

2008

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Recommended Citation

Aparicio, A. (2008). Leader's of Color in Higher Education: Transforming a Negative Climate. *The Vermont Connection*, 29(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol29/iss1/1>

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Leaders of Color in Higher Education: Transforming a Negative Climate

Adam-Jon Aparicio

Within higher education, leaders of color face a history of racism expressed through negative experiences of bias and discrimination in today's colleges and universities. In the book, Leaders of Color in Higher Education: Unrecognized Triumphs in Harsh Institutions, Leonard A. Valverde (2003) illustrates the pain felt by leaders of color as they navigate an unwelcoming system. He provides readers with the tools necessary to recognize systematic injustices and examines ways in which leaders of color can "act" as the change they wish to see within the institutions they serve. The following book review explores how Valverde examines the unheard and unrecognized voices of leaders of color and provides ways to create awareness in today's increasingly diverse college and university environments.

As educators within higher education, our primary role is to further nurture the intellectual, personal, and professional development of the students with whom we work and the communities in which they learn. For educators of color, this goal is often partnered with the tools needed to survive in institutions that continue to devalue, underestimate, and ignore the work that leaders of color provide to institutions. In Leonard A. Valverde's (2003) book *Leaders of Color in Higher Education: Unrecognized Triumphs in Harsh Institutions*, the experiences of leaders of color are examined to provide a voice to a population of leaders who have been historically, and currently, silenced. The following book review examines Valverde's exploration of how our institutions of higher learning became paradoxical beacons of both racism and pluralism, how leaders of color navigate these institutions, and what is needed to end such racist practices.

Valverde (2003) opens his book with a powerful statement regarding the future of higher education and the type of leaders needed to transform this system. He expresses this need here:

The new leaders, no matter their ethnic or racial identity, no matter their gender, their religious beliefs, or their sexual orientation, will have to be strongly committed to helping shape a better future that not only guards the rights of all persons but promotes substantially the celebration of cultural democracy, in which all cultures are equal. (p. xix)

Adam-Jon Aparicio '07 received his B.A. from the University of California, Santa Cruz in Sociology with an emphasis in Social Psychology. During his tenure as a UVM HESA student, he enjoyed making great friends, working in Career Services, and supporting his peers and colleagues in the queer people of color community.

This call for *transformational leadership* immediately attracts the reader with an unapologetic goal of systematic change. Transformational leadership is defined as leadership that transforms practices by establishing morals and ethics as the norm (Burns, 1978). Valverde espouses this need through an assessment of the harsh reality of inequity throughout United States history. The book's historical examination identifies key examples of how certain groups of color have been discriminated against. This account expresses that in order to understand the injustices of today, one must first accept the realities of our past. Valverde eloquently builds a foundation of facts and narratives that causes one to explore connections between incidents of bias and leadership systems within higher education.

Valverde provides specific examples of what leaders of color experience throughout their development within undergraduate, graduate, and later professional journeys. This sobering list of experiences is the book's greatest strength as it fervently explains why transformational leadership is needed to protect the well-being of these leaders who are, quite literally, under attack. More specifically, readers of color (or other underrepresented group members) may find that the experiences listed evoke specific connections to their current experiences in higher education. Valverde (2003) describes the graduate school experience specifically for leaders of color here: "Typically, because the numbers are so small, the dynamics are more intense; hence, the experience becomes painfully personal" (p. 30). He further examines such experiences with the following telling example:

Even worse, it is amazing that many experience the following scenario: In a setting the only person of color or woman in the group will make a suggestion or observation, and it will not be heard (acknowledged) by the group, yet when later said by a white male, it will not only be listened to but accepted as good thinking! (p. 40)

Such examples not only grab the reader's attention, but also thrust the conversation of White privilege into the forefront; thus, connecting the audience through dialogue of a controversial conversation and topic.

As the book continues, the author calls for real change in campus climate to occur through individual transformational leadership as well as through the very system that has hindered the holistic development of leaders of color. Valverde examines the complexities of those who have privilege with efforts to provide systematic change. He further adds that with these privileged leadership roles comes a voice that is heard, valued, and invested in. Moreover, these voices act as a remedy to the goal at hand—equity.

To further investigate equity as a possibility, Valverde discusses how ally work can function as a solution. Moreover, he explains how those who hold privilege can help others with similar privilege become more aware of certain inequities. This involves understanding the ways that both White men and women in higher

education add to the perpetuation of privilege. He also discusses how, conversely, these same individuals can work to eradicate the presence of inequity and privilege. Valverde provides an example of such eradication here:

From past to the present, white males have related more with white women than persons of color. As a result, white women are in a position to bridge misunderstandings and forge more appreciation between white males and persons of color. Given that white women have better and closer access to white men because of their color than to women of color due to their gender, in the future, they can act as the natural link to white men as communicators and advisers. (p. 115)

Valverde's specific examples state that discrimination affects not just those who hold targeted identities, but those who hold non-targeted identities alike. By bringing this idea to fruition, Valverde asserts that both leaders of color and their White colleagues must be aware of discrimination for it to be eradicated.

Valverde has found an authentic voice in developing the thesis of his writing, which is a guide for leaders of color and White leaders who work in higher education systems laced with racism and inequity. As mentioned before, the author emphatically states that higher education will indeed remain a racist institution if not for new leaders who stand for their rights and the rights of others through transformational leadership. Valverde (2003) avows the importance and significance of transformational leadership here:

For a person of color or a woman to be a leader is to be a change agent. To be an agent of change is not to tinker around the margins of the institution; it is to work on the core...to demonstrate leadership, they now had to transform campuses. This agenda will continue to be the main purpose of future leaders of color. (p. 141)

This assertion urges the reader to question the future of higher education and the leaders that it will foster.

Valverde's writing speaks to both leaders of color and White leaders through the language of challenge. He provides his readers with examples of current inequities on campuses nationwide and uses narratives to unfold the negative impacts they have on all leaders. With each experience Valverde discusses, leaders of color become further validated and ultimately energized to create real change. Valverde's hope is delivered by lifting the unheard voices of leaders of color as they fight in a system that so often tears at the soul. This book is a powerful representation of how one person can provide such change in an institution where change was once thought to be achieved only through power. Valverde has now redefined power and is responsible for the change he wishes to see within higher education.

References

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