

Racial diversity increases student leadership skills, especially for white students

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According to research from Jasmine D. Collins of the University of Illinois, greater racial diversity in student leadership programs leads to more effective leaders, especially for white students. Credit: Lauren D. Quinn, University of Illinois

Universities prepare students to enter the professional workforce, but

they also develop the next generation of leaders to head up organizations and drive social change. But, as the United States and its college campuses become more racially diverse, are students being trained to lead within diverse contexts? And how does diversity impact leadership development for both white and non-white students? A new study from the University of Illinois aims to find out.

"We found that greater racial diversity in student leadership programs led to a measurable increase in lasting leadership capacity," says Jasmine D. Collins, assistant professor in the Agricultural Education Program and Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I.

Collins and co-author David Rosch partnered with LeaderShape Institute, a six-day immersive leadership development program for college students, to collect demographic data and survey participants before, immediately after completing the program, and three to four months later. Thousands of students from across the country participated in the study by taking part in 50 program sessions between 2013 and 2015.

The researchers asked students to rate their own leadership capacity in the surveys, and then analyzed their answers according to the level of racial diversity in their program session. Leadership capacity was assessed through eight metrics measuring leadership confidence, [motivation](#), and advocacy for social issues—a focus of the LeaderShape curriculum.

"First, we wanted to know how diverse those sessions were," Collins says. "Were they primarily racially homogeneous or did we see some diversity there? And are those diverse environments, those cross-racial interactions, helping to make them better leaders?"

Greater diversity had a lasting impact on student leadership capacity for

three metrics related to a student's motivation to lead. Leadership motivation can be broken down in different ways: an innate attraction to leadership positions when working in groups, a willingness to lead without calculating "what's in it for me," and a feeling of responsibility to others. In the study, more diversity in the session led to higher scores for all three of these.

Those results were true for all participants; that is, regardless of the race of the survey respondent, everyone had higher leadership motivation scores if their leadership program was more diverse. Participating in a high-diversity session had a greater lasting effect on [white students'](#) social-normative motivation to lead—that feeling of wanting to lead out of a responsibility to others—than for non-white students. That is, white students seemed to be more affected by the degree of [racial diversity](#) in a session, on this measure in particular, than non-white students.

To really explain this result, Collins says it would be useful to conduct interviews or observe students during the leadership programs. However, another one of her recent studies—also looking at LeaderShape participants—might offer some clues.

"In that study, black male participants were already coming into the program pretty high on the social-normative motivation to lead measure. That's consistent with research that says students of color join organizations because they see problems that are affecting their communities and have this sense of responsibility to use their education and skills to benefit their community."

She says white students might have shown greater gains in leadership motivation because, for many of them, the experience of interacting with a more diverse population may be new. They may stand to benefit more because they may be starting off in a different place than their non-white peers with regard to those interactions.

But, she emphasizes, the benefit of diversity on long-lasting leadership capacity applied to everyone in the study.

"In the literature, we see that students who engage in cross-racial interactions have greater openness to [diversity](#), greater cognitive development throughout their coursework, are more civically engaged, and are more socially aware," Collins says.

Collins recommends that organizers of [student leadership](#) programs should be very intentional about their recruitment processes to ensure a broader range of people are included.

"Especially on predominantly white campuses, it would be important for recruiters to go to where the students of color may gravitate, such as their Greek organizations or cultural centers," she says.

More information: Jasmin Collins et al, Longitudinal Leadership Capacity Growth among Participants of a Leadership Immersion Program: How Much Does Structural Diversity Matter?, *Journal of Leadership Education* (2018). [DOI: 10.12806/V17/I3/R10](https://doi.org/10.12806/V17/I3/R10)

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