

The Pandemic, Cultural Diversity, and the Community College

by Dave Balch



The year 2020 was challenging for education.

Teaching went from the classroom to virtual in a matter of days, aided only by the fact that teaching online wasn't new. The pandemic forced educational institutions to make a choice between cancelling classes or making them virtual. Virtual classes coupled with the pandemic's challenges ensured that there was no shortage of incidents that reflected a lack of sensitivity to cultural issues. Often these lapses were attributed to the lack of awareness or sensitivity to cultural issues or cultural competency.

Origins

The term "cultural competency" is not new. Over 30 years ago, Terry L. Cross and colleagues wrote about the need for improving service delivery to "children of color"—i.e., African, Asian, Hispanic, and Native Americans—in *Towards A Culturally Competent System of Care, Volume I*. The issues addressed were the communication challenges that stemmed from cultural differences between practitioners (usually not diverse) and patients (often much more diverse). The article emphasized the cultural strengths and the need for work in the areas of policy, training, resources, practices, and research issues—a developmental process.

While the need was recognized in 1989, not until a decade later would healthcare professionals begin to be formally educated and trained in cultural competence, as published in a historical perspective of cultural competence, *Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care*. This article seemed to be the impetus for the creation of the

National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC). The NCCC "...embraces a conceptual framework and model of achieving cultural competence adapted from the works of Cross et al., value diversity, conduct self-assessment, manage the dynamics of differences, acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and adapt to the diversity and cultural contexts of individuals and communities served."

Culture

"Culture" is a complex concept and while there are many definitions, the authors of *Models for Intercultural Collaboration and Negotiation*, Birukou et. al. (2013), note most scholars agree that "culture" is a word for the "way of life" of groups of people or the way they view the world and do things. As early as 1871, Edward Taylor (credited as the founder of cultural anthropology) reported that culture is the complex and shared combination of knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by people. These are used to make sense of the behavior of other peoples that is reflected in behavior and include religion, music, dress, language (including slang), coping with death, and interactions within the culture—status, marriage, family structure, and each other. It comes as no surprise that there is difficulty understanding other cultures. Geert Hofstede, author of *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind—Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival*, noted culture is not unique to each individual, but something shared as a member of a group.

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Hofstede developed six dimensions consisting of:

- 1) Power Distance (large vs. small)
- 2) Individualism vs. Collectivism
- 3) Masculinity vs. Femininity
- 4) Uncertainty Avoidance (strong vs. weak)
- 5) Long- vs. Short-Term Orientation
- 6) Indulgence vs. Restraint

Other authors have proposed that the characteristics of a culture range from as few as six to over 100 for the United States. Some shared characteristics include:

- 1) Language
- 2) Norms
- 3) Beliefs
- 4) Symbols
- 5) Values
- 6) Cognitive Elements

Concerns

Learning about other cultures is not without controversy or concerns. One issue addressed by Kumagai and Lyson in “Beyond cultural competence: critical consciousness, social justice, and multicultural education” is the idea that “...if one focuses on acquiring knowledge about ‘other’ cultures and treats the concept of culture as static, one runs the risk of objectifying individuals whose appearance, language, national origin, religion, or sexual orientation is different from the majority into overly simplistic categorical descriptions of character and behavior.”

A paper published in *Social Work Education* titled “From Mastery to Accountability: Cultural Humility as an Alternative to Cultural Compe-

tence” addressed concerns about the associated assumptions of cultural competency:

- 1) **Definitions and approaches to cultural competency vary widely depending on worldview, discipline, and practice context;**
- 2) **Language difficulty is prevalent. There are 93 languages spoken just in the Los Angeles Unified School District;**
- 3) **Cultural competency can be taught and learned by a person of a different culture, thus becoming an endpoint. This endpoint assumes that learning will affect behavior when interacting with other cultures; and**
- 4) **The final, and maybe most important concern, is that it may cause stereotyping rather than appreciation of individual differences - merely a substitution for minority racial or ethnic group identity.**

To correct these concerns, some scholars suggest the replacement of “culture competency” with “cultural humility.” The five key characteristics of cultural humility are:

- 1) **Openness—The practitioner has an open mind, is open to engaging in cross-cultural interactions, and is open to new ideas;**
- 2) **Self-awareness—The practitioner has awareness of their own “strengths, limitations, values, beliefs, behavior, and appearance to others;”**
- 3) **Egoless—The practitioner displays humbleness and modesty and believes that all people are equal;**
- 4) **Supportive interaction—The practitioner engages in interactions with others that result in positive exchanges; and**
- 5) **Self-reflection and critique—The practitioner engages in a continual process of reflecting on aspects of self through deep introspection.**

Macro and Micro Levels

The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance published in their “Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice” that cultural competence is an interconnected model delivering at both a macro (organizational) and micro (individual) level. At the macro or organizational level, cultural competency can not only improve services but also identify and rectify inequality of the organization’s service to underserved groups. On the micro or individual level, cultural competency can improve the appropriateness of service delivery.

California Community College—Macro Level

At the macro level, California’s Community Colleges (CCC) serve 2.1 million students. The CCC is the largest provider of workforce training in the nation, offering associate degrees, industry-specific certificates, pathways for transfer to universities, and four-year community college baccalaureate degrees. The system serves a diverse student population in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, and more. The California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office noted in 2020 that, “...more than 69% of our students identify with one or more ethnic groups.”

In a June 5, 2020, letter to the community colleges, Chancellor Eloy Oakley urged colleges to mobilize to act against structural racism through a system-wide review of curriculum, addressing campus climate, updating equity plans, incorporating the implementation of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Integration Plan, and joining the Vision Resource Center “Community Colleges for Change.”

While the majority of students identify as underrepresented minorities, faculty and staff racial and ethnic diversity remain relatively

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homogenous. In April 2021, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) secretary, Cheryl Aschenbach, pointed out, “The system-wide effort to diversify faculty rests on evidence that a diverse faculty improves the retention and success of diverse students served by the California community colleges.”

Faculty—Micro Level

At the micro level, the important question is “How can I become culturally competent?” An article titled “Intercultural Competence Through Cultural Self-study: A Strategy for Adult Learners,” published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, addressed this by proposing a “self-study” in which the author presented an explanation of the processes that mediate this learning. The paper gives a set of five propositions: 1) Cultural self-studiers become more curious about other cultures; 2) Concepts and categories used to describe oneself subsequently will be used more sensitively and accurately to describe others; 3) Self-studiers are more likely to anticipate the pervasiveness and authority with which culture operates in others’ lives; 4) Cultural self-awareness increases self-studiers’ capacity to identify bias; and 5) Self-studiers discover an emerging capacity to arrest their automatic enactment of their culture to participate in the experiences of those more accurately from another culture.

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The eight categories for self-study include:

- 1) **Beliefs, values, and worldviews;**
- 2) **Cognitive style;**
- 3) **Group experiences;**
- 4) **Historical roots and longstanding memberships;**
- 5) **Personal characteristics rewarded by your culture related to gender, age, and social class;**
- 6) **Settings and scripts important in your socialization;**
- 7) **The scripting of your personhood; and**
- 8) **Overview of your cultural programming and identity.**

Rebecca Clay published definitive actions faculty can take in the American Psychological Association's *gradPSYCH Magazine*:

- 1) **Attend diversity-focused conferences;**
- 2) **Interact with diverse groups;**
- 3) **Learn about different cultures;**
- 4) **Learn about yourself; and**
- 5) **Lobby your department to implement diversity training.**

At the Community College (Macro) Level

To increase the likelihood of culturally competent behavior, colleges need to include cultural awareness training and policies at the institutional or macro level. This includes implementing training and policies to help achieve the goal of institutionalizing the skill of cultural awareness.

Essential elements that contribute to the ability to become more culturally competent include valuing diversity, having the capacity for cultural self-assessment, being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, having institutionalized culture knowledge, and having developed adaptations that reflect an understand-

ing of cultural diversity. These elements should be manifested at every level of the college, including policy making, administrative, and practice. Furthermore, these elements should be reflected in the attitudes, structures, policies, and services of the organization. As Chancellor Oakley recommended, consider action plans to implement curriculum review; open dialogue; audit classroom climate; review and/or develop and implement an equity plan; and join the Vision Resource Center "Community Colleges for Change."

Developing self-awareness may prevent our biases from impeding how we interact with others, faculty, and students. An examination of one's own attitude and values, and the acquisition of the values, knowledge, skills, and attributes that will allow an individual to work appropriately in cross-cultural situations, are important. In general, the goal is to increase awareness of cultural bias. Once awareness is achieved it needs to be monitored. This presumes the development action plans to encourage, through a process of individual, interpersonal, and organizational reflection, understanding of different world views, and cultural competence. ■