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[Home](#) › [Liberaleducation](#) › [2014](#) › [Quality, E-Quality, and Opportunity](#) › [Cross-Cultural Mentoring: A Pathway to Making Excellence Inclusive](#)



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[Current Issue](#)

Search Periodicals

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Overview](#)

[One Hundred Years!](#)

[From the Editor](#)

[The Future of Scholarship](#)

[Accreditation's Alchemy Hour: Riding the Wave of Innovation](#)

[The Teaching Naked Cycle: Technology Is a Tool, but Psychology Is the New Pedagogy](#)

[Cross-Cultural Mentoring: A Pathway to Making Excellence Inclusive](#)

[The Degree Qualifications Profile 2.0: Defining US Degrees through Demonstration and Documentation of College Learning](#)

[Bearing Witness: Seeing as a Form of Service](#)

[Three Traditions of Democracy in Relation to American Higher Education](#)

[Behind the Headlines: Remembering the Fundamentals about Diversity](#)

Liberal Education

Cross-Cultural Mentoring: A Pathway to Making Excellence Inclusive

By: Betty Neal Crutcher

Cross-cultural mentoring involves an ongoing, intentional, and mutually enriching relationship with someone of a different race, gender, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, or nationality. Generally more experienced, the cross-cultural mentor guides the intellectual and personal development of the mentee over time. At its best, this relationship is built on a foundation of what I call “the three Vs”: values, virtues, and vision. The identification of *values* that are held in common, even across difference, leads to the development of trust and understanding. The cultivation of *virtues*—the abilities and ways of knowing that enable one to deal with various personalities, cultures, and experiences—enables one to maintain individual and institutional boundaries and to overcome barriers between people. The commitment to a vision of inclusive excellence inspires one to clear educational pathways and help others overcome obstacles and limitations.

A sense of trust and understanding between mentor and mentee is a crucial element in the relationship. While my focus here is on cross-cultural mentoring, the overall purpose of all forms of mentoring is to find commonality and common ground among individual values, virtues, and visions. It is in doing this that a special sense of trust, care, guidance, and support can grow. But before discussing cross-cultural mentoring more generally, let me begin by sharing my own experience of its importance.

From the warmth of the South to the cold of the Midwest

The oldest of four children, I was born in Alabama on the campus of the Tuskegee Institute (now known as Tuskegee University). Although I grew up in a highly segregated and stratified community, under the cloud of legally sanctioned segregation, I, like many African Americans, benefitted from the love and support of a close-knit community. This love and support cultivated in my family, friends, and me a passion to grow and excel despite the hurdles we faced. And in time, due in part to a relationship between my father and “Mr. P.,” a white Southerner who came to our home and who worked side by side with him, I began to see the possibility of relationships that were unconditional, revolutionary, and evolutionary. What I had witnessed as a child, though I didn’t have the words for it at the time, was a cross-cultural mentoring relationship.

At the age of twenty-one, I left Alabama and entered the larger world, joining several Tuskegee classmates on an exchange program at the University of Michigan. When my plane landed in

Michigan, I looked out the window and got the shock of my young life: there was a foot of snow on the ground! That was just the first of many changes. In addition to the weather and the landscape, the people—regardless of their color or ethnicity—were different. The culture was different. It was the most diverse setting I had ever been in. It was also the most baffling. How, I wondered, could I relate to people who had such different life experiences? How could I ever find something in common with them? Perhaps I thought of my father's mentoring relationship with Mr. P., who had come to our house and gotten to know us; yet, how could I get to know, trust, and understand people who didn't serve grits and bacon at breakfast and collard greens and cornbread at dinner?

After my classmates returned to Tuskegee, I remained at the University of Michigan, where I had the privilege of making personal and professional connections with individual educators who had different cultural and racial backgrounds but similar values, virtues, and visions. By including me in their lives and becoming my mentors, these educators helped me feel less disoriented and less isolated. I felt that I was surrounded with care, support, and trusting relationships—all elements of good mentoring. The gratitude I felt created in me a lasting passion for cross-cultural mentoring.

At all the institutions we've been a part of, my husband and I have made ourselves available to students as mentors. My husband is currently president of Wheaton College, where I lead a mentoring group for women and he leads one for men. We both take the time to host monthly gatherings that create safe spaces in which our mentees can share anything that is on their minds and contribute to the topic of discussion. At these gatherings, we take the time to listen and support one another as we learn the values, virtues, and visions that have helped shape and strengthen the Wheaton community. In addition to mentoring in group settings, we also provide individual mentoring to students.

Cross-cultural mentoring and inclusive excellence

Why is it important to mentor cross-culturally? Those of us on campuses that are committed to the principle of inclusive excellence are working not only to make our student bodies more diverse but also to be more attentive to the educational, social, and emotional needs of all our students. Cross-cultural mentoring is one pathway for making excellence inclusive.

Cross-cultural mentoring offers a possible solution to the lack of access to education in the United States. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornell West have underscored that one of the primary ways to advance a more radical democracy is to recapture and include the voices of all ethnic and cultural groups and to discuss and analyze their contributions open and honestly.¹ No one, according to Patricia Hill Collins, can be defined solely by one feature, such as race. We are all complex, multifaceted beings living in a multicultural world with varying, complex, and sometimes conflicting ways of understanding that world. By understanding our complexities and our fluidity, we are engaging in a "process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community."² Calling for us to envision a new way of viewing the world, bell hooks urges "all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions."³

Cross-cultural mentoring can help us create these new visions, along with clear pathways to future success. Moreover, cross-cultural mentoring also can support our democratic ideals by helping level the playing field, especially for those from low-income backgrounds.

One of my newest mentees is a high school student from a working-class suburb of Boston. Although she and I may both claim African American heritage, an abundance of very different cultural experiences make me seem to her almost like an inhabitant of another planet. I am trying to level the playing field for this new mentee not only so that she will understand and be able to take advantage of the opportunities before her, but also so that she will become a more active citizen with a better grasp of the issues of our time.

The best possible preparation for meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century is a liberal education. Such an education fosters the qualities of agile learning and the capacity to clarify and adapt to developments in an ever-changing world. Yet, first-generation and less-advantaged students—like my new mentee—are most likely to enroll in institutions and programs that instead provide narrow training. My mentee deserves the opportunity to develop the skills that will create her world; she deserves the opportunity to develop the hallmark skills of a liberal education. Regrettably, however, policy makers and politicians often focus on access, affordability, accountability, and completion without also considering the actual content and purpose of higher education. Cross-cultural mentoring can help bridge this gap.

Best practices for cross-cultural mentoring

Does everyone possess the ability to be a cross-cultural mentor? The answer is yes, if they desire it and are able to find the time to do it.

In a series of interviews, I asked administrators, faculty, and staff who had mentored students and other administrators, faculty, and staff to reflect on their mentoring practices, both formal and informal.⁴ Not all the cross-cultural mentoring they described was directed toward students of color; some of these mentors were faculty of color who mentored white students and students from other ethnic groups. But each participant in my study had something to share about ways to support students and junior colleagues. The following best practices are based on lessons learned by these seasoned mentors:

- Those motivated to mentor mentees whose backgrounds or identities differ from their own must be adept at navigating cultural boundaries—personal, gendered, racial, ethnic, and geographic.
- Because of the complexity of cross-cultural mentoring, mentors need to possess certain attributes or virtues, including active listening skills, honesty, a nonjudgmental attitude, persistence, patience, and an appreciation for diversity.
- Mentors must maintain a dual perspective, seeing the mentee as an individual as well as part of a larger social context.

- For the relationship to survive times when the mentee does not take the mentor's advice, it is important that the mentor avoid becoming overly prescriptive or invested in the mentee's choices.
- Mentors set boundaries and don't become friends with their mentees, at least not for quite a while.

There are challenges to mentoring and cross-cultural mentoring, and there are rewards. Time is perhaps the greatest challenge. It takes time to build mentoring relationships. But as I know from my own experience as both mentor and mentee, the shared values, virtues, and vision that undergird the mentoring relationship enable one to transcend differences and create commonalities that provide new pathways to inclusive excellence.

Conclusion

I'd like to end with a well-known quotation from Martin Luther King Jr.: "An individual has not started living fully until they can rise above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity. Every person must decide at some point, whether they will walk in light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment: 'Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?'"⁵

I could not have completed my doctoral dissertation without the help of cross-cultural mentoring from faculty and administrators, in addition to the support of my family, friends, and other cross-cultural mentors. As a person of color who returned to graduate school after years of learning outside of the classroom, I will be forever grateful for the wise counsel of all who assisted me. Each was instrumental in creating my pathway to inclusive excellence.

For those of you who have not yet acted on it, I hope this article will inspire you to value cross-cultural mentoring, both personally and professionally. I would like to encourage you—if you have not already, and as your time allows—to think about becoming a cross-cultural mentor to one of your students or junior colleagues. This can be a pathway to make excellence inclusive, the next step in bringing us closer to the world of our dreams.

Notes

1. See Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornell West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Knopf, 1996).
2. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 39.
3. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.
4. See Betty Neal Crutcher, "Cross-Cultural Mentoring: An Examination of the Perspectives of Mentors," (PhD diss., Miami University, 2006), http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=miami1151683574.
5. Martin Luther King Jr., "Conquering Self-Centeredness" (speech, Montgomery, AL, August 11, 1957).

Betty Neal Crutcher is presidential spouse and senior mentoring consultant at Wheaton College. This article was adapted from the author's address to the networking luncheon for faculty and administrators of color at the 2014 annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

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