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Title: *Sustaining Students-of-Color: Collectivist versus Individualist Orientations in the Preparation Education Professionals.*

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Authors: Brenda H. Leake, Ph.D.
Donald O. Leake, Ph. D.

Address: The College of New Jersey
School of Education
PO Box 7718
Ewing, New Jersey 08628-0718

E-Mail: bleake@TCNJ.edu (Dr. Brenda H. Leake)
leake@TCNJ.edu (Dr. Donald O. Leake)

Phone: 1-609-771-2219 (Dr. Brenda H. Leake)
1-609-771-2229 (Dr. Donald O. Leake)

Fax: 1-609-637-5197

Sustaining Students-of-Color: Collectivist versus Individualist Orientations in the Preparation of Education Professionals.

Paper Abstract

In every culture there are implicitly and explicitly shared beliefs about the appropriate relationship of the individual to the group. These shared beliefs significantly impact perceptions of self and preferences for life goals. It is, therefore, logical to assume that a formal educational institution would intentionally reflect the beliefs of its culture. Unfortunately, the cultural compatibility between student cultural values and the value systems of school settings is often minimal.

Research (Triandis, 1989; Redding and Martyn-Johns, 1979) indicates that at least seventy-percent of the world's population operates from a collectivist or interdependent world-view. The people who comprise this seventy-percent are predominately non-white and non-western in their racial and ethnic heritages. In direct contrast to the cultural heritage of most students of color, educational institutions at all levels are primarily dominated by policies, practices, and beliefs that promote an individualistic or independent world-view. Traditional educational climates are too often defined by highly competitive goals and activities focused on individual achievement and a more-Darwinistic notion of *survival of the fittest*. Therefore, on a daily basis, students-of-color are required to acquiesce their cultural ways of knowing and being in order to achieve academic acceptance and success. Even as educators at all levels continue to express sincere concern about limited successes with students-of-color, the opportunities for more culturally-compatible, interdependent experiences in most formal school settings remain limited to sporadic cooperative learning activities, group projects, and variations of peer

tutoring. Although helpful, these piece-meal attempts to create a transitory sense of community and interdependence are insufficient vehicles to sustain long-term feelings of cultural-compatibility for students-of-color. Observations and lessons learned from the student-cohort design for graduate study at The College of New Jersey may offer useful insights to enhance the academic experiences and successes of students-of-color.

Traditionally, graduate programs in most US colleges and universities are designed to nurture and reward independent/individualistic effort and achievement. The majority of programs at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) follow this traditional approach. However, through the implementation of interdependent/collectivist student cohort program options in the educational administration offered at the New Jersey campus and in the teacher preparation and advanced degree graduate program offered by TCNJ in Johannesburg, South Africa, TCNJ has begun to realize the potential advantages of offering a somewhat less traditional approach. The similarities and differences inherent to such diverse program sites add to the richness of this preliminary report and its implications for subsequent research.

The TCNJ graduate school student cohort model is premised on the notion that some students may experience increased motivation and resilience when they are able to establish bonds of familiarity, identification, and support within a membership group. An additional premise of the TCNJ student cohort model proffers that establishing an interdependent community may prove to be especially significant for students of color who often feel marginalized in the graduate programs taught from a Euro-centric perspective by white professors with predominately white student enrollments.

When comparing the cohort option to the traditional option of graduate programs, preliminary findings indicate that there are significantly more students-of-color enrolled, retained, and graduated in the cohort options. Students-of-color comprise approximately 17% of the overall TCNJ student population, conversely students-of-color make-up approximately 50% of the students in the cohort-model graduate programs. Initial feedback on the cohort format to graduate studies suggest professors were able to concentrate their efforts on core concepts to emphasize a deeper rather than broader understanding, communication between students and with professors was enhanced, and students of color were less likely to feel marginalized by the graduate school experience.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: first, to briefly describe and discuss the graduate cohort programs at The College of New Jersey and second, to explore the educational implications of a cohort graduate program model for students of color.