Equity Speaks: Culturally Sustaining Stories in Education

Podcast 1: Culturally Sustaining Stories

Host Krystal Andrews: Hi, and welcome to the Equity Speaks: Culturally Sustaining Stories in Education podcast series. I'm your host, Krystal Andrews, and I'll be leading the discussions in this series on equity, cultural sustaining practices, and guided pathways in the P-20 educational pipeline. This podcast is brought to you by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or in short, OCCRL, in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, with sponsorship from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Equity Speaks is an interactive portion of the Community College for All professional development series that OCCRL is curating in order to conceptualize how equity is embedded and operationalized within the everyday work of those who are on the front lines serving minoritized students in community colleges. Each of our podcasts will cover various perspectives on topics that speak to culturally sustaining and equity-centered practices. This series will highlight the experiences of administrators, faculty, and staff who are working in various areas of education. We hope that you find the stories to be enlightening and applicable to your work.

For our first episode, we are exploring the culturally sustaining leadership practices that staff and administrators use while working with their student populations. For this episode, we will hear from Mr. Brandon Bellamy, of Howard Community College in Maryland, and Dr. Rhonda Coats, of Davidson County Community College in North Carolina. We will hear a little bit about their leadership journey and how their roles influence the leveraging of equity-embedded practices and policies on their campuses. But before we delve into our interviews with our guests for this episode, it is important that we do some level-setting in defining *what* exactly is culturally sustaining leadership. And for this definition, we sought the expertise of Dr. Muhammad Khalifa, a professor at the University of Minnesota, who specializes in this area of research.

Muhammad Khalifa: I think that culturally responsive school leadership offers the critique as well as decolonial knowledges, opportunities for ancestral knowledge, for experiential community-based. All of these other kind of things for co-constructed knowledge where people make sense of things that actually are powerful for them to work in their context and stuff like that. So I think that culturally responsive school leadership does that.

And another thing that I think it offers that's new and that's I think novel, is that culturally responsive school leadership can talk about classrooms and instructional leadership, but it can also reach beyond that and look at overall systems, finances, distributive leadership, teacher leadership, school culture and climate—school culture, not classroom culture, not classroom, but school culture and climate. Community engagement at a systems level. Like what does it look like for principals to make that happen for their teachers?

Host Krystal Andrews: Given Dr Khalifa's definition, we turned to our guests, Mr. Brandon Bellamy and Dr. Rhonda Coats, for their unique experiences as practitioners and administrators. While both of our guests told us their journeys toward becoming culturally sustaining leaders, they unanimously attributed their education and personal experiences as their motivation that led to their careers. Both of our guests are graduates of a historically black college and university, also known as an HBCU. As a North Carolina agricultural and technical state university, and a Norfolk State University graduate, a common theme that both of our guests alluded to was the holistic nurturing that their undergraduate institutions afforded them through their engagement with faculty and staff, and their own student engagement on their respective campuses that created the impactful experiences that influenced their development as leaders. As easy as it is for *me* to summarize their stories, here are a few snippets of our guests sharing their own. First up, we have Dr. Rhonda Coats.

Rhonda Coats: I had to do some reflecting, and I think there are, you know, in my journey to where I am now, I really have to go back all the way to where I grew up, because that has influenced me and to who I am and where I am, that far back. In Virginia, I grew up in Virginia during segregation, and a rural Virginia where it was very evident to me as a child growing up, I could see how people who looked like me were mistreated. And I still can remember when my dad and I went to Trailways Inn, that was the name of it, but we had to go in the back to get a sandwich. And I remember that. And that wasn't that long ago, but it made me see, I can see how parents, my grandparents were, you know, all the injustices that can happen back in, you know, the fifties and sixties.

But they didn't give up. They didn't stop. They didn't let all of that stuff keep them from doing things for the family. They figured it out. And I look at that as, wow, maybe that's where I learned that, like my parents and grandparents were leaders in the schools that we went to, because I went to, you know, an all-black elementary school and integration didn't happen until I went into seventh and eighth grade. So it was that early on in my, I think in my journey, that I can remember seeing people who were in leadership roles who gave voice and who stood up when they saw, you know, injustices happening.

So then I want to fast forward a little bit until the next really impactful time for me, and understanding that in high school, I had a guidance counselor who really wasn't about helping, you know, the little black girl who wasn't a star student to get in college. And I just was lucky that I had a brother who went to Norfolk State University, and he asked me, when I was a senior, where are you going to college? And I was like, 'I don't know.' I hadn't even thought about it. And going to Norfolk State, it really gave me a sense of self. They *really* thought I was smart. They gave me a scholarship and it changed how I thought about myself and how I thought about college, and they cared about me. Like I had a professor actually say, 'Where were you yesterday?' And I'm like, wow, I didn't even know that you had missed me. But they created this environment at this historically black college. They made me feel like I was smart, and that I had

something to offer, and that they cared about me. So, yet another like a place in my life that said being around other black students and being around professors and the college president, like I could see people in leadership roles who looked like me. Very much impactful.

Host Krystal Andrews: Mr. Bellamy, meanwhile, talks about how his journey was shaped by his experiences as an undergraduate student and transfers into his current role at Howard Community College.

Brandon Bellamy: I didn't realize that I was going to do this work until my sophomore year at [North Carolina] A&T. My freshman year I was on the dean of Students Advisory Council and my dean of students was one of the first people I actually realized that went to school to work in higher education. I didn't know people can do that. And just the experience at A&T, the people that I met, and the commitment to ensuring the best students that looked like me were successful starts with the foundation for everything I do. I just had a intake with a student earlier today, and she was like, 'Why do people just keep coming to your office?' I said, 'It's because I wanted to create an environment that my students know that they can come in, they can feel that they're included, they can feel that they're listened to and valued, and we can meet whatever need they can use. So we provide snacks in the office because they talk about students who are hungry and there's literature that supports that.

But sometimes students don't want to tell you they're hungry, and so, it's like, 'Okay, you're not going to tell me you're hungry, but I going to put some snacks in here and I'm going to see you come to my office every day.' And that small little thing allows me, and allows our staff, to be able to touch base with our students. They're meeting a need that they have that also meets a need that we have. We need to touch and see our students. And so it's those small things, things that we wanted to see in ourselves when we were in school helped influence the practices that we do.

Open door policy, late scheduling. There are not many offices. I do appointments up to eight o'clock at night, those things because we're working with students who made me traditional age, maybe nontraditional. I know one of my professors at Morgan [State University], Dr. Marguerite Weber, talks about the new majority of our students. They are traditional age but have significant adult responsibilities that we didn't have. So we have to begin to rethink and change the way we do the work we do, and *that's* what guides what I do every day. I'm looking at my students, what do they need? How do we adjust what we are doing to meet their needs, and we go from there.

Host Krystal Andrews: Now that he's been in the field for a number of years, he provided some specific examples of what this work looks like from the context of his role as the assistant director for TRIO-Student Support Services, and from a practitioner's perspective as a first line of support for students, Mr. Bellamy described that as

a culturally sustaining leader, you sometimes have to make difficult decisions that go against what you believe in order to best serve your students.

Brandon Bellamy: To be a culturally sustaining leader means that I may have to take some difficult stances here on campus. I may have to, at times, going against my own deeply held beliefs to ensure that we're doing the right thing for this campus community. So hypothetical situation: If there is a protest on campus because someone wants to ban peanut butter, because there is a growing number of students with food allergies. I love peanut butter. It goes against my deeply held beliefs, but if that's what's right for our students, then that's what we have to do. So, thinking about being a culturally sustaining leader, I have to think about who are our students, who are our stakeholders, and what do we do to ensure that success is possible for everybody.

Host Krystal Andrews: While Mr. Bellamy provides a frontline perspective of working with students, Dr. Rhonda Coats provides a definition of culturally sustaining leadership as a campus-level administrator. Given her role, she speaks of leadership from a system's perspective.

Rhonda Coats: So, piece of advice, don't be in a job if it's not aligned with your value system, and don't spend your time fussing about the negatives. That's not helpful. What is helpful is for you to acknowledge and see it, but then think and *strategize* about how do you move the needle. That's something that people need to really, when you're talking about leadership, leadership is about strategically thinking, not just doing, but strategically doing things that will matter and make a difference, because then you can see the result of your work or of your strategy. Did it work? Did it not? And obviously I enjoy thinking about that kind of stuff and like, 'Oh yeah, how you get people to do things and to think about things that they might not have thought about?' But you can frame it in a way that they can *get* it.

That is *such* a skill to develop. You don't argue and fuss with people, but you have conversations and dialogue and understand, 'Okay, this is what that perspective is. Now how do I get that person to think about a different perspective without making them feel like, oh my God?' That is the strategy. I also think we should, you know, be prepared to give voice, be prepared to speak up, and you can't be afraid that, okay, sometimes I'm going to be ostracized, you know, because I'm thinking differently. It's how you approach people, how you talk to people, how you get people to see different perspectives. But you got to be able to give it voice, because otherwise silence, my mother used to say, is agreement. If you disagree, you can just say something just as simple as that. 'Well, you know, at this point, I don't agree with that.' And you don't even have to go any further, but you have to let people know where you stand and be willing to give voice to people who may not otherwise have it.

And I think the last thing is be *happy* in the work. You know, leadership is not being the vice president or the president. Leadership is about, you know,

wherever you are in the organization, or within the group, having a voice and then helping to make things happen. You can do that at any level, and I believe that. We did the Faculty and Staff of Color Conference in Washington. One of the things that we did was, no, we did not put titles on anybody's nametag. We didn't put Dr. so and so, vice presidents so and so, you just was Rhonda, because when you came there, I wanted everybody to feel *your* voice is just as important. It doesn't matter where you are in the organization. Like your experiencing something, let's talk about it. So, be happy in the work and then you'll sustain yourself.

Host Krystal Andrews: As a seasoned administrator, the examples of culturally responsive leadership that Dr. Coats provides come from more than thirty years of experience as a community college leader. However, she says the most impactful experience that influenced her career was her time working with the state board for technical and community colleges in Washington state. She describes how this role provided her with system-level influence to advocate for students and creating change for faculty and staff of color.

Rhonda Coats: One of the most impactful jobs I've had is that I worked at the state board for Community and Technical Colleges in Washington. Now this is a *whole* other ballgame. Now I am in a position where I'm working with legislators, and I'm working with policy people. I'm working with college presidents, vice presidents, people who are making these major decisions about what colleges can and can't do. And in this role, I found this is where influence *really* can happen, and this is where we can, from a systemic view, not just an individual college, but as a college system, we can have power and influence in helping the direction of community colleges in that state. And, you know, I had a lot of great success there in raising probably the visibility of students of color and that access and success in colleges. I had success with students with disabilities, so I was in student affairs but at the state level.

And I could influence people who may not be able to have voice, like, even the faculty and staff at the colleges. I was one of the founders of the Washington State Faculty and Staff of Color Conference, and it is in its 25th year now. And so that kind of legacy says, 'Yes, you can make change, you can do things.' You just got to have that drive. You got to have the venue to do it. And the state board was perfect for me in elevating kind of some of this drive I have inside. I don't know whether I want to say to be a leader, but to give voice to people who might not otherwise have it.

Host Krystal Andrews: According to the leaders we spoke to, they were most successful as culturally responsive leaders when faculty and staff readily acknowledged equity. For example, Dr. Coats discusses how important it is to be a change agent in order to help move the needle forward on systemic culturally responsive practices and policies.

Rhonda Coats: I feel hopeful that more people can see what I can see, and I don't have to convince people that something's wrong. People are able to see it, white people are able to see it, *and* they're able to acknowledge, like, this is not okay. And I feel like that's a change from ten, twenty years ago where people had to build arguments, you know, about, 'Oh well, let's look at the data. The data will tell us.' Yeah, now people are, I think they're using data as a means to substantiate the severity of the issues that people might be having, but they're also, they're marrying that with kind of that qualitative piece. So from a research perspective, like, you can hear people's *stories*, and now you know these stories are not made up, because people would always challenge that.

So now you're taking the stories, and now you're saying, 'See, this is how severe the problem is or how we need to address it.' So I am hopeful that this kind of growth and what people can see are the equity lens that people can look through are much broader now and not like just five of us can see it. But now I can see people also speaking up and saying, 'This is not okay. This is not okay. We're not doing that.' Now, in a perfect world, everybody would see it, right? Which is not going to happen, but more perfect is that now we have ways to address what we see, and you don't have to convince people that you should care about this. Everybody should care about how another human being is experiencing life or experiencing the college. And if we have to think about every aspect of college, we need to examine it.

And in the perfect world, everybody is looking and could see, 'Oh well, in the curriculum, what are we doing? What does the syllabus tell us? When are we writing? What are we, how are we doing teaching and learning or in admissions to a college or to a special program? What does that look like? What are the services, the co-curricular activities we're bringing?' We should be looking at the *whole* institution through the eyes of the equity lens. That would be perfect. That would be the perfect world.

Host Krystal Andrews: Similarly, Mr. Bellamy discussed examples of what culturally sustaining leadership should look like in practice.

Brandon Bellamy: I think the leadership of our unit that we're in has made this a priority. My director, when I started the policy years ago, he told me, 'Do your job, do it *well*, do it in a way that supports our students.' And as a result, the programs and the initiatives that we've created have been fully supported, and the techniques we do. So, for example, we have a Latino and Hispanic doing a leadership program, and we understand in a lot of Latinx cultures, family is important. But the funny part is, in many of our cultures, the family is important. And so, oftentimes I'll talk with a student and we'll do our advising session and they'll be like, 'Hey, can we call my mom?' The advisor in me cringes because it's like why are we bringing Mom into the conversation? This is your decision. But then I step back and realize, okay, for this student and for this family it's important that everyone knows what's going on.

And so, we talk about with our staff, we talk about students bringing the people who are important to these decisions to the table so that everybody understands what we're doing. Because a lot of times when you *don't* include, let's say, Mom and Dad in a decision, or at least don't inform them, and there's some dissonance, and the student comes back and says, 'Hey, you know, I want to transfer to Frostburg State, but my parents don't want me to leave home.' He helped me explain *why* this is important. So, when I'm thinking about culturally sustaining leadership, I'm also thinking about how do we ensure that we're making sure that our students' *own* cultural backgrounds are reflected in the work we do and our advising practices in our office practices.

We actually have a program here called Career Links, and it supports single parents at this place only. And as a result, that population can't just come to a program at two o'clock in the afternoon, especially when they got pick up kids from school. And so Career Links chooses a new program, six, seven o'clock at night. They do programs that actively support the *children* of these students because having a parent in school is different. You know, the kid's going to school, the parent's going to school, how does that work? So we have to build around the students we're serving, around the populations, and be willing to work around policies that build barriers, but then also be willing to go and make new policies that work better for our students.

Host Krystal Andrews: The last question we asked Mr. Bellamy was what culturally responsive leadership looks like when implementing a guided pathways framework, which is a curricular and institutional model that improves student outcomes and experiences through major-specific curriculum that is aligned in a way that assists students in obtaining a credential.

Brandon Bellamy: So, we are actually in the process of building our pathways. We'll be doing a soft launch of a number of our pathways this fall. And what the pathways process, and talking about equity has been, is bringing in the advising-adjacent people to the table. So here at HCC, our advisors are in enrollment services, but a lot of our programs, like cohort programs, we do a lot of our own advising. So we're also at the table in helping build these pathways.

There's actually a whole subcommittee assigned to developing and looking at how admin support and completion services work within each of the pathways. So how do we build career services in? How do we make sure that our colleagues who are working in disability-support services are embedded into these pathways so that we know how to best advise. And then also in my role, I serve as the chair of the Maryland Academic Advising Affinity Group, which reports to the chief Student Affairs Office at the University of Maryland. So as we're looking at other institutions doing pathways, we know from the get-go that TRIO, how our Pride and Minority Male Leadership program envisions this line of work. Programs that serve significant populations of underrepresented students. We have to be at the table. We have to be able to talk about and think, how do we explain these pathways to our students, and also explain to

the students how that the pathway *doesn't* change their process of transcripts. But instead it makes it potentially a lot easier for students who transferred within a set of tools.

Host Krystal Andrews: To close out our episode, here are a few key things to consider: With everything that we heard from our guests, we know that in order to promote culturally sustaining leadership, we must not only espouse the belief of meeting the needs of our students, we must do the hard work required to make those changes needed to support those students. And it's important to take time to think about what resources we need to make those changes happen. So understanding our context as practitioners, or faculty and staff, and our institution's culture is key to developing strategies that garner the influence that we need to get people on board with equity-oriented change. And as we learned from our guests, our experiences, whether personal, educational, or career-related, they inform the shaping of our leadership steps. So it's crucial to examine our own personal beliefs and experiences for how they align with engaging in equity-minded work.

Thanks for joining us on this episode of Equity Speaks: Culturally Sustaining Stories in Education. Stay tuned for future episodes about culturally sustaining practices in P-20 education.