Many Spiders, One Web: Distributing Leadership for Inclusive Excellence at the University of Richmond

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2017, the University of Richmond issued a new strategic plan under 10th President Ronald A. Crutcher that named "fostering a thriving and inclusive university community" as one of its five pillars. Building on progress made in diversifying the undergraduate student body over the past decade by prioritizing access and affordability, the University identified the need to pair growing representational diversity with campus culture change to enable "[s]tudents, faculty, and staff [to] reach their full potential and thrive in an inclusive University community" ("Forging our Future, Building from Strength: A Plan for the University of Richmond," 2017). Enlisting more than 100 faculty, staff, students, and alumni over two years, the President charged three groups to consider the institution's past, present, and future in relation to diversity, equity, inclusion, and thriving, which culminated in a University report and recommendations on making excellence inclusive (University of Richmond, 2019). The report identified three critical goals with respect to representation, belonging, and capability; outlined an ambitious three-year action plan; and named the University's executive vice presidents, vice presidents, and academic deans as responsible for each action (University of Richmond, 2019).

To advance this agenda, the University began piloting a collaborative, shared leadership approach we refer to as the *distributed leadership model* to advance our commitment to making excellence inclusive. This approach aims to embed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) broadly and deeply across our campus, and has yielded successes and insights during its inaugural year. The distributed leadership model apportions responsibility for and ongoing attention to the University's DEI work among the President and his leadership team—the executive vice

presidents, vice presidents, and academic deans; a Senior Administrative Officer for Equity and Community (SAO), who serves on the President's cabinet and reports jointly to the Executive Vice Presidents—the provost and chief operating officer; and the Institutional Coordinating Council for Thriving, Inclusion, Diversity and Equity (ICC), composed of 20 faculty, staff, and students from across the University. Together these "nodes" of the DL model collaborate to engage the campus in the ongoing work of making the University of Richmond an equitable, inclusive community.

CHARACTERISTICS AND INTENTIONS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

A new and important experiment in process for the University—a predominantly White institution in the former capital of the Confederacy—the distributed leadership model centers collaboration and accountability for DEI efforts while simultaneously expanding the networks of faculty, staff, and students engaged in the ongoing work of culture change. Put simply, responsibility for attending to DEI work at UR does not fall to a single person. The president's cabinet, the deans, and the ICC—made up of faculty, staff, and students whose departmental and organizational affiliations support campus DEI work in a variety of ways— form a web of more than 35 faculty, staff, and student leaders actively driving toward our inclusive excellence goals and growing the capacity of others to contribute to our efforts. The model requires synchronous action on three fronts: (1) senior University leadership focuses on the actions and outcomes of the three-year campus action plan; (2) the ICC brings together staff, faculty and students to foster alignment, communications, and best practices for inclusive excellence across campus, while centering the longer-term vision for DEI at Richmond in its work; and (3) the SAO serves as the bridge between these efforts and as a proactive strategist, advocate, and organizer catalyzing both the short-term actions and long-term planning. This multi-dimensional and collaborative

approach is essential to align and embed efforts and practices that increase and sustain institutional coherency, urgency, and accountability for DEI work.

In adopting the DL model, we seek to address a perennial problem in higher education: systemic DEI work becoming siloed and losing momentum because it is seen as the responsibility of a central authority or individual, rather than the responsibility of all. Inevitably efforts get derailed in the wake of evolving campus interests, crises, and leadership changes within the institutional hierarchy. These problems—as well as others associated with the ways colleges and universities traditionally approach their DEI work— identified by Witham, Malcom-Piqueux, Dowd, and Bensimon (2015) persist and include: institutional decision-making that is insulated from the experiences and priorities of groups under-represented in the hierarchy; default preference for short-term strategizing tied to academic calendars, strategic plans, annual rankings, capital campaigns, and the tenures of senior leaders; discontinuities and reinventions linked to leadership turnover; the tendency to compartmentalize problems/challenges so that they match the timetables and existing structural capacities; a relative absence of DEI in "discussions of 'core' management operations" (p. 34); and an overall lack of institutional urgency to propel second-order, transformative change.[1]

The shared leadership approach of the DL model seeks to address these impediments to sustaining DEI focus and efforts by introducing "new goals, structures, and roles that transform familiar ways of doing things into new ways of solving persistent problems" (Cuban, 1988, p. 341, as cited in Sturm, Eatman, Saltmarsh, and Bush, 2011, p. 9). A t-shaped distribution of leadership and accountability *across* the institutional leadership structure, and *down* into

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[1] Second-order transformational change alters the culture of an institution by changing underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, processes and products. It is deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution, and is intentional, occurring over time. For more, please see Eckel, Hill, and Green (1998).

departments, units, and organizations, the DL model is designed to: encourage and sustain long-range thinking, inform short-term actions; pull from a wider range of DEI expertise on campus in the process; and generate a sense of ownership for DEI goals and work within departments and units. The model is therefore intended to generate institutional capacity for pursuing transformative change in which DEI values and goals inform "not just the design of individual components…but the entire operational structure" of the University (Witham et al., 2015, p. 33). In enacting the DL model, we seek to enable equity-minded change by overcoming persistent tendencies in higher education to focus only on "boutique programs or isolated [DEI] initiatives" (Witham et al., 2015, p. 33) and instead weave DEI into the fabric of institutional decision-making on a day-to-day basis.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Distributing leadership for the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion across a complex, interconnected institution requires ongoing capacity-building among individuals, departments, and leaders. In higher education, centralized, hierarchical leadership structures, often led by a chief diversity officer or vice president, often accompanied by an advisory committee, represent the most recognizable form of DEI leadership on college campuses (Leon, 2014; Williams, 2013). Further, the summer of 2020 and a new era of civil rights activism across the United States has forced many institutions, including colleges and universities, to examine these structures for pursuing DEI goals to better understand their successes and shortcomings.

Building capacity for distributed leadership at UR is a fledgling and ongoing effort, but in particular, we have focused time and attention on multi-directional trust-building, thought partnership and dialogue, and amplifying a diversity of voices. Putting the distributed leadership model in place was an important step, but creating the conditions conducive for practicing shared

leadership is even more vital. That is, how we work and learn together in the distributed leadership model matters. A central goal of our efforts is to build a model that is woven deeply in the fabric of how the University operates and engages in collective action for change.

Trust-Building

In piloting the distributed leadership model, we have found that trust-building—in multiple directions—is foundational to our work and a necessary action step toward cultivating an inclusive and equitable community. Establishing, and strengthening trust among distributed leadership stakeholders fosters a culture of respect for each other's talents and expertise, promotes collaboration, and most importantly, creates a stronger collective that can address the pressing social, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges we face as an institution. At present, we are focused on building relationships rooted in trust and reciprocity among the SAO, ICC members, deans, and the President's cabinet, and paying close attention to how we interact and work together in order to learn from each other's differences and draw upon one another's talents, expertise, and experiences.

Faculty, staff, and students engaged across the model are working side-by-side with University leaders, and vice versa, on DEI issues. And, in the case of the ICC and its members, colleagues—some who have worked at Richmond for many years—are being asked to reconsider notions of how DEI work on a college campus is done. Trust-building within the ICC has entailed engaging its members in the co-construction of a shared identity as a Council, one that delineates their efforts from that of a typical, task-oriented campus committee and reorients members toward the long-range planning and cultural transformation work we believe is required to reach our vision. Creating bonds of trust fosters a culture of respect for expertise, a propensity

for collaborative programming, and more importantly, a strong, diverse institutional team positioned to address our most pressing challenges.

Thought Partnership and Dialogue

We embrace the notion that the knotty, intersectional complexities of DEI issues we face as an institution require dialogue and deliberation that necessitate a multitude of perspectives from a range of institutional altitudes, and thus dialogue is critical to our capacity-building. To practice distributed leadership means embracing the idea that all campus community members are agents in creating an inclusive culture at UR regardless of position or discipline. The ICC actively invites individuals, departments, and units to engage the Council as thought partners as a mode of working and sharing ideas, expertise, and experiences to assist in navigating complex DEI challenges. From reviewing inclusive language style guide drafts with the University Communications team to offering feedback on a draft employee resources group program through Human Resources, to brainstorming program ideas with University Museums, the ICC serves as a sounding board and a source of dialogue and information for campus partners addressing DEI challenges within their units across the institution.

Facilitating ongoing dialogues across campus on our goals of representation, belonging, and capability and how they manifest in different units was a key focal area in the distributed leadership model's first year. The co-chairs of the ICC, in partnership with the SAO, were invited to numerous departments and offices during the 2019-20 academic year, and facilitated dialogues with over 300 faculty and staff about how their units contribute to institutional DEI efforts, as well as identifying areas of action to improve the climate within their own department and camps spheres of influence. These discussions yielded rich qualitative data that has assisted

us in identifying which components of our DEI agenda are best understood by the campus or feel

most urgent, as well as gaps and areas that require more attention.

Amplifying Voices

Effective distributed leadership arises from participation and interactions amongst diverse

individuals and challenges the idea that an individual leader alone can shape action. Instead,

distributed leadership, by design, draws attention to the larger number of actors contributing to

the process of leadership in shaping collective action (van Almeijde, Nelson, Billsberry, and van

Meurs, 2009). Like many institutions of higher education, the University was not well-situated at

the outset of our work to consider a multitude of voices in day-to-day decision-making. As such,

we have made concerted efforts to amplify a diversity of voices in building our institutional

capacities for distributed leadership.

In particular, the ICC is structured to magnify a range of voices, experiences, expertise,

and backgrounds in its assembly and in interactions with University leaders and the broader

community. Designed with the widest possible institutional representation in mind while keeping

the group small enough to be nimble (20 members, including offices such as Athletics,

Communications, Student Development units, academic schools, and current students), the

Council elevates perspectives from underrepresented groups and people with on-the-ground

knowledge and expertise from DEI work in a range of University offices and academic

departments, as well via its student members. The DL model brings people from across campus

engaged in DEI work together to ensure those efforts are well-coordinated and mutually

reinforcing, and centers the ICC within its structure to ensure the Council has direct input and

influence in institutional DEI decision-making,

Our desire to listen to more voices has also created space for more candid and open conversations between University leaders and our students, in particular. For example, immediately following a spate of racist and xenophobic incidents on campus in January 2020, the President invited student leaders into dialogue with the Executive Vice Presidents, SAO and ICC co-chairs to ensure their voices were heard quickly and their feedback incorporated into the ongoing institutional response. One outcome of these dialogues was the creation of a President's Student Cabinet meant to bridge the gap between students' lived experiences and institutional decision-making, and ensure their feedback and opinions are shared more consistently with senior leaders. By working to amplify voices across campus, we aim to encourage and facilitate wider participation in DEI work, and to bring a diversity of ideas and experiences to bear on institutional practices, policies, and decisions in a mutually beneficial manner. In so doing, we cultivate spaces for communities of practice and collaboration on DEI efforts.

BENEFITS OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Though the DL model at Richmond is still in its infancy, we have begun to see some positive changes that we believe may have long-term effects on our DEI goals and work together moving forward. In particular, distributing leadership has resulted in increased mutual understanding on DEI issues and efforts, an embrace of critical introspection as we do our work together, and the development of a team mentality that deemphasizes hierarchy and separation. We believe these benefits contribute to propelling our work forward and will help to the University to embed this approach to leadership more deeply into the culture of the institution.

Transparency

Changing the way Richmond leads DEI work requires a level of administrative transparency that is perhaps atypical in higher education institutions. As we have worked to build

relationships among the nodes of the model—the president, executive vice presidents, cabinet, deans, and the ICC—we have also worked to develop new ways of communicating about our efforts. For example, in the wake of the aforementioned campus incidents that threatened DEI goals and values on campus, our approach to shared leadership encouraged us to bring *more* people to the table at the outset of crisis response, rather than a select few. Within hours of the incidents, leaders and members of the ICC, the president, the executive vice presidents, and other campus leaders were convened by our Bias Resource Team to consider next steps. Those first moments of response were messy, yet senior leaders, mid-level staff, and faculty voices from across the institution were heard and used to inform the development of a comprehensive University response. Because participants came to the discussion open, ready to listen to different perspectives, and trusting of others, our response was faster, more cohesive, and more representative of the collective wisdom needed to respond creatively to our challenges. It is risky for institutional leaders to allow others to view "the mess" of a campus crisis in progress, but in this and other examples, we have found being more open and transparent has benefited us and created better responses and outcomes.

Clear communication with the wider community about our DEI efforts has also been critical to the early stages of the model. Built on precedent created by the three-year University effort that preceded launching the DL model, where unredacted committee reports and documents were shared publicly on the president's website, we have aimed to share as much information as possible about our work on a public-facing inclusive excellence website. This includes painstaking work updating and revisiting our action plan and ensuring its details reflect our progress underway, even as the actions themselves evolve (University of Richmond *Making Excellence Inclusive: Work Plan Update*, 2020). As other university initiatives unfold, we expect

this more open and transparent way of working may positively influence our colleagues across

campus to do the same.

Critical Introspection

Taking inspiration from the American Association of Colleges and Universities'

(AAC&U) report *America's Unmet Promise* (Witham et al., 2015), we strive to uphold DEI

practices and equity-mindedness "as a pervasive institution-wide principle" (p. 33). This means

that an essential part of our distributed leadership work is critically reflecting on our practice and

process in the moment (Youngs, 2017). This reflective work is a vital action. We regularly pose

questions among the distributed leadership model's members, as well as within its nodes, about

existing power dynamics and how power is distributed (or not), the kind of change that is

needed, how we imagine change happening, and how we can enact it.

Our focus on critical introspection proved beneficial when the university embarked on

pandemic contingency planning for the 2020-2021 academic year. In keeping with its charge to

foster alignment, communication, and best practices for inclusive excellence, the ICC created

and shared the following equity-minded guiding questions to cultivate critical introspection

among the groups charged with developing plans for operations during the pandemic:

> Who benefits? Who is burdened? Who is missing? How do we know? In other words,
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> how are the perspectives and interests of under-represented groups centered in each
>
> aspect of the planning and the possible outcomes?

We understood the pandemic was and is disproportionately affecting people of color and other

vulnerable groups, and it is crucial that our own responses serve to mitigate such inequities. In

posing these questions, we sought to encourage one another to become *more equitable* in this

moment, rather than backsliding on equity gains.

As we do this work, we also recognize that in practice, distributed leadership can create an illusion of participation by calling various stakeholders for advice, when decisions have already been set into motion (Kezar, 2012). We are intentionally working to ensure our distributed leadership model does not become a utilitarian tool of work activity meant to simply dissolve tensions, resolve problems, or otherwise continue with business as usual. Doing so can legitimize division and exclusion, and reify the inequities that we are working so hard to reduce (Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling, 2009; Josyln, 2018; Youngs, 2017). Critical reflection on current actions and intentionality around future actions ensures more integrated, concerted, and supportive work. This reflexivity fosters synergies; encourages us to connect theory and practice; enables and encourages actions to be critiqued, challenged and developed; and grounds our work in long-term cultural change. Paying close attention to how we work increases DEI leadership quality and capacity (Josyln, 2018), and distributing leadership for DEI intentionally creates a campus social network engaged in equity-minded practices.

Cultivating a Team Mentality

One of the surprising benefits of our distributed leadership approach has been relational; across the model, we are seeing a team mentality starting to develop, where ownership for our DEI goals is truly shared, and reciprocal relationships flourish in perhaps unlikely places. Because the model involves many people and decision-making is driven by a combination of expertise, dialogue, and consensus, the work can be messy. It also requires us to constantly, repetitively communicate about what we are doing, both among the model's nodes and outward to the University community. This process of shared repetition ensures all of us, from the President to the student members of the ICC, are practicing and refining our shared message: that each person on our campus has a role to play in DEI work that is important and unique, and that

our goals are for the whole institution, not just those whose roles or offices focus explicitly on DEI.

An offshoot of this work has also been the close working relationships among University leaders who might otherwise find themselves somewhat isolated from one another. For example, the DL model brings together the University's Provost and Chief Operating Officer, in their shared supervision of the SAO, but also to wrestle with the intersections of DEI issues that affect faculty, staff, and students. We recognize that relationships in higher education that cross academic and operational boundaries in pursuit of DEI is unusual, and are proud that the DL model is forging more of them across, down, and among various parts of our campus. The early benefits we have seen from these developing relationships suggests the potential utility of distributed leadership designed for other purposes—such as leading strategic planning efforts or other cross-institutional initiatives.

CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

We have, of course, also faced many challenges in our first year standing up and practicing our distributed leadership model, some from inside the University and many from beyond its boundaries. In addressing these challenges, we have also learned important lessons that may help others seeing to share leadership on critical, ongoing University initiatives.

Steering Through Crisis

Almost from the moment we announced our distributed leadership approach, we have been battered by crises, both on the campus and off. Within a few months of launching our work together, the aforementioned racist, xenophobic incidents on campus threatened to derail us by calling into question our stated goals and actions, and destabilizing the ICC and campus leaders' focus on our longer term aims. Off campus, the nation and world have presented a set of almost

inconceivable, interconnected challenges with major DEI implications: an unprecedented global public health crisis, a summer of continued violence against people of color, protest, and widespread civil rights activism; an economic downturn; and a coming contentious presidential election. In times of crisis, it is an understandable response to demand more of institutional leaders at every level. And, our philosophical and structural approach to leading cultural change and executing DEI objectives demands both a steady hand guiding toward our long-term goals *and* the ability to re-evaluate and reprioritize in the face of crises.

We have learned, and sought to reinforce, that the ICC is not a crisis or bias response team, nor directly responsible for immediate action in the wake of crises. Similarly, among the University's senior leaders, we work to stay the course, rather than let campus and national crises immediately call into question the goals and actions to which we have committed. At the same time, we have also worked to remain nimble within our DEI framework, adding new action steps and reprioritizing our efforts to address the most urgent and salient needs of underrepresented groups on our campus. Of late, we have had to work even harder to stay grounded, given the tempestuous political and cultural landscape in which we are situated, returning frequently and purposefully to the goals we have set as the right goals for our institution.

Communication

As we have referenced throughout this chapter, communication is critical to our work and to the enactment of distributed leadership. While we have experienced some key gains, especially with regard to transparency on DEI issues and expedient, University-wide messages in response to DEI challenges on campus and beyond it, we have also experienced missteps along the way. For example, at the outset of our work, we released a comprehensive report outlining our approach to leadership, University-wide goals, and a three-year action plan (University of

Richmond, 2019). While the report remains the keystone of our work, our failure to embed it within a comprehensive and institution-wide communication strategy has meant that enormous time has been spent—across the DL model—communicating and re-communicating our goals and planned actions. As a result, much of our first year was spent both trying to do the work outlined in our plan while simultaneously explaining to a range of audiences what the plan entailed. This challenge has served as a constant reminder to us to plan and over-communicate (to the extent that is possible) about the work we are now doing.

More importantly, frequent and fluid communication within and across the different nodes of the DL model are critical for building its capacity. The SAO has proven a pivotally located catalyst for this boundary spanning work. While we anticipated the need for building intentional structural communication links, we did not anticipate the extent to which the actual practice of communicating across these boundaries has built trust and increased our collective capacity to communicate and to act.

Keeping Students at the Center

Last, we have experienced an ongoing challenge around ensuring our students' involvement and investment in our DEI work, while also navigating a desire not to overburden by engaging them in uncompensated labor on behalf of the institution; in other words, we deeply desire their involvement, but believe the difficult work is ours, as faculty, staff, and administrators. This tension led to an early oversight in developing the DL model and its key nodes; we failed to imagine a permanent place for students within it. For example, when launching the ICC, we aimed to build a new structure that works differently than normative committees. We intended to add student representatives the second year, once the Council had solidified its structure and work. This was a mistake. Having student representation from the

beginning would have made our work better, more connected, and more inclusive. The ICC now has two student representatives, and the President has since created the President's Student Cabinet to amplify the voices of our students in University decision-making and DEI work. The ICC student representatives are also ex officio members of the Student Cabinet. We will likely continue to struggle with how best to engage students in our DEI work, but these early missteps have cemented our intention to keep them at the center—in spirit, if not directly in practice—of all we are doing.

CONCLUSION

Early in our work together, the authors developed a shared principle that has guided us through these early and challenging days of adapting to and enacting a shared leadership approach: *we are making the path by walking it*. This phrase reminds us that we are forging new pathways together, seeking to disrupt and dismantle impediments to a more diverse, equitable and inclusive university community, while simultaneously developing skills, capacities, modes of work, and approaches to collaboration that are new and sometimes anxiety-inducing for us and for our institution. While we have not yet "arrived," so to speak, we believe we have positioned the University of Richmond to more fully embrace shared imperatives that are in keeping with our values of diversity and equity, inclusivity and thriving, and to demonstrate to ourselves and the wider community that all of us have unique and critical roles to play in pursuit of those values.

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