

FEATURE ARTICLE

Leading Across Cultures: Crafting a Curriculum to Improve Inclusiveness – A Service Academy Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This case study details the evolution of the U.S. Naval Academy's "Leading Across Cultures" Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion curriculum initiative, from conception to execution. University leaders initiated the program during the racially fueled national tumult of 2020, in an effort to develop in students an ability to build inclusive teams while leading across different cultures. The university studied many commercially available diversity and inclusion educational programs but deemed them unsuitable for a military academy setting, and instead, developed its own. The Naval Academy's Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership led this endeavor. Its leaders started by compiling learning outcomes drawn partly from the U.S. Navy's broader diversity and inclusion efforts and partly from the leaders' belief that an ability to work across cultures represented an integral part of learning how to lead. The learning outcomes included all three domains of learning: cognitive, behavioral, and affective.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, DEI, Inclusiveness, Annapolis, Mutual Obligations

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2023, 10: 261 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v10.261>

Introduction

During 2020, as U.S. citizens wrestled with a series of racially fueled incidents across the nation, the U.S. Naval Academy's (USNA) Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership commenced work on a discussion based program to aid future military officers in leading across different cultures and building inclusive teams. Entitled *Leading Across Cultures*, the discussion-based program aims to provide a framework for building more inclusive groups, a model that students, faculty, staff, and coaches could use in Annapolis and beyond. The curriculum includes a series of small group training and discussion sessions. The program features monthly follow-up small-group discussions.

This article explains the evolution of the *Leading Across Cultures* initiative from conception to execution. It includes how the leaders of the Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership narrowed down the focus of the effort and selected a series of learning outcomes, how the contentious national political environment shaped the final product, and how/why the Stockdale Center chose the Mutual Obligations Approach.

This article does not attempt to capture everything the USNA did in response to the racial difficulties of 2020 and 2021. That response included dozens of offices and hundreds of people. Rather, this article attempts to explain how the Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership responded in creating its *Leading Across Cultures* program, which is used today for two purposes: firstly, to train those faculty, staff, and coaches who have expressed an interest in improving cross-cultural relations and secondly, to train a cadre of student Dignity and Respect Program (DRP) facilitators, also called Dignity and Respect Officers (DROs) who serve in each of the 30 companies (a military unit with approximately 150 Midshipmen) on campus and on every varsity sports

team.¹ In mid-2023 the Commandant of Midshipmen (equivalent to a civilian dean of students) expanded the program by mandating that all extra-curricular activities and club sports teams with 30 or more participants include a trained DRO.

Search for Existing Racial Reconciliation Programs Leads Stockdale Center to Construct Its Own

In spring and summer 2020, as racially fueled protests and riots spread across the nation, the staff at the USNA's Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership pondered how it could respond. The mission of the center involves using externally provided gift funds to stage extra-curricular and co-curricular activities to develop ethical leaders for the naval services. The Stockdale Center staff commenced its efforts by reviewing many of the racial reconciliation books and training programs available in the commercial marketplace. For multiple reasons, the Stockdale Center staff chose not to select them. Some proved so closely connected to civilian business applications that they failed to account for the unique facets of military organization and life. Other programs openly embraced controversial political views that threatened to draw the Stockdale Center into the thorny, partisan national debate over race, gender, and sexuality, which might jeopardize the Center's long-standing aim of remaining apolitical. Still others featured online learning, which we believed would be ineffective in fostering learning in the affective domain. Having found no commercially available products or curricula that fit, the Stockdale Center leadership team began to craft its own program that aimed to foster discussions about diversity issues and how to create more inclusive teams. As with the creation of any new curriculum, we started by asking ourselves, "What exactly are we trying to do?"

¹ Originally titled the "Diversity Peer Educator" (DPE) program, USNA leaders in early 2023 changed the name to the "Dignity and Respect Program" (DRP) to better reflect its aims. This article uses the revised nomenclature. The reasons for the name change will be addressed later in the article.

Learning Outcomes

Concurrent with the Naval Academy and Stockdale Center efforts, the larger Navy headquarters in Washington had compiled an Inclusion and Diversity Core Competency Continuum that provided some broad learning outcomes upon which to build the Leading Across Cultures curriculum (OPNAV N-1, 2021):

Learning Outcome	Primary Domain of Learning
1. Create an inclusive environment for all members	Behavioral
2. Demonstrate inclusion through communication	Behavioral
3. Understand organizational and social norms	Cognitive

To these, three other outcomes were added that were drawn from a set of U.S. Navy Pacific Fleet directives on desired Navy Signature Behaviors (U.S. Navy Pacific Fleet, 2020):

4. Embrace the diversity of ideas, experiences, and the backgrounds of individuals	Affective
5. Treat every person with dignity and respect	Behavioral
6. Intervene when necessary	Behavioral

In addition, Naval Academy leaders added several additional outcomes:

7. Understand the science of perception and bias and strategies for addressing them	Cognitive
8. Understand the terminology and logic of contemporary academic arguments concerning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Cognitive

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| 9. (For future facilitators) Facilitate discussions related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion topics | Behavioral |
| 10. Internalize the belief that all people were created equal and that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, as reflected in the Navy's shared military virtues | Affective |
| 11. Internalize the belief that naval leaders must master the ability to lead across cultures | Affective |

Borrowing from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy

In 2021, about the same time that Stockdale Center leaders were crafting their curriculum, the USNA Chief Diversity Officer asked the Stockdale Center staff to train participants in a new program patterned after the U.S. Coast Guard Academy's Diversity Peer Educator (DPE) program; after initially using the same name, in early 2023 the Naval Academy retitled its program to the DRP, staffed by Midshipmen DRO. The plan envisioned training a cadre of students, at least one from each of the 30 companies at the USNA, as well as at least one representative from each of the varsity sports teams. Once trained and certified, these DROs would then become chief facilitators and discussants on inclusion-related issues throughout the 4,400 students in the Brigade. Stockdale Center leaders believed that its nascent Leading Across Cultures program could be used for that task. As part of adapting the curriculum, a formal mission statement for the DRP program was crafted:

Mission: To create an inclusive environment that fosters dignity and respect throughout the Brigade by equipping Midshipmen to lead across cultures (U.S. Naval Academy 2021).

The word inclusion in the mission statement proved important. Often the words diversity and inclusion today get used interchangeably. There exist, in actuality, substantive differences between them. *Diversity* refers to the degree to which an organization consists of people of different traits, such as race, religion, technical skills, age, etc. As such, then, diversity represents a quantifiable metric. *Inclusion*, on the other hand, represents something less concrete and more abstract. Inclusiveness consists of two components: belongingness and uniqueness. Inclusive leadership, in that vein, involves “fostering a shared team identity and individuals’ feelings of belongingness,” while at the same time “enabling individuals to express their uniqueness” (Ashikali, 2019).

Relatively few people decide the diversity of an organization; at the Naval Academy, it is U.S. Congressmen, Senators, and the admissions office staff who shape the incoming class of students. Everyone, on the other hand — Midshipmen, faculty, staff, and coaches — shapes the institution’s environment of inclusion. The ability to lead across different cultures, and to make everyone, regardless of their background, feel that they are a part of a unified team — to feel like they are included, in other words — represents a fundamental mission of all members of the armed services.

As an adjunct to the mission statement, Stockdale Center crafted a DRP Objective to provide some additional clarity on how to achieve our learning outcomes:

Objective: The Dignity and Respect Program supports the moral mission of the U.S. Naval Academy by facilitating small group conversations that educate and inform Midshipmen, Faculty, and Staff and foster a culture of inclusion across the Yard, resulting in resilient teams ready to exert maximal performance and win the naval service’s battles (U.S. Naval Academy, 2011).

Teaching and Learning in the Three Domains

Educators and social scientists frequently classify learning into three domains: *cognitive*, *behavioral*, and *affective*. The cognitive domain includes what is traditionally thought of as classroom learning, such as mastering the periodic table, for example, or learning how to complete long division. The behavioral domain includes learning physical skills, such as learning how to swim or to dance (Rhode, 2004). The third domain, affective learning, aims to foster changes in peoples’ attitudes, feelings, and interests (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2021). The list of learning outcomes governing the Leading Across Cultures curriculum includes all three domains of learning. Like at most universities, the USNA faculty and staff possess considerable experience working in the cognitive domain, which serves as the foundation of most traditional college courses. USNA staff also works frequently in the behavioral domain of education. All students receive physical training in swimming, martial arts, and military drill. The Stockdale Center staff, however, possessed much less experience working in the third domain of learning, the affective domain. In early deliberations the Stockdale Center staff agreed that the program — whatever its final form — should involve all three domains, with special attention to shaping students’ affect or feelings.

In preparing to teach students in the affective domain, Krathwohl’s Taxonomy of Learning in the Affective Domain was referenced. It involves five different levels of growth in student affective learning, from most basic to most advanced:

Receiving refers to the student’s simple awareness that a thing exists.

Responding refers to active participation on the part of the student.

Valuing involves a commitment to something.

Organizing brings together different values, resolving conflicts between them, and begins the process of building an internally consistent value system.

Characterizing by a value set. This culminating stage is reached when an individual has developed a value system that controls their lifestyle; the behavior is pervasive, consistent, and predictable (Indiana University, 2022).

With respect to the learning outcomes that fall primarily in the affective domain, while we hoped our students would one day reach the fifth and highest level of Krathwohl's affective learning — getting all service members to develop a value system that views all humans equally, who commit themselves to treating all people with dignity and respect and who recognize that they must master an ability to lead across all cultures — we concluded that was perhaps too lofty a goal given our time constraints. Instead, we adopted the fourth level as a more realistic end-state: bringing together different values, resolving conflicts between them, and beginning the process of building an internally consistent value system. Having set an overall goal for learning in the affective domain, the Stockdale Center staff then set about trying to construct a curriculum to meet all of its learning outcomes.

Selecting a Dominant Pedagogy

While Krathwohl describes levels of learning in the affective domain, he does not offer suggestions on how to achieve it. Thus, began a debate within the Stockdale Center on how best to change attitudes, feelings, and interests. Traditional classroom lecture and online computer-based learning were ruled out. The first often requires little of a student beyond sitting in a seat while someone else talks, and the second involves little human interaction with others as the learner flips through online slides. Over time, Stockdale Center leaders selected a pedagogy that primarily involved small group (approximately 10–15 people), in-person discussions, led initially by the senior

leaders from the Stockdale Center. Ultimately, however, Stockdale Center leaders aspired to get Midshipmen to lead these small group discussions.

A Curriculum to Meet the Learning Outcomes

As a result of this work, the Stockdale Center crafted a 15 hour Leading Across Cultures educational curriculum composed of several different modules, all aimed at meeting the learning outcomes. The curriculum opens with a 90-minute guided scholarly discussion on perception and bias. This segment aims to address the cognitive learning outcomes of the curriculum. In the Naval Academy's freshman leadership course Preparing to Lead (NL110), Midshipmen learn about perception, cognition, and bias, and how the human brain frequently and naturally makes rapid conclusions when it confronts new things, new ideas, and new people. In this opening segment of the curriculum, these concepts are reviewed. We discuss how this sub-conscious human process of making rapid conclusions can prove beneficial when it provides quick meaning in a complex or dangerous environment: it allows one to draw upon prior experience to determine safety or danger in "fight or flight" survival circumstances.

Daniel Kahneman, who has popularized a model of the mind that explains why the brain operates quickly in some situations yet slowly in others, a differentiation that is important in understanding the emergence of human stereotypes and biases, is introduced. In his influential book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Kahneman explains that there exists a figurative part of the brain (referred to as System 1) that operates quickly and makes rapid conclusions, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. The brain's System 2, on the other hand, allocates attention for effortful mental activities, including complex computations (Kahneman, 2011).

What importance do System 1 and System 2 have for our understanding of inclusion? They are important

because they impact the manner in which humans judge others. When meeting someone new, the average person sums up the other very rapidly, sometimes within just a second or two of meeting, based upon our experiences and learning that may have come decades before. There exists a growing scholarly literature that supports the idea that the human mind makes quick decisions about others, usually at the subconscious level. One scholar has cautioned, “Although cultural wisdom warns us not to judge a book by its cover, we seem unable to inhibit this tendency even though it can lead to inaccurate impressions of people’s psychological traits and has significant social consequences” (Zebrowitz, 2017). Thus, the brain’s System 1 is very powerful and often leads people to make conclusions about others much more quickly than a rational analysis of their backgrounds, skills, knowledge, or competencies might otherwise suggest.

Kahneman cautions that it is very difficult to avoid our own biases even if we know that we have them. So, what are we to do? We spend time in this unit discussing some suggestions. Firstly, when making an important decision, increase the number of people involved and ensure that they come from diverse vantages; in doing so we can seek out alternate opinions and explore them fully, thus providing an opportunity to see inconsistencies and faults in our own logic (Kahneman et al., 2011). Secondly, when interacting with someone different than ourselves, we might paraphrase back to the speaker what we think we heard, in order to confirm that we have interpreted their words correctly and that our understanding has not been clouded by our own biases (Shanahan, 2021). Finally, we can make a conscious effort to learn about others and perhaps change our pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. This opening lecture unit aims to address the cognitive learning outcomes.

After the scholarly unit the curriculum continues with a discussion about the importance of creating in

their groups a warm and welcoming environment. This exercise purposefully begins the process of achieving the behavioral learning outcome “create an inclusive environment for all members”; and the affective learning outcome “embrace the diversity of ideas, experiences, and the backgrounds of individuals.” In this unit, students break into small groups of 3–4 people for a group exercise called the “Name Game” in which they share some information about their name. We’ve found that this exercise helps our participants get to know one another on a personal level, and they begin to feel more comfortable revealing their hidden selves. We aim, in other words to begin to build in their groups some psychological safety.

The curriculum then proceeds to the next unit, a shared video viewing and discussion session on cultural inclusion. The locally produced video (Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership, 2020) features interviews of minorities sharing their experiences at the Naval Academy. We have found that the video and the guided discussion that follows normally initiates conversations that rarely happen spontaneously, and it also serves as a template that DRO’s can use in future inclusion-related discussions. This video, along with others in the Conversations in Conscientious Leadership series, all aim to provide an opening device to generate similar conversations in small group settings, and to stoke learning in the affective domain.

The next section of the curriculum focuses on how to become an effective facilitator: one of the learning outcomes in the behavioral domain. We discuss techniques for good facilitation, such as lesson planning and developing a set of open-ended questions that will elicit a free-flowing conversation. We talk about skills such as how to handle the “loud-mouth” who attempts to dominate a discussion, how to encourage a reluctant talker to join the conversation, and how to re-center a wayward discussion back to the desired subject. This is followed by a discussion around active listening.

Next, we introduce the concept of cross-cultural competence. We discuss the culture Iceberg, which suggests that the most important dimensions of a culture — like that of an iceberg — lie hidden under the surface, awaiting exploration from an interested and eager learner. We encourage students, to take some time to study the history and literature of other cultures, particularly those with whom they will interface in the workplace or on an upcoming deployment. We follow that up by having them take a cross-cultural competency online test, which often proves humbling to even the most internationally minded person.

Role Playing Exercises

After discussions on active listening and cross-cultural competence, the curriculum then moves into some role-playing exercises, aiming in part to meet the “Intervene When Necessary” learning outcome in the behavioral domain. Learning to “Intervene When Necessary” serves as one of the Signature Behaviors that fleet leaders want officers and sailors to exhibit. But how does one develop the skills to intervene in fraught and tense situations? We give participants an opportunity to practice such interventions. Again, in small group settings, we distribute scenarios to participants that include a difficult race or cultural dilemma. The purpose of this role playing is not to determine right or wrong, but to develop among future facilitators some interpersonal skills that they can use to help facilitate discussions to defuse tensions before they explode.

Mutual Obligations Approach

The curriculum then turns toward a structural framework to improve inclusion in the fleet’s operational forces. Sociologists Emerson and Yancey developed a Mutual Obligations Approach to transcend barriers between people of different cultures, backgrounds and attributes. Their framework empowers and encumbers *all* members of a group to help shape group attitudes, beliefs, and practices, and as such, represents a form of both “affective” and “behavioral” learning. In the

curriculum we talk about how individual service members might adapt it to help improve feelings of inclusion:

1. Initiate inter-group communication under controlled circumstances
2. Listen to each other
3. Recognize and incorporate individual and group interests
4. Search for a critical core that all can agree on, giving voice to cultural uniqueness
5. Acknowledge and define the inter-group problems at hand
6. Devise ways that allow for negotiation of these individual and group interests to produce a solution to which all can agree (Emerson & Yancey, 2010).

One of the steps in the framework encourages all members of a group to “search for a critical core that all can agree on.” In the naval services, the long-standing virtues of honor, courage, commitment, and respect provide such a critical core:

Honor. We honor our shipmates when we accept them as equals, regardless of their race, color, creed, sexual orientation, faith or other attribute. We honor them by celebrating their histories as well as the struggles that they face.

Courage. Courage is the ability to do something that scares someone. We can all habituate courage by practicing bystander intervention, like when we hear off-color jokes or overhear a slur. Intervening takes courage, because it compels us to speak up: “Hey shipmate, your behavior is improper, and you must change it.”

Commitment. One shows commitment when one exhibits a steadfast dedication to a cause. In this context, we can habituate our commitment to stand up for equality for all, regardless of one’s race, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnic origin. Such a commitment might involve our dedication to improving feelings of inclusivity in our units.

Respect.² Finally, we can exercise the virtue of respect by recognizing that, as human beings, we all possess an inherent human worth, equal in power and weight to that of all others. One of the Enlightenment's foremost thinkers, Immanuel Kant, placed respect at the very top of moral thinking about the equality of humans. By virtue of their existence, Kant believed, all humans possess certain things that no one else can take from them (Hill, 2014).

By habituating these cherished naval virtues of honor, courage, commitment, and respect, and by utilizing the Mutual Obligations Approach, over the long term we intend to build bridges across social divides and help forge a more inclusive environment. The next component of the curriculum surrounds an objective review of the heated and contentious political perspectives on Diversity and Inclusion, which fulfills learning outcome 8. The Stockdale Center believes that members of our nation's officer corps benefit from understanding the logic behind the various viewpoints.

Culminating Project

In the culminating project, students break into small groups of 3–4 people and develop their own discussion-based lesson plan and execute it. This also becomes the chief assessable product for the curriculum. Throughout the program, students are encouraged to think about how they might use a vehicle around which to build a small group discussion among their company mates or team mates, similar to the vehicle of the Conversations in Conscientious Leadership video that preceded the group discussion earlier in the curriculum. We then discuss the importance of developing a lesson plan, which includes a set of goals or learning outcomes, and some open-ended discussion questions that will lead to a productive dialogue.

2 Naval leaders in early 2021 suggested that they would add "Respect" as the fourth core Navy core value, as explained in the "Task Force One Navy Final Report," February 2021, page 14. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/26/2002570959/-1/-1/1/TASK%20FORCE%20ONE%20NAVY%20FINAL%20REPORT.PDF>, cited 10 August 2021.

On the final day of the curriculum, we provide about 20 minutes per group for the students to present. We allow them 10 minutes for their vehicle — the short video clip or other such device. Then, they move into the discussion phase, to see if the team can exhibit good facilitation techniques and if they have prepared a worthy lesson plan. In almost all cases, the students want to perform well in front of their peers, and the discussions prove very robust. After they present, they are provided honest but constructive feedback.

Assessment

The Leading Across Cultures curriculum has an accompanying assessment plan that initially assesses one of the learning outcomes discussed earlier in the article: "Facilitate small group conversations related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion topics." The Stockdale Center leadership chose that outcome to assess first since leading small group discussions serves as the primary function of the campus's Dignity and Respect Officers. In succeeding years, the Stockdale Center will choose different learning outcomes to assess. Of particular interest is the ultimate goal of discerning whether or not the Leading Across Cultures curriculum has actually improved measures of inclusion among the student body.

In recent years several scholars have purported to have developed measurement instruments for inclusivity, both at the individual and group level (Ashikali, 2019; Jansen et al., 2014; Lennox et al., 2022; Wilson & Secker, 2015). These are currently being reviewed to discern what validated instruments and measures might be appropriate for future use in a military academy setting.

Conclusion

This case study detailed the evolution of the USNA's "Leading Across Cultures" curriculum initiative, from conception to execution. University officials initiated the program in an effort to develop in students an ability to build inclusive teams while leading across different

cultures. While the leaders of the Stockdale Center have embarked on modest efforts to assess student learning — namely to measure competencies connected with facilitating challenging conversations — the staff recognizes that it needs to develop additional tools to measure progress on achieving the other learning outcomes connected with the Leading Across Cultures initiative.

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