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De-Centering Dominance, Reclaiming Resilience

C. V. Dolan

Although there is a significant body of literature bolstering the concept, the term “resilience” is often misused and abused in the academy at the expense of the most marginalized students and community members. In this article, I advocate for reclaiming resilience as using creativity to survive and challenge dominant views of resilience. Furthermore, I call for de-centering dominance in conversations about diversity and inclusion to represent and serve the needs of marginalized students navigating institutional barriers and systems that were never meant for them.

Content Warning: transphobia, racism, suicidal ideation

Earlier in my career, I worked with a brilliant trans student of color at a predominantly White institution (PWI) and competitive graduate program. They experienced multiple traumas during their time in the program related to classmates who threatened their safety and sought to belittle their trans identity. Rather than enforcing their right to safety, the university and the graduate program contended that the student needed to be “more resilient” by taking the time to educate their peers about their identities and “be more patient.” When the compounded traumas became too much to bear, they were hospitalized after expressing suicidal ideations and told that they could not return to classes due to concerns about their safety. The dean of their college said again, “we need this student to be more resilient in order to succeed here.” What the university failed to realize was that this student was far more resilient than most, because of their ability to survive and achieve with multiple marginalized identities, which earned them their place in that program.

If the institution considered existing statistics and the environment in which this student was attempting to survive and thrive, they would have seen the extra barriers they were facing. If they understood the correlation between experiencing victimization and bullying in school environments, especially bullying based on intrinsic identities such as being trans, they would have realized that the student’s

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self-injurious behavior and suicidal ideation was connected to this pattern.

One does not have to look far to find a plethora of information about decreased life chances for trans individuals (Carmel, Hopwood, & dickey, 2014). According to one study, LGBTQ young people were 5.6 times more likely to report having attempted suicide (Russel, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). Other studies have found that 21% to 41% of trans people report having attempted suicide at least once (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Grant et. al., 2010; Kenagy, 2005; Nuttbrock et. al., 2010; Xavier, Honnold, & Bradford, 2007). Had this renowned institution believed this student when they came forward about the trauma they were experiencing, had they listened and prioritized their safety, I firmly believe they could have practiced the exact resilience that landed them in this prominent program.

Reclaiming Resilience

To truly understand resilience, we must challenge the idea that marginalized people need to “be more resilient” in order to succeed. Instead we must seek to apply existing theories about marginalization to practice. To grasp how resilient marginalized students already are, student affairs professionals must understand the labor these students invest regularly as they persist through systems that were never built for them. Their resilience is what got them to higher education—an intrinsically White supremacist, sexist, cissexist, heterosexist, ableist, elitist environment—in the first place.

One way of understanding resilience comes from adrienne brown. Drawing on the work of her mentor, Octavia Butler, brown believes resilience to be an act of “visionary fiction” or futurity (2017, p. 198). She describes resilience as creativity and innovation: “...those who survive on the margins tend to be the most experientially innovative -- practicing survival-based efficiency, doing the most with the least,” (brown, 2017, p. 198). Framing resilience as creativity that allows for survival reframes the narrative. Rather than seeing marginalized people as not conforming to colonial and capitalistic frames of success, we see them as building a better world by dreaming and innovating pathways through oppressive systems that were never meant for people with their identities and experiences. The dense existing literature in cultural, ethnic, and gender studies surrounding the topic of futurity (e.g, queer futurity) is an important resource for us to study and support students who are creating better futures for themselves and their comrades.

Much of the concept of futurity is built on dreaming, imagining, and manifesting new worlds for ourselves beyond what currently exists. When students are met with resistance or barren environments where they cannot practice this creative

notion of resilience, the stakes are high. “Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity” (Brown, 2017, pp. 163-164). The importance of someone with decreased life chances being able to dream a strong, healthy, happy, and decolonized future for themselves cannot be understated.

With atrophied creativity, imagination, and futurity muscles, marginalized students regularly engage in laborious work to survive. Nicolazzo (2017) suggests that “resilience might not necessarily be something that one has or does not have (e.g., an ability) but a practice” (p. 88). Nicolazzo (2017) goes on to say that this work is “less about figuring out if [students] were (not) resilient and more about developing strategies they could use to practice resilience” (p. 89). While it may seem that we are not seeing resilience, instead, I contend that we are indeed seeing it but are not recognizing it. Nicolazzo (2017) adds that oppressed peoples are often thought to lack resilience since their practices are often practiced in community. These communal values, rather than individual tactics, are delegitimized within capitalistic and colonial frameworks of success. Trans students, students of color, first-generation college students, and other marginalized students seek community with each other, share tools, and take care of each other as they navigate harsh environments where they are underrepresented. When they cannot find each other or are isolated, their resilience practices are less successful or are muted by the dominant culture.

De-Centering Dominance

Often, the preferred rhetoric of higher education and student affairs includes the buzzwords “diversity and inclusion.” Diversity refers to the numbers and representation of historically underrepresented students. This diversity framework tends to benefit White, cisgender, heterosexual students more than the marginalized students, and makes these underrepresented students “native informants” and co-educators for their peers. This framework is harming the same students it claims to serve (Harris, Barone, & Patton Davis, 2015). Although “inclusion” may sound better than diversity, this framework is equally problematic. Harris et al. (2015) problematize inclusion in their analysis:

Students of color may be given access to higher education, but they are not set up for success once they arrive on campus. Racial inclusion initiatives also focus on equality as a process rather than an outcome—and, in doing so, ignore inequities of the past to focus on future, individual, and isolated offenses against people of color. (p. 23)

Can we be proud of a politic that seeks to fold underrepresented students into the existing dominant narrative at our institutions? Rarely were these institutions built and intended for anyone other than the most privileged, so how can we trust that these underrepresented students will be safe and practice resilience within these systems?

As educators, we must commit to understanding non-dominant forms of leadership, challenging our White-washed expectations of leadership. When we recognize leadership in all its forms (including collectivist culture and values, ways of earning trust, etc), we de-center dominance instead of seeking to include more people in the perpetuation of oppressive systems. We remember that we are aiming for liberation, for the dismantling of White supremacy, of cisgender and binary expectations, and of heterocentric values, all of which our normative institutional culture continues to prescribe.

Implications for Practice

In order to reclaim resilience and de-center dominance, the higher education profession, within both student affairs and academic affairs, should adopt an advocacy culture. Manning and Muñoz (2011) characterize this culture as one in which students, staff, and faculty are all committed to attending to policies and practices that contradict institutional values. Instead of acting from fear or loyalty to “the way things are,” participants in an advocacy culture “seek to expose and undermine injustice in the academy” (p. 280).

Schlossberg (1989) discusses the impact of transition on college students and the weight of a loss of ritual. Campus involvement connects students with a common bond and greater resilience during transition. What would it be like to celebrate a trans student of color’s accomplishments in transitioning to graduate school? What programming can we create for (not about) students with these identities? Perhaps a mentorship initiative for underrepresented students with a semesterly banquet would gather communities and celebrate resilience. It is critical for student affairs and higher education professionals to validate marginalized and underrepresented identities in order to encourage those students to believe in and empower themselves (Schlossberg, 1989).

Nicolazzo (2017) proposes “embracing a trickle-up approach to diversity and inclusion work” (p. 144). This approach includes listening to and believing marginalized students’ voices, needs, and experiences. Utilizing the Critical Race Theory tools of story-telling and counternarratives can help student affairs professionals to stay in tune with our goals (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). When seeking voices, we must not do so to keep adding more stories in parallel. At some point, we must note patterns in these voices and take necessary action.

We can create depth in the work instead of infinite breadth. An intersectional framework is critical because when we center the most marginalized, all people's needs are met. We can focus our resources on intersections of identities that produce decreased life chances for our students (Nicolazzo, 2017). We must consider who is not visible or present on our campuses, at all levels of leadership, and in spaces where decisions and policies are created. We must ask hard questions and be ready to move back in order to make space for those more marginalized than ourselves. We must be ready to revisit our mission statements and values and ask how we can put them into practice for the sake of all marginalized people.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the student who endured multiple traumas at the PWI and was eventually pushed out of their program, and I am driven by a call to justice for future students like them. There are so many ways administrators with more power, or even staff with stronger influence, could have shown up for them. Some low-hanging fruit could have included allowing them to take sick leave for one term, providing academic accommodations, working with the faculty to support them better in the classroom, or connecting them to counseling with someone who holds their identities. The dean could have held the student's classmates accountable for their attacks on this trans student of color's identities and recognized that their experience was traumatic and keeping them from succeeding.

The dean and the faculty also could have remembered the resilience the student showed in their application and taken responsibility for accepting them and not retaining them instead of blaming the student's attrition on their "lack of resilience." Too often, retention conversations erase the narratives of marginalized people, diminish them to statistics, or depict them as students who did not "pass" the process of weeding out those who were not truly "worthy." The institution could have taken responsibility for its stature as a PWI and interrogated their history and consistent patterns of enrolling and graduating White, cisgender, heterosexual students by a large margin. They could have asked, "What can we do to better empower and accommodate trans students of color in this rigorous and vigorous environment?" instead of assuming that everyone started from a level playing field. The institution and graduate program could have further revisited their mission statements, looking back to existing theories that support and uphold their values and how they can use those frameworks to inform their practices. By truly de-centering the dominance that exists in institutional histories, leadership, and representation, and re-centering the most marginalized students' needs, we can decontaminate the word "resilience" and deweaponize it against the students who must practice their resilience the most.

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