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# Reshaping What Emerges: Empowering Student Employees to be Authentic

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Reshaping What Emerges: Empowering Student Employees to be Authentic

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of my study was to understand who my students are authentically and discover what keeps them from being authentic within the workplace. I focused on culturally minoritized students in the context of professional expectations and intersecting identities. The research questions that guided my study are: How do I help students be authentic in their role as culturally minoritized employees at a multicultural center? What does authenticity look like for the students I work with, and where do they find it most difficult to express their most authentic selves within the United Front Multicultural Center? What interventions and/or practices best support the students and how can our center institutionalize those practices? Interviews, focus groups, surveys, journals entries, and reflections were used to interact with participants of the study. Findings suggest students struggle with bringing pieces of themselves to their role as a student employee due to a number of factors. These factors include the pressures from their peers, the lack of connection to and with some professional staff members, and the institutional culture that centers certain identities and schools of thought while actively marginalizing those of the participants. In partnership with the participants' recommendations for a restorative justice circle, safe space to dialogue, opportunities to connect with team members in meaningful ways, and climate surveys for the student employees in the division of student affairs were created and data informed.

## Introduction

Throughout life I have always been someone to follow my own path, regardless of the repercussions and backlash I often faced by authority figures and peers who did not understand me. This has been something that I have particularly and consciously worked towards in the past five years as a student as well as working in higher education institutions. In a world where much of life is out of our immediate control, I strive to find a way to be in control of the way I interact with others. Often my actions and ways of being have been counter to societal and institutional expectations that I, like all people, have been taught from the time I was assigned gender in the prenatal form, and even reinforced in many ways through orientations to the institutions of academia and the higher education field. Because of these experiences in educational systems, along with familial and ancestral history, many of my values are rooted in what empowers me to press through each day.

My core values are authenticity, resistance, social justice, and love. I am a firm believer in my ability to be authentic or stay true to myself in all spaces I navigate, without compromising who I am and my realities of this world. Social justice and resisting go hand in hand for me, because of my belief that one needs to resist laws and social expectations in order to create spaces within predominantly white universities (and nation) that places equal value on all human beings regardless of their cultural and personal identities. Lastly, love is a huge value for me. In my personal life, love is what ties me to my peers and family, and allows me to connect at a deep level with those I know in a kinship capacity. Love is present in my work because I am driven to help others and use myself as a vehicle for change out of the love I have

for the students with whom I work. I also experience love as God moving through mankind, and want to serve as an extension of that love.

In my previous role as a supervisor to student interns and a Graduate Assistant under the Associate Director of the United Front Multicultural Center (UFMC), I felt those values carried over well and were the driving forces that landed me on my path to work on authenticity for undergraduate students. Through my first semester at the University of San Diego (USD), I found myself again in a position where I was challenged by other people's perceptions and expectations of how I should behave and interact with others, both as a paraprofessional and as a student.

These challenges were mostly focused on how much space I take up in a room at any given time as well as the vernacular I choose to use in conversation with different individuals. In my professional role I could see how my own strife was affecting the students I worked with, as well as how their own personal battles related to behavioral expectations seemed to run parallel to mine. There were times where the students motivated me to remain true to myself, by not trading in my left-of-American Standard English and refusing to minimize myself to make others comfortable. These moments made me feel like they were watching me to see if it was possible to operate as a professional outside of the unspoken guidelines that have been created in American culture and reinforced by colleagues at USD.

My hopes for this research are to help my students gain a deeper sense of self, and feel empowered to bring their full selves to the spaces they occupy, including the workplace. In my experience, being a young professional can be draining and confusing at times, because there is not only an expectation of ability and ethics when it comes to tasks on a job, but there are also

organizational norms and expectations that are created around behavior. As we look at the ever-changing landscape of this country, the majority who created these rules is growing smaller, while those left on the margins of those foundational decisions are growing stronger. My hope was that the students and I would be able to examine the truths of ourselves as the future leaders of tomorrow, and to begin to think critically about the life we imagine living, and live it.

The purpose of my study was to understand who my students truly are and discover what motivates and encourages them to be authentic within the workplace. For the purpose of my research, authenticity will refer to students' ability to connect to one's true self through daily activities and interactions as defined by Wenzel & Lucas-Thompson (2012). This definition was created when specifically thinking about traditional age college students, as they explore emerging adulthood and come into themselves. Each individual's true self has been defined by the students throughout the action research process, and used to gauge their own growth and attempt at being authentic at the United Front Multicultural Center.

The research questions that guided my study are: How do I help students be authentic in their role as culturally minoritized employees at a multicultural center? What does authenticity look like for the students I work with, and where do they find it easiest and most difficult to express their most authentic selves within the UFMC? What interventions and/or practices best support students and how can they be institutionalized at the center?

## **Background**

### **Race in America**

America has a problem with understanding the complexity of races that expand beyond the white race, which is evident from the country's inception. Due to the magnitude and complexity of the various race relations intertwined in the fabric of this country, I will not outline the nuances of all races. I believe that anti-blackness is the root of all race issues in America, and that if our country were to shift the way it views black people and black culture, that all other races and ethnicities would reap great benefit as well. Racism was birthed through colorism or anti-blackness which has existed globally for years. The idea that the fair skin is the most desirable and praised can be found in most cultures and contexts predating colonialism in the United States. In fact, this was the thinking from Europeans who encountered Africans in the 1600s and decided they were less than human due to their pigmentation, not their racial identity.

With that in mind, I have focused on analyzing pieces of the black, American experience when thinking societally about the background that informs my study and the experience of people of color in all contexts. I felt it was important to truly understand the value (or lack thereof) that is placed on Black lives and Black culture. I also feel it is important to highlight the deep-rootedness of race within the context of America. Omi and Winant (1994) assert "...in the United States, race is a master category—a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States" (p. 106). I believe this to be true, and that we can never truly be a post-racial society, as it is so ingrained in every foundation of our society.

I began my research without even knowing my topic, when I came across the documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* (DuVernay, 2016), and decided to finish reading the book, *Sister Citizen*

(Harris-Perry, 2011) during winter break of 2016. In watching the documentary one of the biggest things that struck me was how the narrative of harmful and dangerous Black people was handcrafted as a means to keep people like me from being able to reach the heights of success and happiness that White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) at the time (and arguably now) are able to reach. This structure created based on skin color and fear of the unknown post-slavery. DuVernay (2016) cites D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) as the mainstream blockbuster that painted and burned into the minds of White people at the time, Black men as barbaric, cannibalistic, and rapists. There was also a counter image to that, which were White heroic martyrs of the south and poised White champions of the north. The messages showed in every movie theater across the country and even at a screening in the White House, gave reason for non-Blacks to see Black people solely in a negative light, and continue to devalue them as human.

Similarly, *Sister Citizen* speaks to the ways in which society has pigeon holed Black women into three distinct roles, the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel, as a means to hinder their progression and limit their ways of being multidimensional humans (Harris-Perry, 2011). She refers to these roles as the "crooked room" in which Black women are placed by society (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 28). The Mammy serves as an asexual unattractive care-taker for others, including white families. This can be seen as a mainstream trope when Hattie McDaniel was the first Black person to be awarded an Oscar as a slave mammy, with no black actress to grace the Oscar's stage as a winner for 62 years to follow. The Jezebel, the counter to the Mammy, refers to the promiscuity that White society spread in order to justify the raping and impregnating of slaves as a means to turn the blame of those encounters on the victims rather

than the perpetrators. This stereotype has been consistent through white society's policing of black women's clothing, the narrative that black women are the only ones unwed to their children's fathers, and are using the government-funded system to get by (Federici, 2004 & Harris-Perry, 2011).

The Sapphire, prevalent in the modern age, is more commonly referred to as the angry black woman. The Sapphire is not allowed to be mad, angry, or upset like all other humans can be, but instead is donned as irrational, erratic, and ghetto. This trope is touched on in Solange Knowles' song *Mad*, from her critically acclaimed album *A Seat at the Table*. "I ran into this girl, I said I'm tired of explaining. Man, this [stuff] is draining. I'm not really allowed to be mad" (Carter & Knowles, 2016). The Sapphire can be seen with Black women on any reality TV show you turn on, as well as on social media and news sites in reference to the figure heads of Black women, including former First Lady, Michelle Obama.

In 1985, a young Michelle Robinson had written a senior research project for the Princeton sociology department in which she explored the social and personal difficulties many African American students experienced at the university...she wrote..."I have found that at Princeton, no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my white professors and classmates try to be towards me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don't belong...it often seems as if, to them, I will always be black first and student second" ...It resonates with the struggle we have seen as representative for black women throughout American history. Yet when this paper was made public [during Barack Obama's 2008 campaign trail]...few questioned the veracity of her

claims; instead, her complaint alone was enough to label her as angry. (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 274-275)

This is also the most common trope I have seen black women forced into in the workplace and within the classroom in higher education settings. In my experience, any emotion that is not happy or content, is denounced and taken as an illegitimate emotion by non-black colleagues and professors.

### **Relation to Higher Education**

Over the years, messages in mainstream media and film have gotten less overt, however the same undertones can be found through the decades to present day; the same is true for the higher education field (Berry & Candis, 2013; Ceja, Solórzano, Smith & Yosso, 2009; Cordova, 2013; Ingram 2015). Understanding this is crucial to understanding the implications that certain interactions have on students. It is also important to note that a person who is consistently fed negative images of a certain group of people will adopt those biases unconsciously (DuVernay, 2016). Those biases will present themselves in different ways, often times affecting those with whom they have interactions.

One way that we see these unconscious biases is through microaggressions.

Microaggressions were defined by LaPorcha Ingram (2015) and Janice McCabe (2009) as subtle acts of intolerance. Ingram (2015) also paints a picture comparing blatant acts of intolerance as stabs whereas a microaggression would be more comparable to a paper cut. Over time those paper cuts add up and cause similar, if not, worse damage to one's being. McCabe (2009) asserted "microaggressions are powerful because, despite being invisible to the perpetrator, they exact a toll on the recipient's psyche" (p. 135). It is important to note, these students

whose minds should be focused on their academics, take on additional stress through the microaggressions experienced on their campus (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016). Because of this, I have decided to focus on the small acts of intolerance rather than seeking to find blatant marginalizing acts against the students with whom I work.

There have been numerous accounts for how America negatively shaped the narrative of black people. I have found how that shaping has impacted all areas of our nation, including higher education. I have read the different accounts for how those crooked rooms that have been cultivated, create a hurdle for Black, thus brown, students to cross before they are even able to be seen as themselves. I am left wondering, what is the student affairs role in the shaping of Black students and how do student affairs professionals help to make that hurdle lessened? What do the students need to better experience their life in college, and beyond?

As a person navigating the emerging adulthood phase in life, I understand how much critical growth and learning happens in the 10-12 years of life between adolescence and true adulthood. That learning depends in the individual's ability to be a self-author and to discover one's true, authentic self. Microaggressions challenge minorities in a number of ways such as being an alien in own land, ascriptions of intelligence, color blindness, denial of individual racism, myth of meritocracy, pathologizing cultural views and communications styles, treatment as a second class citizen, and environmental microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007). All of which can make someone want to adjust or hide parts of them to avoid these potential impacts.

Much of the work for this study falls on the shoulders of the administrators as a means to create more inclusive and aware spaces that will make students more comfortable and

willing to be themselves. For students, there is work to be done on self-authorship as a means to help students see their life is within their control, despite the outside forces that may tell them otherwise. Robert Keagan (1994) coined the term self-authorship and describes it as one's ability to create their own definitions of the world through critical thinking and questioning. Madyun, McGee, Milner, and Williams (2013), describe what it means to become a self-author this way:

Becoming a self-author means an individual is becoming more authentic, is learning to speak and behave in a manner that is consistent with their character. Learning to behave in accordance with one's character regardless of context increases the possibility of developing comfortable relationships with others and the probability of maintaining them. (p. 70).

In order to become a self-author and to exist from a place of certainty in self, one must first understand who they are authentically. My hope for the study was to be able to challenge the UFMC to meet the students where they are in their development and identity, and challenge the students along the road to feeling the most secure with their whole self.

### **Context**

The organizational setting for my research is the United Front Multicultural Center at the University of San Diego. The mission of the UFMC includes: fostering an environment where student leaders feel empowered to become change agents for social justice and build relationships with faculty, staff, students, and community members to develop a foundation that honors and values diversity. I was one of three Graduate Assistants working in the office, through most of my time completing the study. Since then, the university underwent a

reorganization that separated myself as well as my direct supervisor from the center, making the completion of my study more challenging.

When I worked there, I served as a supervisor for two students within the center. I had been able to work alongside these students to delve into meaningful discussions and create positive relationships where trust was quickly built and an open and candid relationships had been formed. I am fortunate to have such relationships extend beyond my direct supervisees, to more than half of the interns who are on staff. In many of our conversations there were explicit talks of balancing one or multiple aspects of themselves with the job and the frictions that have risen out of that. Students have expressed their discontent with certain expectations that the professional staff had of them as it relates to the behaviors they exhibit or want to exhibit that they feel are unwelcome. They also have talked to me about subliminal messaging they have received related to how they bring themselves to work, some fitting the eight categories of the impacts of microaggressions listed in the previous section.

I have been able to connect with the students in the center in part because of my shared feelings and willingness to be transparent about receiving similar messages even as a Graduate Assistant. Seeing the students grapple with the question of being authentic, or true to themselves, while also processing that for myself since being a part of the USD community, has made me very interested in this topic. Aside from the shared work struggles of the students, all of the student interns who work eight or more hours at the center also have at least one of the following culturally minoritized identities—race/ethnicity, familial educational history, and socioeconomic status. As a Black, second generation college student from a single parent household, I have connected deeply with the students and their stories.

Some of the challenges of my study have included finding data that I am discouraged from writing about in my paper as a means to keep harmony. With work that is sensitive and personal, it brings the possibility of sensitive reactions that can impact the feelings of others who work at the center. As an outsider now, it can come across even harsher because of the new-found positioning I found myself in. Before completing my study, I also feared finding that I alone do not have enough power to truly empower my students to be authentic, but rather end up finding ways to help my students cope with their limitations. I believed the power of formal authority, if not aligned with the outcomes of the research, could limit the institutionalization of any efforts that assist in furthering the acceptance of the diversity of the student staff. Unfortunately, much of those fears and limitations came to fruition with broken promises and halted actions, however, there seems to be some subtle shifts that happened for the better as well.

As I am writing this paper, I am particularly worried by the idea that the staff's feelings about data derived could take precedence over revealing the true findings. This again ties into my question of authenticity within a job in higher education, and how I am still learning and practicing right alongside the students with whom I worked. I engaged others through different formal interventions/cycles. All of the people included in the study were staff at the UFMC. A part of my cycles included all-team meetings due to my job responsibilities, and the rest were more focused on the individuals who agreed to dig deeper into the work.

### **Needs of Assessment**

I established the need was present for this research within the UFMC through conversations with students who found themselves misunderstood or not accepted for who

they felt they were within the space. There had been conversations around what they felt was a preferred working style in the center and how their own style was not in alignment with that. I worked directly under the Associate Director of the center at the time, who allowed me to access preexisting data from staff meetings and trainings. He also supported my research topic and understood why there was a need to further delve into the student experience. It is important to me that my former supervisor believes in the work I did, so that he was able to add a level of formal authority to the process, which served to further credit my work.

My participants were five of the students of color who at the time of the study, were interns at the UFMC. Previously I defined interns as undergraduate students who work a minimum of eight hours per week. Those not included in that number are the four remaining interns, the Rainbow Educator student team which consists of five students who work three hours per week, and five professional staff members. The rest of the team in the center also participated in a more collective way in team meetings over the course of the time I was researching. I also used previous staff members as a means of reflecting on their experiences more candidly as past employees with no fear of job security. I invited the main participants to participate through a google poll expressing interest and level of comfort. I followed up with those who committed to full participation to talk about what to expect from the research participation and have them decide if it was best for them. All participants signed a consent form that included their level of participation and be given full confidentiality in my write-ups to keep job security intact.

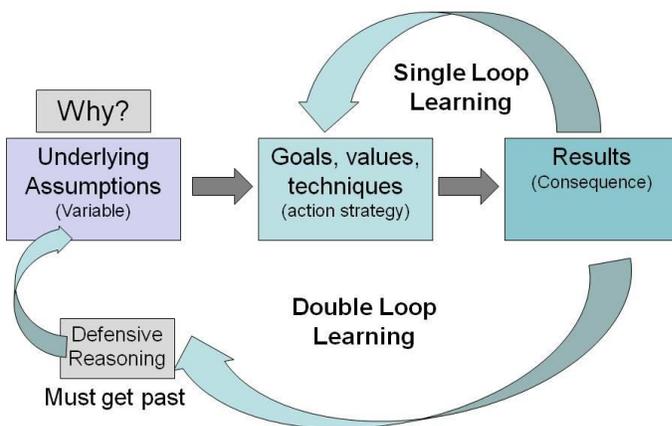
My critical friends groups were the assigned groups created through topic interest through my action research class. In particular, my former co-Graduate Assistant in the center

who was also in my assigned group. I also utilized my peers in the Leadership Doctoral program at the University of San Diego to assist with reviewing my work and offering feedback and input. One of whom was connected to the center through one of our programs that runs through the UFMC. The other is in no way affiliated with the UFMC and had a distant perspective.

### Methodology

The action research method I used to explore my inquiry is a combination of participatory action research and double loop learning action research (Argyris, 1977; O'Brein, 2011). The double loop learning model I hope to use was introduced by Argyris and Schon (1978), as seen in Figure 1.

### Double Loop Learning: Argyris & Schön



*Figure 1.* Double loop learning by Argyris and Schon (1978). Single loop learning focuses on enhancing what is already in place, while double loop learning allows for the researcher to explore the reasoning behind the practices currently in place, and potentially create new practices that better support the vision.

I chose this method because it allowed me to work with what was already in place at the center as well as to look beyond it and explore the implications and intentions that the center holds collectively, and examine its effectiveness. The key steps of this action research method are to examine what practices are currently in place, see how effective it is through feedback, and cycle back and look at why those practices are in place. Essentially, if the findings were in line with the intention then the focus would be on creating different interventions or practices to better support the UFMC mission. If the findings did not align, then there would be a desire to create something new to bridge that gap.

The other part of my action research that I incorporated is participatory action research which according to O’Brein (2001), “has a strong focus on emancipation and the overcoming of power imbalances.” The power here is less about the hierarchy of the professional world, but more of the power associated with race and culture that may or may not impact the professional work space. The fundamental principles of participatory research are: democracy as a precondition for participatory research, the need for a safe space, and all of the community taken into consideration as participants while allowing for varying degrees of participation (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). This methodology fit well with my research topic because of its parallel alignment with my personal values and ability to see all parties as participants in creating a culture.

I also used pieces of critical race theory (CRT) to inform my interventions focusing on the importance of storytelling that is emphasized within this theoretical approach. The most utilized practice of CRT is using the narratives of Black and brown people (the minorities) to counter the stories that are told by Whites (the majority), that hold a singular view (Berry &

Candice, 2013; Ceja, Smith, Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). Critical race theory is directly connected to my research due not only to its focus on race and the way it impacts or effects individuals, but also in its desire to consider the intersectionality of people's other identities compounded by race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This is important to keep in mind when I work with students, in understanding that they are more than their race and that other factors of cultural dissonance can be and likely are impacting them in their role as student employees as well.

One of the limitations of the methods I used is that there are very few hard numbers that can easily be coded for the consumption of those with whom I am sharing my findings. As the reader, personal accounts can be taken as individual incidents rather than seen as a part of a larger scale issue and they can be interpreted many different ways based on who is taking the information in at that time. I worked hard to make sure what the students and I speak to can be broken down and connected to the United Front Multicultural Center as an organization, taking into account my role as well as others as I try to shift some of the culture that exists. I also see that there are some challenges in using methods that question the assumptions of a center that has been doing great work in the campus community for years. However, no place is perfect and there is always room for improvement. My role has been to highlight the ways in which the center is assisting with optimal student development and to find new ways to enhance that where it is lacking, with a specific focus on the part identity plays into it. There is also the potential for people to take some of the inquiry personally rather than focusing on the betterment of the center for the students. This of course is a minimal risk outcome, which I hope I did a good enough job of decreasing the possibility through communication with key partners throughout the duration of my study.

## Cycles Overview

I used surveys, focus groups, interviews, storytelling, reflections, collages and personal journal entries with the participants to help them engage with my research topic. I hosted three cycles that included a wide array of items in each. The first cycle included a means of assessing what exists at the center, as well as what exists in each of the participants. This was done through journals, reflections, and surveys. I then examined the assumptions that are present at the center; specifically the assumption that the center operates as alignment with its mission. This was done through collages, journals, interviews, focus groups, and reflections.

For the last cycle, I wanted to create new opportunities that would assist both professional and student staff to create a better container for all to be more authentic in the UFMC space. I also wanted to enhance the good things that were in place to assist with achieving better results. This was done through team meeting discussions, journal entries, focus groups, and surveys. Before cycle one, I begin by introducing my topic to participants and having them sign their waiver detailing their commitment to the work. Much of the assignments were done during their working shifts, which created a good way for me to hold the students accountable as well as for them to hold me accountable. When the organizational shifts happened, that made the day contact a lot more difficult, due to my physical departure from the center. Those changes also shifted the culture of the center.

**Cycle One.** Once the waivers were turned into me, students were emailed the introduction survey, which served as a way for me to collect demographic data as well as individual opinions on their knowledge of authenticity and professionalism and how they felt as employees in the center at the time. Through that survey, I found the students were all able to

define authenticity within the context of their true, genuine, and or natural selves. Two participants also included the contrast of hindrances and filters that present barriers within their definitions. This was an important clue in, as I was able to see there was already a grappling what it means to be yourself and their initial link to what pressures can stop that from happening. I also was able to see that my group of five students consisted of Asian, Black, and Hispanic ethnic identities, first and second generation educational backgrounds, and mostly middle and working class household incomes. This was the first portion of cycle one.

Students were also asked to journal once per week. The reoccurring prompts were: Highlight a time this week you felt valued or appreciated when being your authentic self (leave blank if none); and highlight a time you felt you were unable to be authentic in a situation at work, or were reprimanded when you did (leave blank if none). Those journals were kept in my desk drawer in a specific file folder that was introduced to the students when they turned in their paperwork. When I was moved out of the UFMC, my critical friend and co-graduate assistant, housed the folder in her drawer for the remainder of the study. Participants had access to the journals during our work shifts which averaged out to 20 hours per week. They were asked to write for a minimum of four minutes each time, which I feel allowed all students to have more than enough opportunities to complete the assignment. This cycle served to assess how students were experiencing the UFMC at that time, thus informing me of the current results being co-created by all parties involved. This was the spring board to assessing my first loop of inquiry: to understand what goals and techniques were in place resulting in student employees' understanding of themselves and their difficulty to bring that to their roles.

**Cycle two.** In cycle two, I relied on interviews with students as well as the collages they created during our time together in conjunction with the first focus group. Each interview was scheduled for 30 minutes. They consisted of follow up questions from information each student shared in their survey, focus group, or team meeting that I felt needed more explanation. For example, a student referenced the concept of influence in the first focus group, but did not elaborate on what type of influence a peer may have and the resulting impact of those influences. Due to scheduling difficulties, most interviews took place prior to the first focus group, so some questions were not applicable to certain participants.

As they engaged in the interview with me, they also worked on a collage that depicted how they felt as employees of the UFMC. Once all of the questions I asked were answered, we discussed the images and words they chose for their collage, and the meaning behind them. Students describe their collages as representations of their self-care regimens, food, their student identities, and things that symbolize something unique about them. The most notable of the collages was by a student who identifies as a black woman. She cried during her interview while expressing how she had been repeatedly microaggressed against by being called “sassy” by some of her peers in the UFMC. In her collage she chose a large image of an avocado captioned “made in the shade” as the focal point, and spoke to her own relationship with finding ways to flourish even in less desirable circumstances. The connection to the crooked room Harris-Perry (2011) referenced, was stark and unavoidable.

I built in three to five minutes to silently journal and reflect on the experience at the end of each interview. In reflecting on the interviews, there were a few participants who looked at the UFMC in comparison to other jobs they have held. They spoke to how in comparison, they

felt more authentic in the center. Themes of withholding parts of themselves to fit in with their peers in the space, as well as continuing to explore the importance of presenting themselves authentically, and the journey it takes them to get there came up as well. One student said she had to “find her own way” in the UFMC. Another spoke to “finding ways to align [his] characteristics with what the UFMC has in place”; adapting himself to fit the culture. When speaking to the importance of authentically showing up at work, a student stated “if you want to produce your best work, it’s important to be yourself and stay true to yourself and your values.” The struggle to present in such a way, then has a direct impact on the work students are able to create in the space. I’ve always referenced Maslow’s (1954) Hierarchy of Needs as a way to better encourage and motivate the students with whom I work. The student in this moment was expressing the desire for her esteem needs, more specifically her desire for herself as she is to be accepted and included in the work environment, in order to reach self-actualization.

During the week that I was meeting with participants individually, I hosted our first focus group. The group started off with a mind mapping activity driven by three questions about professionalism and how they show up at work. The participants engaged in silent work for the initial 15 minutes, and in verbal communication for the remaining 25 minutes of time. One response that I feel is worth highlighting due to its connection to feelings of stifled authenticity, showed up on the bottom-right corner of the chart, where a participant answered the question of what does professionalism mean to you. The answer said “being yourself,” and another person drew a line connected to that response and added “if you’re allowed.” This

comment, heartbreaking to imagine for one student, was then affirmed with stars and check marks by three other students as a feeling they too shared.

In April of 2017, a little over five months before I held my focus group, I did a similar activity using post-it notes with the professional staff at the time when I hosted one of our bi-weekly professional staff meetings. In the responses given by all five of the professional staff, including my own, no one mentioned bringing themselves to the work at all. All of the answers spoke to how we need to alter ourselves or our appearance to show up professionally.

Comparing those responses led me to think about the influence that the leadership of the UFMC has on its student employees, for better or worse. It also made me further question the notions of what we have learned collectively in comparison to what we would want to embody. There were some similarities in responses when it came to communication standards, dress codes, and a focus on productivity. In the reflection portion of the focus group, a Hispanic identified woman explained that she felt professionalism was “whitewashed”, which creates barriers and issues of accessibility in the professional world. Students mentioned the perception of professionalism as “robotic” and “habitual” in essence, with one student noting that it is time consuming to challenge the status quo to make change in the work environment as well.

During the focus group, I learned just as much about the students through what was shared as I did by observing how they shared space together for the duration of the activity. During the focus group, I observed how the two most dominant voices in the discussion were the two interns who held years of tenure as employees at the center, and held senior status. A participant also made a comment when transitioning out of writing the reflective journals that

went as follows: “[participant] probably wrote about how all of her interactions with me were poor.” The student with whom the comment was directed did not respond. Those interactions helped me to be more attentive to peer encounters and impacts on the student staff.

**Cycle Three.** In my last cycle, I led the entire UFMC staff through various activities during our bi-weekly team meetings. The topics were connected to the development of all employees while serving as a way to dig deeper into who each individual is and how they bring themselves to the work that is done collectively. This portion of my study begins the second loop in my double-loop theory cycle. It also served to connect the ideas of storytelling and counter stories from CRT and considers all community members as I modeled from the participatory action research framework. The hope I had for these activities was that it would help all of us who worked at the center to understand the assumptions that were being made about who we were individually and collectively which then influence why we operate the way we do (what we learned from cycle two).

One participant referenced their experience with the activities in their exit survey stating: “The issue of authenticity is something that is sometimes hard to verbalize because it can be kind of abstract but I thought the fears in a hat and the perception activity were great and connected well.” When reflecting on the Fears in a Hat activity in the second focus group, a student confessed “reflecting on my time here, there was a point where I was dealing with a significant fear and I didn’t really feel affirmed or supported in this space.” She then connected that to her ability to show up authentically, and the impact of feeling a lack of support when she has in the past and what that means as she continues to navigate the space.

I also hosted a second focus group that served as a way for folks to unpack the overall experience the participants had in the study, and use the journals to serve as a guiding tool for discussion. There was also space for the participants to share any lingering feelings or thoughts that would be beneficial to help the UFMC continue to enhance and promote all types of people and their various ways of working. It is important to note, that by the time of the second focus group, the Student Affairs divisional restructuring had its initial large shift, resulting in the reassignment of myself and my direct supervisor to a new department on campus. This meant that I was operating with a new-found outsider's perspective, and that the participants were navigating their new office culture after losing two professional staff members in the space; one student losing her direct supervisor. It is also important to me to acknowledge that we scheduled for another 40 minute session, but the students used an hour and 20 minutes of time to express all that they had been holding onto and began to brainstorm ways to continue that type of space beyond the bounds of the study.

Some themes that came from that session were how they were coping with the impact of the divisional change, many compared their higher education experience to the idea of jobs beyond college and the fear of how much more rigid those spaces might be, and spoke to the importance of feeling supported with their own narratives or experience with good and not so good support in the UFMC space. When asked if they felt any different about the ways they were able to show up at work in late November in comparison to how they may have brought themselves when we began the study in early September, one student responded saying "it's a different dynamic...I feel like I've always got to be on watch." Another followed up saying "after all of the changes happened, I felt not that there was no support, but no one was talking to

me....I felt like the direction of the center was lost. There was none.” One student later stated that they did not feel “known” by the director of the center, thus making the absence of myself and former supervisor a hard hit when bringing their authentic selves into the space.

When reviewing the journal entries from participants over the duration of the study, I saw themes of feeling there is a right and wrong way to feel or to go about engaging in certain topics in the UFMC. I also saw desires of vulnerability, and the positive impacts that vulnerable moments had on the feelings of belonging in their role at the center. The final ask was an exit survey that did not ask any identifying data in hopes that the students would feel comfortable giving me direct feedback. I set out to discover if I was an effective agent of change in offering tools to have a positive impact on the culture of the UFMC. When asked how the participants ranked the overall study on a scale of one to ten with ten being optimum satisfaction, all students gave a nine or ten ranking. When asked if there was anything from the study that they wanted to remain after the conclusion of the study, most students responded with some variation of a desire to have safe spaces where open dialogue can exist.

### **Findings**

Findings suggest that students struggle with bringing their authentic selves to their work environment in the UFMC. As a result of their ethnic identities interacting with others of their intersecting identities, students find it hard to show who they are and connect with others in a way that seeks to engage those identities in meaningful ways. Two of the most glaring ways that my participants seemed to have been struggling with bringing their authentic self was through the ways in which they experienced formal and informal authority in the UFMC space. Formal authority being those given titles and paychecks to lead in the UFMC, and informal

authority refers to people who the UFMC trust and believe in because of their ability to satisfy their needs up to that point- no significant title needed.

### **Informal Authority**

During my study, I spent a lot of time paying attention to the group dynamics that were playing out amongst participants. I paid attention to frequency of speaking in group settings, nonverbal cues from person to person, the amount of autonomy one felt and enacted in the center and in what capacity students were linked to the UFMC space. From my observations and even from certain offerings that were made by students when sharing space with me, I was able to see that peers were heavily impacted by one another just as much as they were by formal authority in the space. One student who is involved in sorority life on campus, spoke to the ways that she withholds conversations pertaining to that piece of her identity from her peers. She stated in the opening survey “I feel that there are certain stigmas that prevent me from bringing that part of myself to the table and I've struggled with bringing these two identities together.” Another student in her interview mentioned that she found it hard to connect to her peers as an international student with different interests than American popular culture which created a barrier for her to present authentically. She spoke eloquently to the idea that culture is made up of people, who are inherently flawed as we all are; and questioned whether or not the peer subculture at the UFMC would be able to shift to a desirable place for all individuals with that understanding.

Additionally, it seemed that those with longer tenures at the center felt more confident in being themselves yet, held greater sense of responsibility for helping to promote what they believed to be desired ways of engaging in the space. Their comfort level is likely a combination

of age differential from some of their peers as well as social capital gained by occupying a space for a number of years. I also see a link between students who fit the desired expectations of the leadership and their long tenures at the center, in comparison to those who are challenged and their willingness to leave for other opportunities over the course of my time working there. The longest tenured participant spoke to feeling she herself had experienced minimal issues when it came to bringing herself into a space, but noticed that “others were not sharing in that experience.”

During my study, a new position was created for interns to help with staff development, which this participant was granted. This also subconsciously created a subdivision of a hierarchy where others felt she was seen as the ideal employee and others would need to be more like her. I think it is important for us in our roles to consider the ways that students are developing and consider the impacts of empowering one peer in a way that can create further divides without intentional integration of that responsibility. At the end of the second focus group, one student expressed their gratitude to be able to interact with two of the participants who were holding the informal authority. She stated that after being able to connect authentically with them in the study, she sees them as beacons of “confidence and security” amidst much of the looming uncertainty. This highlighted again the need for space to connect so that students can explore their commonalities and find more meaningful ways to connect and collaborate in the space.

### **Formal Authority**

Aside from impact of peer to peer interactions, findings suggest formal authority and how the professional staff at the UFMC engage the student staff, has a large impact on how my

participants have been able to present themselves in the space. Firstly, the lack of authentic relationships with the professional staff, creates a barrier to know when and how to present authentically in the space. Many students spoke to the need for authentic connections with the formal leadership and talked about the positive experiences they had from those connections, and also the negative impacts when those connections were lacking. Two of the participants named feeling connected and brought onto the staff through an authentic connection they had with the former Associate Director, and how meeting him and feeling like he understood them and was invested in them as people first and employees second was something they appreciated. Those connections made the absence of him a direct link to an absence of a sense of care in the space.

Another student spoke to feeling that the director of the center has made efforts to be more visible since the shifts, but that the investment in him as a person still is not present. He maintained “she comes out and like sits with the staff more, whether or not we have authentic conversations while she’s there is another thing...like she’ll come out and sit with us at lunch but every single time, at least when I’m there, it’s just like let’s talk about [her] and like, what’s going on with her. And I’m just like, okay.” In light of the changes, the professional staff shifted from six employees to four, three of which students found hard to connect to and with. The Program Coordinator, who is the direct supervisor of three participants after the changes, was lauded for her attempts to maintain connection to the staff. One participant stated in the second focus group “if [she] wasn’t here, I wouldn’t be here.” Comments on her ability to be authentically herself daily, helped them to engage with her in different ways than they found themselves able to with the remaining staff. The participants also noted how they feel it is

unfair to the staff member to be the sole investor in the students' holistic development and growth and want to see that kind of care across the board.

Another finding was the felt differences in expectations of what it means to be professional between the professional staff and the student staff. One student named is as a "generational gap" in their interview. Along with that perceived gap came fears of being themselves due to the desire to be considered a good worker and some students' desires for letters of recommendations that they were concerned about for their future. As mentioned before, students want to be able to bring themselves to a space, but if there is no work done to bridge the gap between standard notions of what professionalism is, and intentionality behind where the leadership in the center stands on those ideas, room is left to question, wonder, and fear what it would be like to not try and fit a certain mold.

Earlier, I referenced a student who saw the standards of professionalism being upheld in the space as "whitewashed." The same student mentioned in her interview that her understanding of professionalism in various contexts, including at the UFMC had an underlying goal of keeping "others" out. In this context, the "others" are those who do not fall in the dominant groups that America was built on. As a multicultural center whose leadership is varied in personal identities, it is worth thinking about how the leadership has assimilated to a point where they are "othering" people with shared identities as their own. Furthermore, to think about the impact that actively marginalized or forced into an easily digestible version of yourself by someone who shares similar identities and backgrounds as the students can have on their outlook on future employment and the possibility of being authentic in other spaces.

### **Additional Findings**

Aside from the large role authority played in the participants' ability to be authentic, there were also connections I was able to make with the external forces to which the UFMC operates in, that seem to have impacted the students of minoritized communities greatly. The first is the fact that USD is a catholic institution which only two of my participants identified as. One student spoke to her experience having to decorate for a holiday in the center that did not speak to her identity or desires, yet she was still expected to participate. From this, I deduced it was important, especially at a multicultural center, to validate people's religious affiliations and be able to contribute to the team without engaging in a way that goes against their values and beliefs.

Closely related, I also found that the UFMC has an unspoken culture as far as how to think about certain issues that leaves little room for dialogue from alternative perspectives. An Asian, Muslim, woman participant wrote in her opening survey "I do feel as though we are supposed to present ourselves in a certain way and are expected to take a position on certain issues within our campus that we may or may not be what we truly believe." For student employees with marginalized identities like her, there seemed to be a lack of room for those identities to be engaged in a meaningful way that can be mutually beneficial for the rest of the staff, thus making the center a better equipped place to understand a multitude of perspectives.

I believe this study was an overall success in that it allowed space for students to have important conversations with one another about the experiences they were having in a space that felt safe and supportive. One student described the study in the following ways:

I think whether or not this will drastically change the dynamics at the UFMC, I think for everyone who participated in this study there will always be the small internal nudge reminding them that being authentic is extremely important to the work and that anything that keeps us from being authentic is probably affecting all of us in our interactions and how comfortable we can feel in a space.

Another student echoed similar sentiments particularly around the subtle shifts in UFMC culture. Their need to feel a part of community was clear in the student's remarks, stating:

I think it got us talking about what was going on in the center in an open and honest way. It validated my own feelings, and showed me that others felt similarly. It is not always something that is talked about so having this study allowed us to take actions to better the UFMC and make sure student voices are heard.

Through this feedback, I gathered the importance of elevating student voices and the value of allowing students to navigate their identities in concert with the roles they take up and spaces they occupy.

### **Recommendations**

When reflecting on the Catholic teaching of caring for the whole person, I believe USD has a mission and duty to find ways to better support all students in the varying ways they present. Additionally, I believe the multicultural center should be at the forefront of that support and be the model for other departments on campus when nurturing the leaders of tomorrow. As a result of my study, students have come up with desired outcomes they would like to see, and with my support and faith in their ability to decide what would best support them, I have outlined them below.

## **Restorative Justice**

The first request to come out of the study was birthed at the end of the second focus group. The students had spent a greater part of a half hour speaking to the harm and damage that they experienced under the leadership of the director at the UFMC and felt that relationship must be repaired or rethought first and for most. I was reminded of a quote I came across that states “a bad manager can take a good staff and destroy it, causing the best employees to flee and the remainder to lose motivation” (Knickerbocker, 2015). This is not to say that the director does not have good qualities and know how to do her job, but rather that the ways in which she interacts with the student staff has not landed well for that group of students, which is worth exploring rather than overlooking. I have outlined previous students’ concern of motivation and not feeling supported, and a desire to leave the job if not for one individual carrying the emotional load.

One of the participants identifies as a Resident Assistant on campus and in the focus group asked if a restorative justice circle or session would be appropriate for the current state of the staff. I believed this was a great idea, and a timely one that should not wait until my paper was written in April because I was aware that each month that went by without growing together would keep students in the same space of inauthenticity while they were still expected to show up to work and give their best. As a result, I encouraged the students to work together to draft an email to the director’s supervisor expressing what their experiences have been and why they think it’s important to work to restore a sense of community in the center. Students had come to the director the semester prior with some concerns about disconnect from her which resulted in a 20 minute speech during our all team meeting explaining away

concerns and closed with a reminder that none of their jobs were secure for the fall semester. Because of that interaction and the confidential nature of the study, it made sense to bring the concerns birthed from the study to the next level in the hierarchical chain.

Unfortunately, the situation was not handled with care or followed through on. The students were in communication with the Assistant Vice President (AVP) of Student Affairs and one of our restorative justice leads on campus for two weeks. During this time they tried to solidify a time and place for the restorative justice to happen before the end of the fall semester. There were two key reasons fall was important to them and to me as their support through this. The first was that one of my participants was graduating in December and took on the organizational role of continuing to engage the students after the conclusion of the study as well as led the communication efforts with upper level leadership. The second was that we all feared pushing the session back a semester would leave room for things to get lost in the shuffle and for the likelihood of the session happening to decrease exponentially.

The concerns from leadership were that they had not been given enough time to have the appropriate pre-meetings with all impacted participants and that the director was traveling during the week that would have been optimum for students. After a sizable amount of email communication, the AVP agreed to meet with a small group of students in her office to hear their concerns first-hand under the guise that she would use that information to better prepare those who would do the restorative session in spring. This way the graduating students could express themselves and feel heard, and the remaining members of the UFMC could start the process going in the right direction for January. It is now April, and students have reported that no restorative session ever took place.

In meeting with the Director of the UFMC to share this information, she noted that there was an activity done during spring training, which was offered up as starting point for engaging in restorative work with students. The activity was a picture card activity where students picked pictures that related to how they feel in the center. From the director's perspective, students did not share deep concerns, and it was a consensus amongst the rest of the professional staff that no further session was needed. Students did not share the same feeling, and experienced confusion around the activity's purpose. Mainly because the purpose was unclear to them, and because were informed by the AVP of Student Affairs that there would be a third party present whenever the session were to take place.

### **Additional Recommendations**

Aside from a restorative justice circle or session, there are a few other ongoing practices that the UFMC should put into place. The first is to assign a graduate assistant to meet with the student staff once per month to host some sort of dialogue session that is more relaxed than the current structure of the team meetings. This would serve as a way to keep the focus group style of discussions for the students to feel less pressure to express how they are experiencing the center and to offer feedback, good or bad, in a safer space. This was directly requested by the student staff at the end of our last focus group as well as in four of the five survey responses from participants. The graduate assistant still holds some formal authority, however they tend to be more relatable to the students and are a lot less powerful than a director. The hope would be for the graduate assistant to be able to report back to the professional staff at their meetings so that they can monitor students' sense of belonging and abilities and bring themselves fully to their work.

The next recommendation would be to continue to include activities that assist in learning more about each other in the team meetings. When I introduced the “Who Am I?” activity to the team, there were opportunities created for staff who had worked together for years to be able to connect in ways that further motivated people and broke down perceived barriers. One student employee not a part of the formal group sessions commented on the activity as we debriefed it in the team meeting stating that she felt closer to one of the professional staff members at the end of it because she did not know they shared an immigrant identity, and wanted to work more closely with him to find ways to integrate that identity into some of the UFMC’s initiatives. The more the staff is able to find connections between who they are and what they value, it will positively impact the cohesion of the center as well as enrich the work the center produces.

Lastly, I think that the division of student affairs should do climate surveys for all student employees at the end of each semester. Professional staff typically undergo performance evaluations from the top down on an annual basis, but I believe there is room for assessment from the bottom up as well. From my experience, the AVP only comes to the UFMC to have 1:1 meetings with the director in her office, and maybe attend one event per semester. It is hard to understand the culture of a space when there are limited personal interactions with the students in the space firstly. In addition, people tend to put on their best face when the “boss” comes around, which often does not reflect the true ways they interact in the space when they are left to operate autonomously. This survey would ideally serve as a way to get the ground level perspective of the experience students are having. Again, if our job in student affairs is to serve students to the best of our capabilities, there needs to be a way of monitoring the

student experiences. As Brent Harris, a top executive for Nordstrom, notoriously says, “you can’t teach culture. You have to live it.” If the UFMC and Student Affairs at USD want to say they are student centered and have a culture of care, now is the time to demonstrate that to those who need it most.

### **Personal Learning**

Throughout the duration of my time working on this study, I have learned a great deal about what kind of practitioner I want to be as well as how much my passions interconnect. As a future practitioner I want to always center students in my work, and never lose sight of the importance of student connection. The work that I do, I do it because of my love and passion for them and I know I have the capacity to invest in them and assist them on their journey. I also believe that research has taught me more than ever to remain consistent and persistent with pursuing what really matters to me. In some ways, I failed the students as well by not continuing to follow up with the upper-level administration and continue to be an advocate for the students. I also think that some of the recommendations could have been hosted by me informally to offer that space for students to connect with one another in a way that is not being offered at their place of employment. This all comes back to the fact that I do not need to wait for approval in order to find ways to support students in their time of need. And that additional support is always beneficial and can only increase student development.

Two passions that I have aside from student development are understanding group dynamics and social equity. I have spent the past two years learning how to analyze groups, surface unearthed dynamics, and to assess self in the context of it all as I seek to be an adaptive change agent. When I first began my journey I saw that type of analysis as only useful in specific

spaces, however this study has illuminated the importance of adaptive leadership in many spaces. I am now more than ever motivated to continue to sharpen my skills in practicing adaptive leadership and utilize it in my practice as a student affairs professional.

My passion for social equity has been alive in me for as long as I can remember, and I contest it is at the crux of what we should be doing as student affairs professionals. The student population in higher education is only becoming more diverse as the nation continues to diversify and access is given to new populations of students. I believe it is my duty and the duty of others in the profession to be as open as possible to varying ways that these students present. To celebrate their various backgrounds and to meet them where they are to build them up to reach their unique potential. Everyone's journey will look different and it is up to us to adapt to them rather than for them to adapt to us. It is not enough to tolerate, but to be informed and to remain curious and not reach a point of habit when working with students.

### **Conclusion**

Since the time of the study, one of the participants has left their position at the UFMC for a new campus job opportunity just one floor below. I mentioned before that another participant graduated in December after getting the run around from upper level leadership. And as two more participants prepare for a May graduation, I am left saddened that we are failing at our responsibility to support students in their development and holistic growth. I have seen firsthand that the structures in place are not created to support diverse students. I have also witnessed students offer suggestions to make for a more inclusive environment, and those requests gain enough traction to make it seem like they will be taken up but are never be completed. I am now preparing to graduate from the institution as well, and have already been

removed from my role at the UFMC, leaving one participant left in a job at a university that has shown her time and time again that she does not matter.

Due to the personal nature of some of the findings, I would understand if the UFMC leadership is too close to see where they have fallen short. That being said, I leave the department of student affairs with the following questions: how do you center students, particularly marginalized students in your work? How much attention does upper level leadership pay to the dynamics and environments of the student centers and offices that function under them? Where is the culture of care present for minoritized students who feel forgotten about or insignificant as students and employees of the university? Are we meeting students where they are and assisting them in navigating the university or expecting them to figure out a way to cope with the harmful experiences they endure until they build an emotional callous or remove themselves altogether? As student affairs practitioners, are you satisfied with the impact of your actions or is this a wakeup call that it is time for change? To the students who participated in the study and to anyone reading this who finds themselves outside of the frame modern American society tells you to fit in, I leave you with the words of Audre Lorde (1978): "When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcome. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak..." (p.32).

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# Appendix A: Opening Survey

## Opening Survey

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my research study: Empowering Student Employees to be Authentic. The first task for the study, is to complete the attached survey. The survey will ask some identifying questions, however, as described in your consent form, all information will stay with me and not impact your job security. I ask that you be 100% honest with your answers so that I can have the best data possible to best improve the practices and initiatives here at the UFMC.

1. How would you define authenticity in one sentence?

.....

2. List at least 10 adjectives describing your "authentic" self.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. Do you feel as though you are able to be your "authentic" self in your role as an employee of the UFMC?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

Other: .....

4. How has your (in)ability to be authentic impacted you in your role?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. What do you hope to get out of this project keeping in mind the purposed as explained in your consent form? (The purpose of this research is to assist students in describing their true selves, and assessing whether or not they present that at their job in the UFMC. Then, participants along with the researcher, will identify what practices influence the ability to be authentic, and how the UFMC can further enhance in that area.)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. Are there any thoughts, questions or topics you would like to address before or during the research process?

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Demographic Data**

7. What is your race/ethnicity? (e.g. Hispanic, Black...)

.....

8. What is your familial socioeconomic status? (household income)

*Mark only one oval.*

- Up to \$15,000 per year
- Between \$15,001- \$32,000 per year
- Between \$32,001- \$72,000 per year
- Between \$72,001- \$100,000 per year
- Above \$100,000 per year
- Unknown

9. What is your familial educational background? (e.g. first gen., second gen...)

.....

**10. What's your gender identity?***Mark only one oval.*

- woman  
 man  
 gender fluid  
 transgender  
 Other:

**11. What's your religious affiliation?***Mark only one oval.*

- Christian  
 Jewish  
 Muslim  
 Hindu  
 Buddhist  
 Atheist  
 Other:

**12. How many semesters have you worked at the UFMC?***Mark only one oval.*

- 1  
 2  
 3  
 4  
 5  
 6  
 7

**Appendix B: Focus Group 1 Script**

## Focus Group 1

*On chart paper, the students will work on answering these questions silently and use each other to feed off of for a silent discussion. The students will get 3-5 minutes to engage with each question on the chart paper, then be brought together to discuss what they noticed from each area, and elaborate on their own answers and what that means to them. The dialogue will go on as I observe silently and make note of key points that are spoken to. Guiding questions will be posted by me on chart paper once the written activity closes.*

## Script:

Hello and welcome everyone to the initial focus group for my Action Research “Empowering Student Employees to be Authentic.” Thank you all for filling out the survey with information that will better inform this study. It has been great for me to review your responses. I hope that this session will further add light to the concept of professionalism and how each of you engage with that in the workplace.

Keeping in mind time, I would like us to dive right into the activity that will open our discussion. Everyone grab a marker, and answer the following questions on chart paper. I will give you all five minutes to engage with each question. You can answer it, comment on a peer’s answer, agree or disagree with an answer as you feel compelled.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Great the first question is going to be posted here. You all may begin. Please remember this is a silent activity.

1. What does professionalism mean to you? Be specific. (ex. using Standard American English in all work-related communication)
2. Where did you learn your understanding of professionalism? (ex. TV, parents, former employers)
3. How do these characteristics and/or actions influence the way you operate at work?

(15 minutes later) Alright, that’s time! Let’s put the markers back and grab a seat to discuss your responses to these three questions. Please feel free to speak candidly in conversation with your peers. I am here to help guide the discussion, but in no way am seeking any authority as you all discuss.

- What did it feel like to go through that process without talking?
- What themes did you notice in your responses or your peer’s responses?
- What was the most memorable response you saw or wrote? What feeling did that evoke?
- How do you see those themes of professionalism present at the UFMC? How do they make you feel?

Please take the next 3-5 minutes to jot down any feelings or thoughts left from this focus group. Label the top of the page "Focus Group 1" with the date.

I would like to thank you all for coming to this focus group. If you have any questions or concerns you can email me to set up a time to talk. I will be following up with you all for our next cycle which includes an interview, which you can share your questions there. I will be sure to read your journal entries before we meet 1:1.

Thanks again!

**Appendix C: Interview Guide**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. The purpose of the interview is for me to collect data on their experiences with authenticity and the UFMC. I am also here to clarify some of the things I heard and noticed during the focus group and survey. You have signed a consent form before the start of this study; please let me know if you would like to review it. Please also let me know if you have any questions at this time.

Please note that all of your responses are anonymous. Please tell me how your time as an employee at the UFMC is going so far.

1. Please share with me why you were interested in working on this study.
2. How do you feel authenticity and professionalism interact with one another?
3. What experiences have you had, if any, with authenticity in the workplace?
4. During the focus group you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_, can you elaborate more on that comment?
5. How did you feel when filling out the opening survey?
6. Are there any feelings or thoughts that are left lingering?
7. Do you have any questions for me?

**Appendix D: Focus Group 2 Guide**

Hello and welcome everyone to the second and final focus group for my Action Research “Empowering Student Employees to be Authentic”. I am glad to see you all here today. It’s been nine weeks since we’ve all met in one space together. I would first like to thank you all for working with me for so long on this project that I am very passionate about. I would like to open this group up to a fluid conversation to debrief some things that you all have noticed in the past couple of months, and also get out any lingering thoughts or feelings that remain. So without further ado, let’s begin.

1. What was your favorite or least favorite experience of the study? Why?
2. Do you feel the interventions were beneficial? In what ways?
3. Have you seen any shift in the dynamics of the UFMC, whether from your peers, or the professional staff? What have those looked like?
4. Before the study you completed a survey question asking you to name what you wanted to get out of the study. If you feel comfortable sharing, please explain whether or not you feel as though you got what you wanted from this study.
5. What’s one thing you’ll miss now that the study is concluding?

Please take the next 3-5 minutes to jot down any feelings or thoughts left from this focus group. Label the top of the page “Focus Group 2” with the date. When you are done please hand your journals back to me. Thanks again for all of your hard work. I will be sending out an email with a closing survey to get any additional information that you may need more time to think about, or would rather share in a more confidential manner. Let me know if you have any questions.

**Appendix E: Journal Entry Guide**

Please write in your journal at least once per week, for 5 minutes per entry, answering one of the following prompts:

1. Highlight a time this week you felt valued or appreciated when being your authentic self
2. Highlight a time you felt you were unable to be authentic in a situation at work, or were reprimanded when you did

It is best to journal about this as soon as you experience the situation rather than wait. If you do not have access to your journal when you experience this, reflect on a digital device putting the date on the entry, and email it to me to staple into your journal.

Journals will be read by me on a bi-weekly basis. All journals will be collected at the close of the study the week of December 4th.

**Appendix F: Exit Survey**

Thank you for the past three months of honest feedback, authentic engagement, and informative dialogue to assist me with this study. This survey that seeks to inform me of how your experience was as well as any unsaid thoughts or feelings you have that you did not feel comfortable sharing with me in our other sessions. This survey has no identifying data, and will be anonymous, so please be as candid as you feel is needed.

1. On a scale of 1-10 how satisfied are you with the overall study?
  - a. 0      2      4      6      8      10
2. Please elaborate on your answer above.
3. Do you want anything that was created as a part of this study to remain? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel any change made during the study will remain? Why or why not?
5. Do you feel that the study has impacted the UFMC's culture? How?
6. Do you feel that the study has impacted you as an individual (outside of work)?
7. Do you feel that the study has impacted you as a part of the UFMC team? In what ways?
8. Is the UFMC your first place of employment?
9. Do you think your authentic self will be accepted in the professional world?
10. Please describe your overall experience in the study using 5 adjectives.

**Appendix G: Letter of Support**

Leadership Studies  
School of Leadership and  
Education Sciences  
(SOLES) Mai-Anh (Annie)  
Ngo, PhD  
5998 Alcalá Park  
San Diego, CA 92110-2492  
P: (858) 232-6217

June 14, 2017

To: Institutional Review Board, University of San Diego

From: Annie Ngo, Adjunct Faculty and Research Advisor

I have discussed the research project “Empowering Student Employees to be Authentic” with Amber Williams. She is conducting this study as part of her action research project in SOLES at the University of San Diego. I am her research advisor and approve her moving forward with this project. She may submit her IRB for approval. I will continue to support her throughout her research process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Annie Ngo".

Annie Ngo, PhD Adjunct  
Faculty, SOLES  
[maianhngo@sandiego.edu](mailto:maianhngo@sandiego.edu)

**Appendix H: Solicitation Email**

Dear Student,

I am emailing you to see if you have an interest in participating in a research study that will take place throughout the duration of the fall 2017 semester. As you know, I am a Graduate Assistant at the United Front Multicultural Center (UFMC), but I am also a full time graduate student at the University of San Diego. A part of me completing my degree is finding an area where I work that I feel needs improvement, and work towards improving my own practice in collaboration with my job, to learn more about that area, assess it, and try to enact change.

For my study, I have decided to focus on authenticity within the workplace. I am interested in whether or not students are able to be authentic at work. Whether or not racial/ethnic identities play a pivotal role in one's ability. As well as, finding ways to enhance the acceptance and ability for student employees to be their true selves.

If you find this topic of interest to you and would like to commit a total of 4 hours and 15 minutes for the entire semester to this work, please respond to this email so that I can arrange a time to meet to go over the requirements and have you sign a waiver stating you agree to participate.

Please note that not participating will not affect your job security. Also note that participation will be confidential and most data will be derived with no trace back to you. This is all in an effort to prevent participation from interfering with job security as well.

If you have any questions before agreeing to be a part of this, please feel free to reach out.

Thanks!

Amber Williams

[amberwilliams@sandiego.edu](mailto:amberwilliams@sandiego.edu)

x6601

**Appendix I: Consent Form****Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:

Empowering Student Employees to be Authentic

**I. Purpose of the research study**

- A. Amber Williams is a student in the School of Leadership and Educational Studies at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting.
- B. The purpose of this research is to assist students in describing their true selves, and assessing whether or not they present that at their job in the United Front Multicultural Center (UFMC). Then, participants along with the researcher, will identify what practices influence the ability to be authentic, and how the UFMC can further enhance in that area.

**II. What you will be asked to do**

- A. If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:
  1. Participate in focus groups
  2. Complete two surveys of 12 and 10 questions respectively that will ask you demographic data as well as data about your experiences as an employee of the UFMC
  3. Participate in a private interview about your experiences
  4. Complete written journal reflections
- B. You will be audio taped during the focus group and interview
- C. Your participation in the study will take a total of 4 hours and 15 minutes

**III. Foreseeable risks**

- A. This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life. Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-339 or the USD Counseling Center at 619-260-4655.

**IV. Benefits**

- A. While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the intersection of race and authenticity within a higher education work setting.

**V. Confidentiality**

- A. Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research

project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

VI. **Compensation**

A. You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. **Voluntary Nature of this Research**

A. **Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to do this**, and you can refuse to answer any question at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you’re entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. **Contact Information**

A. If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1. Amber Williams | email: [amberwilliams@sandiego.edu](mailto:amberwilliams@sandiego.edu) | phone: 267-975-2187
2. Annie Ngo | email: [maianhngo@sandiego.edu](mailto:maianhngo@sandiego.edu)

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Name of Participant (Printed)

---

Signature of investigator

**Appendix J: Solicitation for Opening Survey**

Dear Participants,

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my research study: Empowering Student Employees to be Authentic. The first task for the study, is to complete the attached survey. The survey will ask some identifying questions, however, as described in your consent form, all information will stay with me and not impact your job security. I ask that you be 100% honest with your answers so that I can have the best data possible to best improve the practices and initiatives here at the UFMC. Please complete this survey by September 18th at 5:00PM. Feel free to let me know if you have any questions or need any assistance. I will be in communication with you all soon with next steps once all surveys are accounted for.

Thanks again,

Amber Williams

[amberwiliams@sandiego.edu](mailto:amberwiliams@sandiego.edu)

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**Appendix K: Solicitation for Closing Survey**

Dear Participants,

Thank you for the past three months of honest feedback, authentic engagement, and informative dialogue to assist me with this study. It has been a pleasure getting to know you all more, and work with you in a personal way. I hope that you have found this experience to be as impactful and meaningful as I have. In the coming months I will be compiling the information I have gathered from you all, and reflecting on how the UFMC can best support you and students like you for years to come.

Before I am able to do so, I have one more favor to ask. Attached in an exit survey that seeks to inform me of how your experience was as well as any unsaid thoughts or feelings you have that you did not feel comfortable sharing with me in our other sessions. This survey has no identifying data, and will be anonymous, so please be as candid as you feel is needed. I am asking that you complete this survey by December 11th at 5:00PM so that you all can focus on finals without it lingering over your heads. I look forward to hearing how this experience has impacted each of you.

Thanks in advance for your cooperation.

Best,

Amber Williams

[amberwilliams@sandiego.edu](mailto:amberwilliams@sandiego.edu)

x6601

