

## **D.R.E.A.M Model: A Framework for Advancing the Ethics of care to Students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)**

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### **Abstract**

Ensuring all students have a sense of belonging is critical to retention and positive student engagement. There has been a shift toward academic customer service to increase enrollment and retention. The ethics of care model in student affairs fits well with specific models and strategies within the hospitality industry that can be applied to higher education, creating the opportunity for a new conceptual framework, the D.R.E.A.M model (Define, Recruit, Educate, Assess, and Motivate). It combines strategies from the hospitality industry and the nature of student affairs work. This model is poised to engage and retain students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority-serving institutions (MSIs).

*Keywords:* HBCU, MSI, customer service, college students, retention, enrollment, student affairs, diversity

### **Introduction**

Ensuring all students have a sense of belonging is critical to retention and positive student engagement. As students present more diverse needs, student affairs professionals must be equipped with innovative service-oriented skills to maximize the student experience. Many universities are shifting toward merging strategies from the hospitality industry and student affairs to encourage both creative and innovative ways to increase engagement and retention by providing the best service to all students. With the shift now toward academic customer service to increase enrollment and retention, these organizational cultures are changing.

A proposed new model, the D.R.E.A.M model (Define, Recruit, Educate, Assess, and Motivate), which combines strategies from the hospitality industry and the nature of student affairs work is poised to engage and retain students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority-serving institutions (MSIs). This conceptual model builds on pre-existing student affairs models for student engagement and retention. This paper discusses the ethics of care model in student affairs, specific models and strategies within the hospitality industry and their connection to higher education, and a new conceptual framework (D.R.E.A.M model) that embeds hospitality into student affairs practice. Lastly, this paper concludes with several implications for practice for HCBUs and MSIs.

### **Background of Student Affairs**

The publication of *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1937) provided the foundation of fully educating the student within student affairs. Student

development theories emerged to ensure that students are at the center of the work at institutions. Manning et al. (2014) discussed the following three types of student-centered innovative models: the ethics of care, student-driven, and student agency. These three models are innovative in their approach to keeping the student at the center to enhance overall student success. The ethics of care model focuses on student deficits, such as a lack of understanding how college works as happens with first-generation students, finances, academic issues, or hesitancy about asking for help. The student-driven and student agency models require students to be more sophisticated in knowing what they need and being able to ask for it. The student agency model places the student as a co-partner with student affairs personnel so that the student can fully engage with professors and university staff. The ethics of care model will be discussed as a foundation for developing the D.R.E.A.M model because it deals with students who need to become empowered in their academic life. This applies often to minority students who may feel marginalized or just ignored in their colleges and universities.

Though the ethics of care model recognizes that there may be deficits in students' abilities to navigate college life, it also understands that student affairs personnel must establish working relationships in which students feel that they are heard, that their needs are understood, and that they can work in partnership with not only their student affairs advisors but also their instructors and others in the college community. Keeling (2014) reminded higher education professionals that institutions are "structured communities of people" (p 141). Therefore, educators must understand the value of relationships between the institution (e.g., faculty, staff, etc.) and students to ensure a quality experience and education. Furthermore, Keeling (2014) stated that institutions can no longer commit to engagement and student success while dismissing the wholeness and being of a student. Developing relationships with students "recognizes connection, acknowledges interdependence and creates ethical requirements" (p. 143). Additionally, institutions can no longer commit to engagement and student success while dismissing the wholeness and being of a student. Developing relationships with students "recognizes connection, acknowledges interdependence and creates ethical requirements" (Keeling, 2014, p. 143). This is vital for student affairs personnel working with students.

Manning et al. (2014) stated that the ethics of care model is framed by care and relationship, which was influenced by several scholars (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Rendon, 1994; Schlossberg, 1989). Keeling (2014) stated that these scholars' work (Beck, 1992, Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2005; Tronto, 1994), when grouped together, revealed themes that defined the ethics of care. These themes include: paying attention, accepting responsibility to act on what is noticed, assuring capacity and competency, and responding (accepting the principle of differential vulnerability). These themes support Keeling's (2014) statement that, when viewed from a student success perspective of learning and development, "an institutional ethics of care supports and is essential to the achievement of that idea [student success]" (p. 144). An institution that understands and views students as whole beings responds with care in which students feel as though they matter.

Schlossberg's (1989) concept of marginality and mattering reinforced the idea that students become involved when they see evidence of them mattering versus being marginalized. There are numerous ways that one may feel marginalized and this feeling of marginality arises as an individual experiences some type of transition. Schlossberg (1989) also explained that

marginality can be permanent, such as that of race and being a way of life for a person. All in all, at some point in life, everyone is marginalized, based on their circumstances at the time. Schlossberg (1989) defined mattering as feeling that one matters to another and that mattering is a motive and determines behavior (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). The goal is to assist students who feel marginalized so that they feel as though they matter at our institutions.

Schlossberg's (1989) concept can be furthered implied in Rendon's (1994) validation theory, which focuses on culturally diverse students. Rendon's (1994) validation theory examined minority and nontraditional college students and the impact of validation on their success. The validation theory spoke to the issues experienced by low-income, first-generation students and those adult students who return to college after an identified time (Rendon Linares & Munoz, 2011). Rendon's (1994) validation theory is composed of six elements:

1. Responsibility for initiating contact with students on institutional agents (e.g., faculty advisors etc.);
2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning and have a sense of self-worth;
3. Validation is a prerequisite for student development;
4. Validation can occur in and out of class;
5. Validation should not be viewed as an end, but as a developmental process; and
6. Validation is most critical when administered early in the college experience.

The combination of theories and constructs put forth by Keeling (2014), Manning et al. (2014), Rendon (1994), and Schlossberg (1989) influenced ethics of care at institutions. This is the foundation of the newly developed D.R.E.A.M. model for professionals at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and minority-serving institutions (MSIs).

### **Background of the Hospitality Industry**

The hospitality industry is a service-based field that requires strong interpersonal and management skills. Professionals in this field are expected to be effective problem solvers, who understand their customers. The hospitality industry is a culture of service, which involves basic principles of service. One foundational tenet is that the more intimately an organization is involved with a guest, the more their employees need to provide quality care (Montgomery, 2016; Hotel Tech Report, 2020; Zeithaml, 2000). This goes beyond providing whatever services the establishment is delivering (food and drink, lodging, spa services, tourism) to also creating the conditions through which the guest enjoys what is provided. This creates guest loyalty that results in repeat business and word-of-mouth referrals that ensure continued business success (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Zeithaml, 2000). Superior service within this growing industry inevitably enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty, thereby securing profitability within each organization (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Haghghi et al., 2014; Zeithaml, 2000). Having well-trained and emotionally mature workers will most often ensure superior service (Scott-Halsell et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2015). Both organizational loyalty and remarkable service are important traits to cultivate in higher education.

Remarkable service is simple because it puts the guest's needs first and offers them an investment in the institution. There are nine hallmarks of remarkable service. Remarkable service

is welcoming, friendly, and courteous; knowledgeable; efficient and timely; flexible; efficient; communicates effectively; instills trust, exceeds expectations, and extends beyond the goodbye (Culinary Institute of America, 2009).

These qualities may seem to be simplistic or just good manners, but they can have a deep effect on how guests view and institution (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Zeithaml, 2000). A welcoming, friendly atmosphere establishes an emotional connection to the institution and has been found to be a factor in choosing a particular institution and returning to it. Being knowledgeable is important so that a guest feels confident in the institution being able to answer his or her questions about services and amenities. Efficiency and timeliness show that a guest is valued and that services will be delivered on time. Flexibility shows that an institution can handle emergencies or unexpected occurrences, as well as cultural accommodations. Consistency inspires trust, which is also a quality of remarkable service. This means that a guest knows that the quality of service will always be the same or higher than their previous visit. A guest will trust and institution to deliver what it says it will. Effective communication also inspires trust. Though consistency of service is essential, making sure the institution strives to constantly improve service is the hallmark of a thriving business. Going just a little above and beyond will not only ensure recognition but also will ensure repeat business. Finally, hospitality services are varied and require a personal touch, which can endure far beyond the final goodbye to the institution. These kinds of people skills help the hospitality industry thrive and grow. It is this mindset that distinguishes hospitality from business because its employees understand the foundation of hospitality that says, *be our guest*, and they really mean it (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Culinary Institute of America, 2009; Zeithaml, 2000).

### **Models in Hospitality**

There are a variety of models and theories that support the importance of the service of the hospitality industry in applications to institutions of higher education (Boyd, 2012; Ewers, 2010; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Sines & Duckworth, 1994). Many of the customer service hospitality models rely on dealing with problem solving and conflict prevention or resolution and have merit when applied to academia. There are three basic methods or models that are widely used. They are the HEAT Method (Espejon, 2012; Heaslip, 2015; Ramsey, 2020), the BLAST Method (Barneto, 2019; Steinman, 2013), and the L.E.A.R.N Model (Beddow, 2019; Davidow, 2011). The steps in each may seem simplistic but they are foundational for delivering quality customer service. Each of these methods could be applied to institutions of higher learning, especially when dealing with conflicts.

#### **The Heat Method**

According to Espejon (2012), Heaslip (2015), and Ramsey (2020). the HEAT Method has four, basic, but important, actions: Hear, Empathize, Apologize, and Take Action.

#### ***Hear***

This means someone who deals with guests or students really needs to have exceptional listening skills to be able to get to the heart of an issue. Sometimes it is just important to let the person with the problem vent their emotions about it while the person listening searches out for what is really the issue (Espejon, 2012; Heaslip, 2015; Ramsey, 2020).

***Empathize***

This skill requires the person listening to put themselves in a student's shoes to try to feel what the student is feeling about the situation. Often, this means that the listener responds by naming the feelings the student is demonstrating—frustration, anger, etc. (Espejon, 2012; Heaslip, 2015; Ramsey, 2020).

***Apologize***

This is usually easier done in hospitality situations because employees in the hospitality industry are trained to make a guest feel that they were heard, and the situation warranted his or her reactions. The listener does not make excuses or state they were not responsible, but apologize when needed (Espejon, 2012; Heaslip, 2015; Ramsey, 2020).

***Take Action***

Having a solution or even saying that the situation will be investigated is essential to assure to the guest (student) that their concerns were duly noted (Espejon, 2012; Heaslip, 2015; Ramsey, 2020).

**The BLAST Method**

The BLAST Method is similar to the HEAT Method. According to Steinman (2013) and Barneto (2019), its actions are Believe, Listen, Apologize, Satisfy, and Thank. This method has also been used in medical practices, including large hospitals. Listen, Apologize, Satisfy are identical to Hear, Apologize, and Take Action from the HEAT Method. Believe replaces Empathize by adding the crucial element of actually taking someone's issues seriously—believing them. This creates trust and establishes engagement with the guest, student, or patient. The last step, Thank, is as important as the initial engagement of believing someone's concerns are real. By thanking the person, the listener legitimizes the concerns and creates a bond with the individual who brought up the issue (Steinman, 2013). Thanking a displeased individual for bringing the issue to a manager's attention means that the person cares about the institution and does not just walk away unhappy. That person is giving the institution an opportunity to make it right (Barneto, 2019).

**The L.E.A.R.N Model.**

Like the two models above, The L.E.A.R.N Model concentrates on similar areas: Listen, Empathize, Apologize, and React (i.e., Take Action, Satisfy). There are, however, differences in the N part of this method. One version (Davidow, 2011) has Now, which means that action should be taken to investigate and resolve the guest or student's concerns immediately. Another version has Nurture (Beddow, 2019). This means that the listener checks back with the person who made the complaint and sees how they are satisfied his or her concerns were dealt with.

**Organizational Culture of Hospitality at Colleges and Universities**

The hospitality methods listed above reflect some of the changes that are happening in institutional and organizational settings. Identifying the organizational environment or culture of an institution is important, especially if there is something not working within that organization. Quinn and Cameron's (2011) Cultural Typology identifies four unique environments or cultures

that are typically present within organizations. They are the Clan Culture, the Hierarchy Culture, the Market Culture, and the Adhocracy Culture. The Clan Culture is a friendly, often creative environment, where participants work together as a team to produce a product or service, and leaders are more often mentors and parental figures. The Hierarchy Culture is highly structured with strict procedural adherence. Leaders are good organizers and managers, emphasizing the success of the organization. The Market Culture is highly competitive and goal-oriented, with leaders who are driven to get the organizations members to produce. Winning or succeeding binds the organization together. The Adhocracy Culture is creative and often takes risks, with leaders who are viewed as cutting-edge innovators. Members are encouraged to show initiative and to constantly be creating new products or services (Quinn & Cameron, 2011).

The Hierarchy Culture has been used to describe businesses and colleges and universities for decades (Quinn & Cameron, 2011). The Clan Culture has been a hallmark of scientists and creative organizations, such as in art and entertainment industries. The Market Culture and sometimes the Adhocracy Culture have been descriptors of sales, manufacturing, and other product-based enterprises. Some organizations are a mixture of some or all of these cultures, with specific departments stressing one culture more than another (Quinn & Cameron, 2011).

### **Background of Service and Student Affairs in Higher Education**

In recent years, American colleges and universities have striven to integrate the service culture into student affairs practice that would provide a unique opportunity for institutions to energize staff to engage new and existing students in innovative ways to enrich best practices in student affairs to increase retention. These collaborations do not sacrifice the high academic standards of an institution that have become the foundation for a university or college's reputation (Zackel, 2016). They enhance the delivery of services and create a more positive atmosphere that can nurture current students and attract future ones. Boyd (2012) suggests that increased enrollment of students in proprietary or for-profit colleges is an indication that students, like any savvy consumer, actually search for schools that meet their customer service expectations. Bejou (2008) stated that it was just good business to support current students than it is to have a constant turnover and have to recruit new ones. Thinking of students as buyers with needs and wants rather than as scholars who are supposed to jump through academic hoops whose failures are their fault is a new concept that requires customer relations management or making sure the institution of higher education oversees student needs and helps them achieve their goals with proper support.

Students are at the heart of college choice and student retention models. This is prominent in English and Umbach's (2016) modification of Perna's (2000) college choice theory. They identified habitus (values, family), cultural capital (student demographics, environment, resources), social capital (influence of institution), and policy (societal changes and institutional policies) as important. Habitus and cultural capital have been found to have more influence, not only in choice but may also affect retention. Ewers (2010) stressed that how students are treated on an initial campus visit or in an interview makes a deep impression on them, perhaps more than whatever the university's website said or their own research about course offerings in their prospective majors. Strayhorn (2008) stressed the effect that positive college engagement clearly affected learning outcomes and social needs. The environment and resources of an institution

(habitus), therefore, are major factors. The hospitality service area of creating a welcoming, friendly, and courteous atmosphere is essential to engage students.

Nevertheless, there are conflicting opinions, such as those of Demetriou (2008), Naidoo & Jamieson (2005), and Vail (2000), who insist that universities should not engage in these activities, seeing customer service as somehow hindering or catering to students. To be clear, though, customer service for institutions of higher education does not mean that the student is always right, like the customer has been touted to be in business (Scott, 1999). Specifically, Demetriou (2008) feared that customer service models would commodify education as a product and not an experience (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Vail (2000) also posited that colleges and universities were not selling a product, but a service and that student satisfaction was totally dependent on their hard work and dedication. This was echoed by Demetriou (2008) who insisted, “In fact, often the greatest learning experiences for students come from situations in which they experience considerable dissatisfaction” (para. 4). Further, Vail (2000) stated that students and educators, and even the team environment of learning in groups, is ever changing and that it cannot be quantified in specific product terms. He emphasized the rigorous qualifying process to enter college is not present in business marketing strategies needed to buy a product.

Arguments such as these indicate a lack of understanding of the hospitality industry and its model. Hospitality is more than merely delivering a service. Montgomery (2016) calls it a sincere interaction with customers. Boyd (2012) suggested a middle ground where student needs could be met while allowing them to learn from their mistakes. This way, students could benefit by receiving increased support and understanding (i.e., good customer service).

### **The Significance of the D.R.E.A.M. Model**

The rationale of this new conceptual D.R.E.A.M. model is threefold: (1) to explore and advance the current student-centered model – ethics of care (2) to integrate a hospitality-based approach in student affairs practice, and (3) to provide a framework for providing exceptional service.

### **The D.R.E.A.M Model and Implications for Practice**

This conceptual framework is grounded in a synthesis of Manning’s (2007) ethics of care model and its theoretical foundation. The D.R.E.A.M model combines strategies from the hospitality industry with the nature of student affairs work related to engaging and retaining students. As students present more diverse needs, student affairs professionals must be equipped with innovative service-oriented skills to maximize the student experience. The collaboration of strategies between the hospitality industry and student affairs encourages both creative and innovative ways to increase engagement and retention by providing the best service to all students, while advancing the ethics of care.

The D.R.E.A.M model was developed to provide a unique approach to working with a diverse student population with increasingly varying needs at historically Black colleges and universities and minority serving institutions, where students may feel marginalized. This model may also be beneficial at other institutional types with marginalized populations. The D.R.E.A.M model can

support students so that they feel that they matter (Schlossberg, 1989) and that they have an active voice in their educational choices (Bejou, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008).

The D.R.E.A.M model, a student affairs hospitality model, encourages a service culture where employees are committed to customer service and delivering a memorable experience for each person they serve. This section outlines the purpose of the D.R.E.A.M model and its five components: Define, Recruit, Educate, Assess, and Motivate.

Step 1: *Define* standards and expectations that ensure a culture of service within the institution, division, and department.

Step 2: *Recruit* the right staff to create a service-oriented environment.

Step 3: *Educate* staff through ongoing training development that is aligned with the student population served.

Step 4: *Assess* practices for continuous improvement and data-driven decision-making that is student-centered.

Step 5: *Motivate* staff to achieve exemplary service through recognition and rewards.

Step one brings attention to the culture and climate of the institution as it relates to the student support services offered to students. It is critical for staff members to *define* the standards to which they will uphold in providing the best service to their standards. A great start to define these standards would be to align practices with the institution's mission and strategic plan. Furthermore, departments must be aware of their core functions and those of other units to ensure there is a direct opportunity to collaborate when needed and that appropriate information and services are provided.

Next, step two ensures that the appropriate people are in place to serve students. *Recruiting* the right people requires an understanding of departmental standards and expectations to ensure that staff have the necessary skills to provide good customer service. For example, search committees may be intentional in how they ask questions to determine if the candidate is able to provide the best service to students who are often marginalized. It is also important to note that people leave and/or return to institutions because of the people the institution employs. Providing behavioral questions that include real-life scenarios may be beneficial in the recruitment and hiring stages.

Once standards and expectations have been defined and the right people are positioned, there must be an ongoing commitment to *educate* staff in step three. As different generations of students continue to occupy institutions of higher learning, staff must be equipped with the latest trends and practices to ensure student needs are met. The use of professional development opportunities allows staff to stay abreast of new information regarding student engagement and support services, which ultimately align with a sense of belonging, retention, persistence, and graduation.

Step four calls for staff to *assess* what they are doing to ensure student needs are met and services are delivered and provided in the best manner. Data is key to continuous improvement of what we deem best practices. Decision-making should be directly aligned to assessing performance and process outcomes within student support service areas. Lastly, step five states that staff should be *motivated* through recognition of what they already do to contribute positively to the student experience. Extrinsic motivation will provide staff with the support and

appreciation to continue their efforts in ensuring a well-rounded experience of great service to all students.

### **D.R.E.A.M. for HBCUs and MSIs**

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were established after the Civil War in 1863 after a White philanthropic organization called the American Baptist Home Mission Society helped establish schools for Blacks (Muhammad et al., 2019). This was an attempt to rectify the educational disparities freed slaves experienced by establishing Black colleges in Southern states to train Black teachers. Though well-intended, these schools were restrictive, using what were called freedmen's texts that not only were racist but had poor content (Muhammad et al., 2019). Despite being called colleges, they taught remedial elementary and secondary subjects to students who had no previous education (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). The Second Morrill Act of 1890 established 16 land-grant colleges for Blacks in Southern and bordering states. *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 established secondary "separate but equal" schools that prepared Black students for college (U.S. Department of Education, 1991).

Over the years, HBCUs have opened their doors to diverse populations. Not only are Black students being served but also Asian, Hispanic, American Indian, and Pacific-Islander students, as well as a small percentage of White students (Schexnider, 2017). Their faculty and staff, like their student bodies, are also as diverse (Schexnider, 2017). Other institutions of higher learning are seeking to best serve minority or underrepresented students, but not to the numbers that HBCUs have done.

The original number of HBCUs has dwindled over the decades due to lack of funding, drops in enrollment, and loss of accreditation (Andrus, 2015; Schexnider, 2017). Today, while many HBCUs are thriving, some are facing significant reduction in enrollment and persistence to graduation. Bunn (2020) states that 101 HBCUs had their lowest enrollments ever in 2018-19 (pre-pandemic) and that many institutions have 50% retention rates. This is devastating to low-income, first-generation students.

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2014) sought reasons for these declines and offered suggestions. The first was to bolster recruitment by emphasizing the value of education at HBCUs, places where students who feel marginalized can begin to feel validated. Schexnider (2017) urged HBCUs to seek a new business model that would install innovative practices. Andrus (2015) identified one clear remedy. "Customer service is the key to long-term sustainability of colleges and universities whether HBCUs or PWIs. Customer service is the lifeblood of all colleges and universities" (Andrus, 2015, p. 136). Further, he insisted that customer service should begin at recruitment and continue through the student's entire academic career (Andrus, 2015). Zackal (2016) sees customer service as vital to a thriving student population. "Front-line higher education professionals, such as those in student affairs or enrollment services, must serve their customers like those in other industries" (Zackal, 2016, para. 2).

## Implications and Conclusions

The D.R.E.A.M. model has significant implications for practitioners at historically Black colleges and universities, as well as minority serving institutions. The concept of the D.R.E.A.M. is to advance the ethics of care (Manning, 2007), a student-centered model with hospitality strategies that engage students through care and service at HBCUs and MSIs. A model that ensures that a quality education is a *dream come true*. The D.R.E.A.M. model was developed to provide a unique approach to working with diverse student populations who demonstrate changing needs. This model is ideal for students who may feel marginalized in a variety of institutional settings. It may be especially relevant to minority serving institutions and historically Black colleges and universities. As new students enroll in American colleges and universities, educators want to ensure that they are engaged and retained. Students who feel that they have an active voice in every aspect of their college experience and who feel that they are heard and that they matter, are better prepared to remain in school and graduate. Their academic experience becomes a positive one and the institution gains customer (student) loyalty. This positivity is then passed on to friends and relatives who are searching for an academic home.

Educators also understand that students who are engaged, retained, and who graduate may provide future alumni support to the university in different aspects, monetarily and personally, such as engaging in mentoring or orientation programs for pipeline or new students. This support will continue to provide different services to current students. Additionally, this model demonstrates another viewpoint of institutional effectiveness, which is critical for an institution's accountability and sustainability.

The argument for the use of customer service in academic settings is a strong one. The hybrid of the customer service of the hospitality industry and current student affairs programs found in the innovative D.R.E.A.M. model is viable and suitable for application at any university or college. Its unique customer/student focus makes it suitable to HBCUs and MSIs that serve minority students who may feel ignored, marginalized, or who are generally underserved. The D.R.E.A.M. model is a unique delivery of customer service that puts the students' needs first and offers them tools to ask for help and to become more independent. Most importantly, the D.R.E.A.M. method values students and provides the means to actively listen and attend to their needs. Because of these characteristics, the D.R.E.A.M. model adds to the current body of literature concerning student affairs schemes that are changing to meet the needs of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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