and approval. This is in line with evidence examining the importance of admiration in relation to exemplars (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Colby et al., 2007; Zagzebski, 2013, 2017). Besides promoting admiration, the program fostered a change in point of view through three mechanisms: inter-group contact and conversation, a deepening of cognitive understanding, and broadening perspectives of and compassion for others. These mechanisms are related such that one often led to the other. After interacting and conversing with students from the HBCU during the program, students from the PWI expressed how much knowledge and understanding they gained and described their transformation of perspective and compassion toward the other students' cultural group and the oppression that other cultural groups face. These results support work examining group interactions in post-conflict settings demonstrating that learning about exemplars' moral behavior from one group (the out-group) can change the perception of members of the other group (in-group) (Čejajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020). Moreover, these results suggest how powerful exemplars can be in creating connections among people from different societal groups and cultures (Gushee & Holtz, 2018).

Critical Consciousness Development

Similar to Diemer et al.'s (2016) findings about critical consciousness development in more privileged individuals, the program seemed effective in encouraging student participants at the PWI to begin developing critical consciousness. They used critical thinking skills to reflect on oppression faced by the historical exemplars in the Civil Rights Movement and their own positionality with regard to other racial and ethnic groups. In line with Bell's (2019) research, the sit-in experiences prompted White students to critically reflect on their racial socialization and perceive their role within institutionalized racism more clearly. This growing ability to think critically and see themselves as agents of change led students to the next phase of critical consciousness: critical action.

The effect of the program on the three interviewees is in line with research suggesting that engaging in dialogues with other cultural groups can be an effective means to encourage social activism (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2020). Student perceptions also highlight how the interactions with peers from the HBCU prompted the changes found in the students. In line with the contact hypothesis, students' conversational experiences support research demonstrating that participating actively in merely one dialogue may inspire more recognition and understanding of issues producing a significant effect on participants that generates future transformation (Bowman et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

Social injustice, particularly racial injustice, continues to affect American society. Institutions of higher education have opportunities to build foundations of understanding and collaboration among diverse students who may then bring what they have learned into roles as citizens and leaders after college to foster lasting change. Inspired by this opportunity, the initial implementation of this program explored how

engagement with historic moral and peer exemplars complemented by other crucial pedagogical methods may encourage and support students' critical consciousness development and commitments to justice. The results support the potential for cross-institutional engagement with exemplars for promoting students' development of critical consciousness to arrive at the end goal of civic action (Styslinger et al., 2019). Students reported engaging in protests for racial justice after their involvement in the sit-in events, and two of the three students were specific in stating that they felt that their experiences during the sit-in events led to their participation in protests to secure positive change. While more mixed-methods empirical research is needed, these findings point to the potential value of using culturally sensitive exemplar interactions and experiences to foster cross-cultural understanding among diverse cultural groups in ways that support social justice and critical consciousness growth.

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APPENDIX A: ART PROJECT PROMPT

James Baldwin writes, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” For generations, across the world, young people have been at the forefront of social movements, boldly facing some of the greatest issues that threaten our humanity. College students have been at

the forefront of social movements throughout United States history, particularly since the 1960s. Whether advocating for desegregation in public spaces and women's rights, or protesting apartheid and the military industrial complex, college students have made their voices heard in various ways. In commemorating the 60th anniversary of the sit-ins, it is

important that we reflect, as college students, and continue to (re)imagine what civil rights and social justice looks like in the 21st century. Using an artistic medium of your choice, create a piece that identifies and attempts to solve an existing issue facing people in/around your campus community.