Research Poster

Cultural Competence: How skilled are students across majors?

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Introduction

Cultural competence has been identified by institutions of higher learning (IHLs) as a primary competency for students entering an increasingly diverse and advanced global job market (Peifer, Chambers, & Lee, 2017; Stough-Hunter, Guinan, & Hart, 2016). Integral to developing this competence is self-awareness and an examination of how one's personal beliefs and assumptions influence intercultural interactions (Cross, 2012; Hosokawa, 2012; Roysircar, 2004). With an ever-increasing diverse student body (Prieto, 2018), post-secondary educators must actively seek out ways to increase cultural competence in the college classroom. Increasing cultural competence among students entering a global workforce also supports the American Association of Agricultural Educators (AAAE) current National Research Agenda (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016) to address the challenges of workforce preparedness in the 21st century.

Theoretical Framework

Cross's Cultural Competence Continuum (CCC) (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989) provides a framework for understanding individual levels of cultural competence using a continuum of six levels ranging from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency. At the far most negative end of the continuum is cultural destructiveness, which is indicated by attitudes (individual and organizational) and practices (actions and policies) that are deleterious to cultures and individuals. The next point on the continuum is cultural incapacity, when individuals see difference and make it wrong. The midway point on the continuum is cultural blindness. Those at this level adhere to a liberal unbiased philosophy of "we are all the same" (Cross, 2012, p. 84). Next on the continuum is cultural pre-competence, when individuals respect those from other cultures and use unbiased hiring methods. Pre-Competence is followed by cultural competence, when individuals respect other cultures and understand the benefit of cultural differences. Finally, individuals can advance to cultural proficiency, when they value cultural differences and research ways to increase their cultural competence.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe the self-perceived cultural competence of students enrolled in a teaching methods course. The guiding objectives of this study were to describe student location on Cross's CCC as evidenced through their self-ratings and written responses related to application of cultural competence to their respective fields, and to compare self-perceived cultural competence between the School of Human Sciences majors enrolled in the course (AELC/AgSci, FDM, and HDFS). To accomplish these objectives a mixed methods design was used. A convenience sample of seventy-one undergraduate students enrolled in a teaching methods of agriculture and human sciences course at Mississippi State University were invited to participate in the study. Written consent was obtained and sixty (60) students served as the study sample. Participants completed a researcher-developed Cultural Competency Self-Assessment, which measured individual self-perceived levels of cultural competence and how cultural competence can be used in the participants' respective degree fields. Qualitative data collected from responses to open-ended questions were triangulated and coded for recurring themes and used to align each participant's self-rating on Cross's CCC levels. Measures of central tendency were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.

24) for the self-perceived level of cultural competency variable. This quantitative statement asked participants to assign their current level of cultural competence a rating from 1 to 10. The researchers corresponded this ten-point scale to Cross's CCC accordingly, deconstructiveness (1-2), incapacity (3-4), Blindness (4-5), pre-competence (5-7), competence (7-8), and proficiency (9-10).

Findings

The sample participants for this research majored in three different areas: AELC/AgSci (n = 19), Fashion Design and Merchandising (FDM) (n = 18), and Human Development and Family Sciences (HDFS) (n = 23). Twenty-four participants' responses were not themed with Cross's CCC. Instead they were themed generally as having knowledge that cultural competency entails *working with diverse audiences*. An example statement from this theme was "I want to be an occupational therapist, so I will work with people from all different walks of life." The breakdown of participants by major in this theme were AELC/AgSci (n = 7), FDM (n = 8), and HDFS (n = 9). Under this theme participants self-reported themselves between five and nine on the provided ten-point scale (M = 7.17, SD = 1.40). The first level of Cross's CCC that participants were themed under was *blindness* (n = 3); one response was "I can use cultural competence with children to show we are the same but just a different race." All three respondents in this theme were HDFS students who rated themselves as either seven (n = 1) or nine (n = 2) on the provided scale. The majority of student responses (n = 26) were themed as *pre-competence*, because they expressed that cultural competence included meeting the needs of all cultures. All majors were represented in this theme: AELC/AgSci (n = 11), FDM (n = 8), and HDFS (n = 7). Their response on the scale ranged from two to nine (M = 6.84, SD = 1.78). Finally, seven responses were themed as *cultural competence* (AELC/AgSci = 1, FDM = 2, HDFS = 4). An example response for this theme was "when teaching kids and guiding FFA kids, I am going to cross many different types of people. I can use cultural competency to mold lessons to each person and make everyone feel welcome." On the self-reported scale respondents in this theme ranged from two to eight (M = 5.86, SD = 2.41).

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The findings indicate the participants of this study need further training on how the skill of cultural competence can be utilized in their respective career fields. Results also indicated a slight misalignment between participants' self-reported level of cultural competence and where their statements fell along Cross's CCC. With more non-AELC/AgSci degrees being themed as *cultural competence*, a closer look at how cultural competence education is embedded in the School of Human Sciences' program coursework would be beneficial for intervention development and implementation and future research. With cultural competency indicated as a priority for workforce entry by IHLs (Peifer, Chambers, & Lee, 2017), providing cultural competence educational opportunities to students should be given precedence by colleges and universities (Talbert & Edwin, 2008). Furthermore, researchers in our profession support and recommend multicultural education for agricultural majors and for their respective educators (Vincent, Killingsworth, & Torres, 2012). Finally, in lieu of an institutionally-adopted multicultural education course, these researchers recommend that considerable attention should be given by educators to embed cultural competency into their course curriculum; thereby, contributing to the AAAE National Research Agenda (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016, 2016) and empowering students to be workforce ready in the 21st century.

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