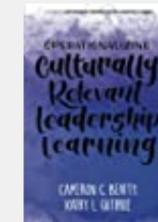# Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning

reviewed by James Noonan - June 13, 2022

Title: Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning
Author(s): Cameron C. Beatty and Kathy L. Guthrie
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In 2022, the imperative for culturally relevant practice in higher education could not be clearer or more urgent. Just two years ago, in the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, young people across the United States helped spark one of the largest protest movements in our history (Buchanan et al., 2020): a movement against racism and for Black lives which has continued to resonate in classrooms and on campuses nationwide. Moreover, post-secondary institutions, reflecting demographic trends in the U.S. more broadly, have been growing increasingly diverse (NCES, 2021), leading institutions to develop and deploy strategic plans and campus initiatives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Given these trends, leadership faculty and student affairs professionals would benefit from the framework, tools, and testimony compiled in a new book from Cameron C. Beatty and Kathy L. Guthrie, faculty members and researchers affiliated with the Leadership Learning Research Center at Florida State University. *Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning* (2021, Information Age Publishing) is a practice-oriented extension of earlier theoretical work that sought to "develop leaders capable of challenging inequity to create social change" (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016, p. 9). In building on this previous work, Beatty and Guthrie situate their book in the sociopolitical context in which it was written: the beginning of the global Covid-19 pandemic, a national reckoning with racism and anti-Blackness, and the divisive and violent aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. "If we are not framing leadership from a socially just and culturally relevant lens," they write in the preface, "then we are not preparing learners to address compound issues of systemic injustices" (p. xviii).

In the book, Beatty and Guthrie elaborate the key elements of the Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning (CRLL) model, enlist 50 practitioners to share testimonials on how they have applied CRLL to their work, and present a series of provocative questions to encourage readers to apply the model to their own professional identity and practice. The book is comprised of 13 chapters, divided roughly into three parts: an overview of the model, rich descriptions of how the model has been used in practice, and resources that readers can use to apply the model to their unique contexts.

Chapters 1 through 3 present the rationale for CRLL, describe the constructs that make up the model, and outline the contexts within which CRLL is used. The model unites two broad empirical domains: culturally relevant pedagogy and research on campus climate. At the heart of the model is the intersection of three concepts: practitioners' *identity* (or the intersection of multiple identities), their *capacity* to undertake leadership, and their *efficacy*, or the extent to which they believe they can be successful. Using these three lenses, individuals make sense of themselves as leaders and the process of leadership itself. Further, CRLL recognizes that leaders undertake this sense-making within broader learning and institutional environments. The five environmental dimensions, which Beatty and Guthrie call the "where and when" of CRLL, are (a) the institution's historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion; (b) compositional diversity, which they describe not only as enrollment but as the extent to which diverse students are "fully engaging" in leadership programs (p. 24); (c) psychological climate; (d) behavioral climate; and (e) organizational and structural elements such as course curricula, budget allocations, and hiring practices.

Spread across Chapters 4 through 11 are 50 short essays from practitioners who have "operationalized" the CRLL model in their respective work as students, faculty, student affairs professionals, and researchers. These testimonials, interspersed with helpful commentary from Beatty and Guthrie, are truly the heart of the book, and they illuminate how individuals have used the CRLL model as a resource for personal and professional development, development of cocurricular and academic programming, implementation of academic and cocurricular programming, and research. Taken together, the broad and diverse cross section of contributors in these chapters speaks to how deeply the CRLL model has penetrated the thinking and practice of professionals in the fields of higher education and student affairs. For example, Leonard Taylor, Jr., a Black queer pre-tenured leadership faculty member at Auburn University, describes how he uses CRLL to interrogate his own social identities and social location, and to design learning experiences where his students can do the same. Similarly, Jessica Chung, a curriculum writer for an undergraduate leadership minor at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, explains that CRLL helped her visualize how different courses addressed different elements in the model and then helped her rebalance courses as needed. The model also prompted Chung to reflect on her own personal development and growth as a leader. "In some ways," she writes, "CRLL is a map and in other ways it is like a lens" (p. 126). Notably, each "operationalizing" chapter concludes with a set of "questions for consideration" aligned to the elements of the CRLL model and designed to stimulate the kinds of reflection and action described by writers like Taylor and Chung.

Chapters 12 and 13 synthesize these guiding questions and present resources for introducing elements of the model in professional learning contexts. The questions that Beatty and Guthrie offer in Chapter 12 are provocative in pushing leadership educators to see the ways in which their programs might fall short for minoritized students and staff and to make commitments to justice-oriented improvements. For example, consider the following questions aligned to various CRLL elements: "In what ways will students explore their identity and leader identity, and how will minoritized identities be centered in their leadership learning?" (identity); "In what ways can leadership educators seek to understand who, how, and why individuals are included or left out/marginalized in leadership programs?" (compositional diversity); and "In what ways is the current campus context being interrogated to deconstruct the ways oppressive ideology may be masked as tradition, both formally and informally?" (psychological dimension) (pp. 202-206). The book concludes with a chapter flush with pedagogical resources, aligned to each CRLL element, that could be easily integrated into professional learning programs for faculty and staff, further ensuring that the theoretical foundation forming the CRLL model is indeed put into practice.

Too often, theoretical frameworks are relegated to the literature review sections of scholarly articles. In *Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning*, Beatty and Guthrie have succeeded in taking the theoretical framework of the Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning model and demonstrating how it can be put to work improving practice for students, faculty, and student affairs professionals across cocurricular programs, academic learning environments, and research. Through the testimonials and analysis collected in this volume, the critical legacy of this model is evident.

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