Communities of practice in workplace learningA cultural interpretation of Graduate enrollment management

C. Dean Campbell
North Carolina A&T State University

Nadielka Bishop
Belmont University

Recommended Citation

Communities of practice in workplace learning: A cultural interpretation of Graduate enrollment management

C. Dean Campbell
North Carolina A&T State University
Nadielka Bishop
Belmont University

Abstract: This paper undertakes a cultural interpretation of the roles professional expertise and context play in workplace learning through human resource interventions with a community of post-secondary administrators at one institution. To better understand and evaluate Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, an ethnographic case study methodology explores boundaries, intersections, and learning communities in communities of practice. The project examines the value communities of practice contribute to African American administrators' professional learning in an understudied context, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Case study data define interventions as indicators of a community of practice in graduate enrollment management: a) boundaries of position; (b) constellations of communities; and (c) learning communities. Implications for the study of workplace learning in context are considered as well as implications for professional and organizational development.

Background

The idea of postsecondary institutions re-organizing themselves in the face of environmental change remains an on-going concern for academic administrators. In many instances, the change is a reaction to environmental changes in the US economy. Other occurrences of change show the visionary statements of many colleges and universities which strategically plan progressive programming initiatives and evolutionary policies (Drucker, 1995). Similar to faculty development which aims to increase online teaching and utilization of electronic resources, staff also learn new workplace skills that focus on communication, technology skills, and interpersonal abilities in the open systems-oriented environment. Cultural approaches to examine decision-making, organizational behavior, and environmental change in higher education have established that institutional mission shapes decision-making behavior (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Tierney, 1988).

Graduate institutions prioritize masters and doctoral education as their institutional mission reflects research and professional training. Graduate enrollment management (GEM) professionals, led by graduate education administrators, navigate a variety of operational units throughout their colleges and universities in pursuit of such a mission. As a result of this unique working environment, graduate education administrators much promote a synthesis that ensures operational units work in tandem (Flynn Thapalia, 2013). The practice of professionals who work both across and within institutional boundaries is consistent with the concept of *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice (CoPs) includes "a practice of

specialist in one area of expertise who work in different unites but manage to stay in close contact" (Wenger, 1998, p. 119).

Scholars point out that graduate institutions "ought not to differ from the rest of American society: those who participate in postsecondary education should reflect the demographic changes that are occurring in the United States" (Tierney, Campbell & Sanchez, 2004, p. 1.). HBCUs show success in producing high achieving Blacks. A community of socialization and nurturing and caring environmental focus at these specialized colleges and universities is heavily credited for academic achievement. African American students on Black campuses exhibit positive psychosocial adjustments, cultural awareness, and increased confidence (Johnson & Harvey, 2002, p. 312). While research on graduate enrollment management is limited, so is research on graduate education at HBCUs as special mission institutions. Historically Black Colleges and Universities were created to provide educational opportunities for African Americans when other higher education venues restricted their participation.

In addition to educating high achieving Black students, HBCUs also employ a considerable amount of Black professionals. However, middle-level Black administrators employed with HBCUs have not received as much attention in the literature as those who enter the faculty or the presidency. Perna and colleagues (2007) also found that Blacks are at or above equity among full-time executives, administrators, and managers at a majority of public 4-year HBCUs s but not at equity at the 4-year PWIs.

This paper seeks to explore existing and emerging management philosophies in graduate enrollment management at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The purpose of this ethnographic case study is to examine the role of place learning in GEM at an HBCU doctoral institution; and in doing so, develop a cultural interpretation of GEM based on experiences of the professionals in that area.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of communities of practice is the primary conceptual frame grounding this study. With communities of practices in GEM, professionals who share challenges and ideas and naturally order themselves into a "tribal group" pursue GEM as "territory," a form of professional philosophy and process. By doing so the community promulgates GEM as intellectual content and as a cultural construct within that field of expertise (Becher & Trowler, 2001). At its core, GEM communities of practice exhibit cultural characteristics. Furthermore, communities of practice in organizations are assets that represent investments in mutual engagement. Wegner (1998) states, "Although workers maybe contractually employed by a large institution, in day-to-day practice they work with—and, in a sense, for-a much smaller set of people and communities" (p. 6).

Drawing on culture as central to understanding of emerging academic disciplines, Tierney's view of organizational decision-making (1991) integrates culture, ideology, and knowledge important for understanding professional development. Communities of practice gain social power as a collective which reinforces their social identity. Members in these communities have a common purpose and a desire to share work-related knowledge and experience. For example, Brown and Duguid (1991) found that story-telling in communities of practice in the workplace served as a way to bond the group in professional practices. Mutual engagement refers to the interdependence of individuals within the community.

In the context of GEM, a cultural perspective of community of practice as a concept represents a grouping of graduate administrators who collaborate with clusters of other enrollment administrators, such as financial aid counselors or registrar office associates who coordinate graduate enrollment activities. These cultural managers consider two approaches for understanding workplace learning are of concern. First, informal workplace learning is one important way in which adults construct meaning from their work experiences. Informal learning may include talking and sharing resources with others, searching the Internet, and experimenting with new techniques or tools. In addition, informal learning in the workplace involves engagement in both structured and unstructured on-the-job activities that result in the development of new capabilities required for effective professional practice. Second, formal workplace learning emphasizes theory, planned objectives, systematic action to achieve goals, and the use of individuals outside of the organization as the basis for learning.

Organizational culture emphasizes practices and norms which prioritize conservative preferences for "the way we do things around here," compared to professional associations which present a "bigger picture of reality" beyond the confines of the campus (Rusaw, 1995, p. 221). Associations and other collectives of professionals socialize peers to techniques, knowledge, and ethics that contribute to making shared experiences upon which professionals form communities of practice. A key cultural process is how administrators manage resources in their work.   In addition to the communities of practice, managerial culture for graduate administrators is concerned with effective and efficient administration of resources and implementation of policies in place in the organization. Priorities in managerial culture include a focus on optimizing political (i.e, power and coalitions) and structural (i.e., roles, plans, and goals) resources to achieve objectives (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Bergquist and Pawlack (2007) maintained managerial culture as a resilient and consistently important part of researching organizational climate in higher education (including communities of practice). In the managerial culture, values emphasized include fiscal responsibility, effective supervisory skills or personnel management; authority is assumed to rest with formally designated administrators who maintain control over planning and managerial functions.

Qualitative Methodology and Data

The approach in this study focuses on interpretation based on analysis of participant observation, field notes, and review of institutional documents (Yin, 1994). In order to produce an interpretive case study on a community of practice made up of African American HBCU GEM administrators, the researchers benefit from using ethnographic strategies. The use of multiple data gathering techniques better ensures the validity of findings in qualitative investigations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The GEM staff in this ethnographic case study consists of six professionals, employed at Freeman State University (FSU), with a collective background that includes a range of years of professional HBCU experience in graduate administration from 5 to 19 years (median = 10), two men and four women, and half of the staff are alumni of the institution. Data for the investigation include observations of on campus office activity, off-campus participation in professional association meetings, document analysis of university webpages, The "Academy" (tribal) became part of the collective identity for GEM staff re-organized to work in new positions (territory). The academy is a staff meeting run by the staff, the agenda is often set by the staff members, not the director. Early on, the Academy served as a peer, cross-training venue; the admission staff trained the enrollment staff and vice versa. Within a few weeks the

training evolved from basic "how tos" to addressing exceptional problems that arose and seeking multiple opinions on how to address problems. This satisfied the staff's quest for informal learning that shapes a community of practice. After several months, the Academy was moved to a web-mediated meeting where staff attended from their offices and used slide presentation, websites, and other PC-based applications in sharing information for training purposes. Occasionally, staff professionals from outside the graduate school were included to lead discussions requiring input from other enrollment management areas. Digital recordings of the meetings were made available for absent staff to reference for important topics. More formalized ways of learning and methods in GEM were created from informal learning. Formal learning was also found in GEM staff's participation in conferences concerning enrollment management.

Discussion

The focus of the discussion first addresses implications for cultural research and communities of practice and then turns to implications for human resource development (HRD) professionals concerned with workplace development. The findings from this investigation point to the benefits found in workplace learning when African American managers are participants in learning with other African American managers in a welcoming environment. Not surprisingly then, the benefits that Black students and faculty experience in the context of the HBCU are also found with the administrative staff. The racialized context of the institution in this study is not unlike other HBCUs in that graduate education exists under-resourced. In the case of African American managers in organizations, there remains more room for further investigation as the US becomes a more pluralistic society. FSU is only one HBCU, but this experience in the graduate school offers another perspective to what professional learning takes place in the absence of traditionally-documented challenges faced by Black administrators in predominantly white learning settings, such as feelings of isolation as well as (white) assumptions of similarity that contribute to "miasma" and unwelcoming work environments (Livers & Caver, 2003).

Conclusion

African American administrators HBCUs are not unlike their peers at other graduate institutions who are engaged in developing expertise in graduate enrollment management. The institutional mission and learning context present opportunities to network and learn from Black administrators in a research university setting that presents its own challenges and opportunities. Study of workplace learning among administrators is one starting point from which to understand how institutional and professional culture contribute to organizational learning.

References

Bergquist, W. H., & Pawlak, K. (2008). *Engaging the six cultures of the academy: Revised and expanded edition of the four cultures of the academy*. John Wiley & Sons.

Bolman, L., & Deal, T. (1997). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brown, J.S. & Duguid, P. (1991). Organizational learning and communities of practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation. *Organization Science, 2*(1), 42-57.

Drucker, P. F. (2013). *Managing in a time of great change*. Harvard Business Press.

Flynn Thapalia, C. (2013). Leadership in graduate enrollment management. Perspectives 26(1), 20-23.

Johnson, B. J., & Harvey, W. B. (2002). The socialization of Black college faculty: Implications for policy and practice. *The Review of Higher Education*, *25*(3), 297-314.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Livers, A., & Caver, K. (2003). *Leading in black and white: Working across the racial divide in corporate America*. John Wiley & Sons.

Morphew, C., & Hartley, M. (2006). Mission statements: A thematic analysis of rhetoric across institutional type. *The Journal of Higher Education, 77*(3), 456–471.

Perna, L. W., Gerald, D., Baum, E., & Milem, J. (2007). The status of equity for Black faculty and administrators in public higher education in the South. *Research in Higher Education*, *48*(2), 193-228.

Rusaw, A. C. (1995). Learning by association: Professional associations as learning agents. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *6*(2), 215-226.

Tierney, W.G. (1988). Organizational culture in higher education: Defining the essentials. *Journal of Higher Education, 59*(1), 2-21.

Tierney, W. G. (1991). *Culture and ideology in higher education: Advancing a critical agenda*. Praeger Publishers.

Tierney, W. G., Campbell, C. D., & Sanchez, G. J. (2004). The road ahead: Improving diversity in graduate education. *Los Angeles, CA: Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California*.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge university press.

Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.