TRANSFORMING A UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENTAL CULTURE FROM TOXICITY TO HEALTH: A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The value and practice of cultivating a departmental culture that supports student and faculty success is critical to its effectiveness and sustainability in institutions of higher education. In this qualitative study, we apply a pedagogy of intentionality as our theoretical lens. Methodologically, we utilized a collaborative autoethnographic approach to explore experiences of departmental culture among educational leadership faculty at a public university in the southeastern United States. We were particularly interested in gathering qualitative data to increase our understanding regarding how a shift in departmental values and priorities impacted how faculty felt and assessed their individual experiences during their time within the department. Overall findings reveal the transformational process of a purposeful departmental culture shift from toxic to healthy. Evidence demonstrates (a) faculty's initial toxic culture experience characterized by a hostile, inequitable, and hierarchical working environment; (b) ways key faculty members utilized the opportunity of departmental personnel change to intentionally envision and effect a cultural transformational shift characterized by community and collegial interdependence and relationships; and (c) evidence of faculty's current experiences within a healthy culture, whose core features are professional, familial, diverse, and authentic. Faculty as guardians of culture was an associated finding.

INTRODUCTION

The value and practice of cultivating a departmental culture that supports both student and faculty success is critical to its effectiveness and sustainability in institutions of higher education (IHEs). The collegial model, underscored by shared governance, consensus-building, and open communication (Manning, 2018), plays a crucial role in this endeavor. In addition, a healthy faculty culture, focusing on trust, collaboration, cooperation, and social capital (Macfarlane, 2012, Tierney, 2006) strengthens a sense of community and fosters innovation and excellence. The Black cultural ethos of community, interdependence and relationships serve to complement this study as it applies these three tenets to further develop a framework of a pedagogy of intentionality, which refers to the intentional steps faculty in a department of educational leadership (EDL) took to build a

department culture characterized by community and collegial relationships undergirded by mutual respect (Croft, et al., 2019). For this study, we operationally define a healthy culture as professional, familial, diverse and authentic. The opposite of a healthy culture is a toxic culture, which we operationally define as hostile, negating diversity, inequitable and hierarchical. This study presents research that demonstrates the shift from a toxic to a healthy departmental culture.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH FOCI

Between 2004 and 2014, the EDL department had six different chairs or interim chairs. Additionally, there were rival factions in the department, and unsubstantiated negative narratives toward others were present. As a result, some faculty did not feel safe expressing their opinions. Faculty meetings sometimes turned into heightened verbal disputes where certain members used their voices to threaten or silence others' comments, including perspectives and opinions. There was also explicit antipathy and antagonism within the department by some faculty and departmental leadership towards acknowledging the value of diversity within the department or hiring new faculty from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds. The antipathy and antagonism were coupled with the lack of mentoring and equitable distribution of service opportunities.

Along with the aversions to diversity, members in the department actively followed a hierarchal disposition. Terms such as "junior" and "senior" faculty were prevalent and used as reasons that faculty members could not participate on departmental committees. Also, ideas of "junior" faculty were considered insignificant and unworthy of consideration. At one point, the culture became so fragmented that external consultants were invited to evaluate the department and provide sessions to help promote unity. Although the process provided a venue for the members of the department to express their frustrations and negative experiences, no significant change resulted from this external consultation. The repercussions on faculty within this department are presented in the findings section.

The investigation in this study also encompasses the shift from the cultural context of toxicity to the realization of a healthy culture. Thus, the purpose of this research is to identify, analyze and interpret the shift from a toxic departmental culture to a healthy culture. To this end, the study is focused on the following research questions:

1. What were the faculty's experiences that demonstrated the presence of toxicity in the pre-shift EDL culture?
2. In what ways did a shift in the EDL department culture occur?
3. What were the faculty's experiences that demonstrated a healthy EDL culture after the shift?

PEDAGOGY OF INTENTIONALITY AS A THEORETICAL LENS

To fully understand the premise undergirding the rebuilding of a department, this study utilizes a pedagogy of intentionality (Croft, et al., 2019). While the foundation of the pedagogy of intentionality rests on the pillars of the Black cultural ethos, the intention here is not to focus on the ethnicities within the department. Rather, intentionality exists in using specific principles of the Black cultural ethos including community, interdependence, and relationships to elucidate the intentional steps faculty in a department of educational leadership took to reimagine and rebuild a department characterized by community and collegial relationships and reinforced by mutual respect. The pedagogy of intentionality framework extends the various components of the Black cultural ethos by embodying *purposeful* intentionality. In other words, when used purposefully to build, incorporate, or sustain an entity, they form the foundation of a pedagogy of intentionality.

In this case, EDL formed the unit or entity on which the pedagogy of intentionality was grounded. The purpose was to deliberately create a culture that permeated aspects for the department from the recruitment of faculty, students, and the selection and implementation of curricula.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term *culture* has multiple meanings. For the purposes of this study, we have adopted the definition of culture by Schein and Schein (2016) that includes accumulated;

> … shared learning of that group …; which has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems. This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values and behavioral norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness. (p. 6)

This review of literature focuses on organizational approaches and differentiates between toxic and healthy workplace environments.

Organizational Approaches

Higher education culture operates dynamically within the department level (Hughes, 2014), and influences the quality and quantity of faculty's academic work (Duryea, 2000; Hearn & Anderson, 2002). The differences in organizational approaches are vast, yet they exist simultaneously at IHEs, and each approach ultimately impacts the culture in any given department. Pifer, Baker and Lunsford (2019) note "the department is the primary location for...the socialization into the norms and practices of the college (p.541)." Organizational approaches reflect ideal models; however, currently, toxicity in departmental culture has been a specific challenge that negatively affects faculty members in various ways (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman 2019) and requires transformation, which can include a new set of values and goals, as well as leadership and faculty personnel. Thus, culture models in their entirety can, and in fact, must be changed under particular circumstances, including toxicity that permeates a department.

Toxic Culture in the Workplace

In general, workplace culture can be described as a set of behavioral expectations for employees in the workplace (Florczak, 2022). As a part of IHEs, departments consist of individuals who are responsible for the workplace culture (Hartel, 2008). The work place is often characterized by language, assumptions, with explicit and implicit rules "that employees use when interacting with one another" (Applebaum & Roy-Girard, 2007, p.19). These workplace norms can often be considered either toxic or positive with each producing various results and can encompass a wide range of subtle behaviors (Applebaum & Roy-Girard, 2007; Florczak, 2022; Tastan, 2017). In higher education, as mentioned earlier, culture operates dynamically within the department level (Hughes, 2014) and influences the quality and quantity of faculty's academic work (Duryea, 2000; Hearn & Anderson, 2002).

Examples of toxic culture may be characterized by "isolation and a lack of belongingness, low morale, no support network, competition, [and] destructive conflict" (Hartel, 2008, p. 1267). Toxic settings often exhibit workplace bullying, including peer-on-peer, a characteristic that is on the rise in colleges and universities (Lester, 2013; Twale & DeLuca, 2008). Fear and trauma can be additional symptoms of a toxic faculty culture (Twale & DeLuca, 2008). According to Keashly & Neuman (2013), the forms of negative workplace behavior comprise an almost inexhaustible list of constructs that includes, but is not limited to, workplace aggression, emotional abuse, incivility,

psychological aggression, petty tyranny, abusive supervision, social undermining, generalized work harassment, scapegoating, workplace trauma, insidious work behavior, counterproductive work behavior, organizational misbehavior, and desk rage. (p.3)

The notion and practice of bullying can become inculcated in a department's culture when "accusations of bullying [are] dismissed as fair comment or 'the way we do things around here', with the person(s) making the accusations themselves accused of bullying those they accuse by making unwarranted complaints" (Tight, 2023, p. 127). Bullying among faculty, moreover, has been found to occur at a higher rate among gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual identity minorities (Gardner, 2012; Sallee & Diaz, 2013). Research literature further suggests that faculty who feel powerful in a toxic department are more likely to engage in isolating and ostracizing behaviors (Simplico, 2012) and new faculty members may feel particularly isolated as they navigate a new space and culture (Boyd, Cintron, & Alexander-Snow, 2010). These expressions of bullying can create an environment that thwarts productive scholarship or collegiality (Hoel, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2020).

Organizational cultures also include interactions that occur within an informal network—referred to as a shadow system (Stacy, 1997)—that can lead "organisations to rethink and refocus their organizational culture in order to obtain the benefits associated with a highly engaged workforce and positive work environment" (Hartel, 2008, p. 1260). In this specific case, our efforts are intentionally focused on transforming a toxic department to a healthy workplace setting and culture.

Organizational Transformation

The landscape of higher education is characterized by internally and externally influenced variation that presents challenges to the leadership and faculty within it. To face and surmount these challenges, the cultivation of a positive departmental culture has emerged as a critical imperative for academic institutions. Such challenges at times demand transformation. In fact, Quan, et al, (2019) assert that "institutional transformation has been a central area of focus in higher education," particularly on the departmental level (p. 010141-1). In this light, a study of organizational change is often focused on the internal dynamic and history of an organization and "derives its force roots from the values and goals of the organization" held by the organization's members. Equally important, an organization's culture is reflected in "what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it" (Tierney, 1988, p. 3). In addition, change aimed at the department level is "more likely to be effective," when work is focused on three principles of organizational change: achieving positive outcomes, collaboration between groups members, and engagement in a continuous cycle of improvement (Quan, et al., 2019, p. 010141-1). Tierney (1988) states that these three principles are undergirded by the organization's sense of trust, particularly necessary "in a changing and uncertain higher education environment" (Driskill, Chatham-Carpenter, & McIntyre, 2018, p. 1). When considering the emotional components of a non-toxic—that is, healthy—culture, Hartel (2008) lists values and goals, high trust, inter-dependence, high compassion, and high cooperation as components of healthy organizations. For the purpose of this review, we focus on values and goals, inter-dependence or relationships, and trust within faculty, as well as high collaboration.

Values and Goals

A strong faculty culture is one that is defined by a unique set of values, beliefs, and assumptions and is critical to the success of any IHE department (Lee, 2007). However, a department may find itself in crisis because the culture is not aligned with the goals of the organization. To meaningfully change a culture, it is critical to first understand how the current one came to be (Schein & Schein, 2016; Tierney, 1988). Pifer, Baker & Lunsford (2019) contend that positive, results-oriented faculty

culture does not come about by chance. Such culture is the result of purposeful planning, reflection, execution, and shared assumptions (Mintrom, 2014; Tierney, 1988). Another key component that drives a positive department culture is identifying the values that support the mission (Driskill et al., 2018). Once identified they become the "shared common philosophical approach to discussion, decision making" taking into consideration "varied perspectives [to make] organizational decisions' (p. 4). Garrett (2019) states that "a healthy culture is one that motivates," encourages, supports, and helps members "to grow and develop" (p. 69) based on the shared values, goals, and mission.

Importance of Collaboration

A positive and supportive culture can provide a sense of community and belonging, and foster creativity, innovation, and a commitment to excellence while helping to attract and retain talented faculty members (Baker, Lunsford, & Pifer, 2017; Gappa & Leslie, 1993). Factors that contribute to a strong faculty culture include collaboration and cooperation, relationships based on trust, and mentorship (Hildesheim & Sonntag, 2020; Manning, 2018; Tierney, 2006). Additionally, a culture of trust is essential for faculty members to feel a sense of belonging, to feel comfortable taking risks and to speak up (Pifer, Baker, & Lunsford, 2019; Tierney, 2006).

Collaboration and cooperation among faculty members help to create a sense of shared purpose and can lead to increased innovative and effective teaching and research (Baker, Lunsford, & Pifer, 2017; Dahlander & McFarland, 2013; Kezar, 2013; Macfarlane, 2012) with a focus on creating a culture of excellence for students and faculty (Mintrom, 2014; Seymour, Hunter, Laursen, & DeAntoni, 2004). Organizational culture can be changed and transformed by developing and incorporating collaborative organizational activities and interactions that focus on positive communication and continuous improvement (Driskill et al., 2018).

Relationships

Building horizontal and vertical relationships are essential components to intentionality. In this rebuilding, "time becomes significant when it is used to establish and nurture relationships that are emotionally rich. Time derives its meaningfulness from and is largely defined by human interaction" (Parsons, 2008, p. 8). "The centrality of relationship and human interaction make it possible for achieving other outcomes…" (p. 668). Another aspect of the social perspective of time is the purposeful orchestration of relationships and human interactions. Most often these relationships function based on trust and exist because organizational members have used existing structures to build trusting relationships (Tierney, 2008).

Trust

Cases exist in which institutions of higher education exhibit substantive destructive flux and instability (Tierney, 2008). Once the status quo in organizations has been disrupted to the point of no longer being viable, change is imperative. According to Tierney (2008), within this context of change, trust is particularly important, as it plays a pivotal role in sustaining cooperation and ensuring organizational effectiveness. Through shared meaning, trust becomes the foundation of relationships and is the basis on which members engage in the co-creation of a shared vision, and mission (Tierney, 2008), and the goals geared to achieve positive outcomes (Quan, et al., p. 010141-5; Garrett, 2019; Tierney, 2008). Shared vision, supported by authentic collaboration, then becomes the driving force that guides change (Quan, et al., 2019, p. 010141-5).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore how a group of faculty members intentionally created a supportive departmental culture. We were interested in understanding how the department's dynamics shifted from one that was described as toxic and full of strife to one that was caring and collegial amongst

faculty colleagues. To achieve this aim, we utilized a collaborative autoethnographic approach where two or more faculty were engaged in autoethnography (Ngunjiri et al., 2010).

Biographical Sketch of Faculty Members in the Department

Various members of the Department of Educational Leadership participated in this collaborative autoethnography. Specifically, there were a total of ten full-time faculty members who vary in rank (from full professor to clinical assistant professor) and have different years of experience in the department, ranging from 19 years to one year. Further, five are identified as Black, three as White, one as multi-racial, and one as Asian. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the faculty members who contributed to this paper.

Table 1 *Demographics of Faculty Collaborative Autoethnography Participants*

EDL Colleagues	Rank	Years in the Department	Race	Gender
Barbara	Full Professor	19	Asian	Woman
Adrienne	Associate Professor	9	Black	Woman
Van	Associate Professor	8	Multi	Man
Loretta	Associate Professor	7	Black	Woman
Andrew	Associate Professor and Interim Department Chair	7	White	Man
Beth	Associate Professor	3	White	Woman
Emma	Assistant Professor	1	Black	Woman
Avery	Assistant Professor	3	Black	Woman
Sierra	Assistant Professor	3	Black	Woman
Simone	Clinical Assistant Professor	1	White	Woman

Data Collection and Analysis

Collaborative autoethnography allowed us to co-construct our shared and divergent experiences. In this paper's context, we implemented a full concurrent collaboration model outlined by Ngunjiri et al. (2010). This model necessitates that collaborators engage individually in autoethnographic writing, reflective practice, individual data analysis and coding, and independent interpretative synthesis. Ngunjiri et al. (2010) categorize these processes as distinct, divergent steps that facilitate the transition from preliminary data collection to report writing. Furthermore, to facilitate the transition from initial data acquisition to the composition of the final collaborative report, we employed convergent processes as described by Ngunjiri et al. (2010), to encompass group sharing and probing, meaning-making activities, theme identification, and joint group writing.

This collaborative approach was intentionally selected and similar to autoethnographies that have focused on common issues that occur within the academy such as roles and experiences (Hernandez et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2014), the intersectionality of racism and sexism (Ashlee

et al., 2017), mentoring (Moore et al., 2013), and incivility in higher education (Higgins, 2023). Collaborative autoethnographies allow the researcher(s) to present their findings in various formats. We used the approach deployed by Chang et al. (2014) and presented a thematic analysis. Further, we approach and present our data as dialogue (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005).

For data collection, we used the departmental mission statement, documents, and each individual's personal self-writing and reflection. The guiding questions for our self-writing activities included the following: How would you describe the culture of EDL when you joined? How would you describe it today? How have you experienced the culture in EDL? Why did you decide to join the EDL department? Why do you stay? Additionally, we brought in artifacts (e.g., departmental meeting agendas and conference presentations) to facilitate our remote face-to-face conversations via Microsoft Teams. During these conversations, we shared our stories and experiences and probed each other to think more deeply about how our experiences within the department have shaped our perceptions of the culture. These conversations were recorded and transcribed in their entirety and referenced during our collaborative writing process.

All autoethnographic manuscripts were manually coded and analyzed (Saldaña, 2016). Data were precoded (Saldaña, 2016) during the first round of coding, and, in our second review, we color-coded the data (Creswell, 2009). The specific coding methodologies we adopted encompassed values coding, versus coding, and emotion coding, all grounded in Saldaña's (2016) guidelines. We aligned with Saldaña's (2009) code-to-theory model for qualitative research and constructed categories of related items based on the initial codes. We then developed themes from these categories.

FINDINGS

The findings follow the results from our data analysis and address each of the three research questions. In addition, an associated finding is presented at the end of this section.

Research Question 1: What were the faculty's experiences that demonstrated the presence of toxicity in the pre-shift EDL culture?

Our findings highlight a form of negative departmental culture that occurred in the *past* which we term Pre-Shift, as it denotes a specific era in which faculty had negative experiences related to the departmental culture. Faculty narratives described the pre-shift department culture as toxic, comprised of the following elements: hostile, negating diversity and hierarchical in practice. The findings from this particular category reflect the experiences by way of written responses of the department faculty members who were then present and had worked and interacted with other faculty members—now retired, relocated or passed on--during this first stage designated as Pre-Shift.

Hostile Work Environment

During this stage, faculty members in this study collectively did not feel safe within the department, which reflected the department as characterized as a hostile work environment. Adrienne wrote, "The culture *was* toxic, racist, hierarchal, inequitable, and inhospitable to new faculty." This strong sentiment of toxicity in the form of hostility was echoed by all recently hired and senior faculty who were part of the department at that point. In Barbara's reflection, she noted, "I did not feel safe in expressing my perspectives in department meetings as faculty meetings sometimes

turned into verbal disputes or "battle grounds" where certain members used their voices to threaten or silence other voices or opinions."

The nearly constant disagreements and bickering amongst colleagues greatly impacted some participants' morale. Van wrote, "After joining [the department], the stories about lawsuits, near physical altercations, phrases like "we can take this to the parking lot" being used, and a general feeling of dislike seemingly floating over the department made me initially question my decision to join." Barbara added that, "At one point, the culture became so toxic that external consultants were invited to evaluate the department and provide sessions to help resolve the situation." The lack of safety and trust contributed to the toxic environment for faculty members by adding stressors to already difficult working conditions.

Negating Diversity

In addition to the hostile work environment, department members expressed that the department lacked diversity. One participant shared that they were explicitly told "we don't do diversity in this department." Another faculty member was told by a white woman faculty member "get over it" when they questioned the lack of diversity content in a course during an assessment visit. Other faculty members experienced this toxic culture directly in relation to their identities and were marginalized within the department. This was particularly relevant for Adrienne who was at the time the only tenure-track Black woman faculty member in the department. Reflecting on the many inequities she experienced she stated:

> I was not assigned a mentor and when I asked about a mentor, I was told that they assumed that 'since I had so much experience, I didn't need a mentor'. Admittedly, I had a wealth of experience, but I had no experience in higher education and was essentially left to my own devices to figure out how to navigate higher ed.

Other racialized experiences in the department showed up in hiring processes (i.e., one search committee member referring to a middle eastern applicant as "Saddam" when that wasn't his name), department meetings, and microaggressions highlighting the prevailing attitude throughout the department that a lack of perceived and/or experienced diversity did not matter.

Hierarchical

In alignment with more bureaucratic organizational approaches (Manning, 2018), faculty also viewed the department as hierarchical, making it challenging to collaborate and feel formally or informally supported by colleagues. Barbara stated, "I did notice that it was hierarchical in the Department, and I was new and did not really feel that I had a voice." Adrienne agreed, writing, "Members in the department actively followed a hierarchal disposition. Terms such as "junior" and "senior" faculty were prevalent and used as reasons that faculty members could not participate on departmental committees."

Participants also expressed that there were factions in the department and "there was gossip going around." According to Van, if the chair did not like a faculty member, the person could be accused of made-up wrong doings as a reason and reported to the college leadership to be fired or sent to another department. These collective experiences further highlight how the use of a hierarchical organizational approach actively worked against building a strong culture of trust and support within the department.

Research Question 2: In what ways did a shift in the EDL department culture occur?

The toxic department culture that faculty experienced was substantively mitigated by pivotal occurrences over a two-year span (2015-2017), which included several personnel changes that ultimately led to dramatic and positive shift toward a transformation in the department culture.

The shift included the following key elements: windows of opportunity for change, envisioning a new EDL culture, and institutionalizing the new culture.

Window of Opportunity for Change

Between 2015 and 2016, two of the original department faculty decided to retire and one senior lecturer left EDL for another university. After these retirements and faculty departure in the department, attrition within the department was heightened as another full professor retired in the next year and an associate professor passed away. Attrition was counterbalanced by the hiring of new faculty over a two-year period; specifically, two assistant professors were hired in 2015 and three assistant professors were hired in 2016, which, as an assistant professor had been hired in 2014, brought the total of new assistant professor faculty to six. Regular discussions occurred between the two assistant professors, the one hired in 2014 and one from 2015, and in one, they recognized there was a window of opportunity to create a distinctive culture within the department. This recognition was pivotal in transforming the department into what became a successful work culture, characterized as healthy, within the department.

Envisioning the new EDL Culture

Department faculty began through subsequent discussions to recognize this *window of opportunity* and joined in the transformation process by intentionally deciding to develop a new culture . Van described the window of opportunity this way:

The upside, many people were deciding to retire. That feels horrible to say but it was an important opportunity. I, another colleague, and the chair met to discuss what we hoped the department might look like 5 years into the future…I would suggest that the goals in that meeting, creating a culture of collegiality, support, one where there is no hierarchy, one where we celebrate each other's accomplishments because we care for one another and those accomplishments raise the profile and reputation of the department we share, and one where we never compete with one another, only against the guidelines is exactly how I would describe the culture today. One in which we are a family.

To begin the transformation, Van and Adrienne set up a meeting with the newly hired chair (previously the interim) in fall 2015 and pointed out the opportunity. One question guided the discussion: "What do we want our department to look like in five years?" Several key points were discussed. First, we described the desired culture, namely one that was supportive, direct, collaborative, and family focused. We intentionally used these terms to characterize the culture needed to be happy within our workplace. We also decided not to use rankings when referring to each other and to value all faculty opinions and voices equally. We agreed that disagreements were a part of the discussion process, and that once a decision was made, department faculty would work as a team in that common direction. Finally, we intentionally set out to build a culture where we did not compete with one another. We believed that the success of any faculty member would raise the department's profile. Adrienne reflected, "Most important, however, we intentionally set out to establish a culture that welcomed diverse people, and a culture that valued everyone equally for their value; all newcomers had a go-to person…"

Institutionalizing the Healthy EDL Culture

Even though faculty members recognized the need for a change in the culture, they also recognized the need to institutionalize these changes by defining their collective core values and then hiring based on those values.

Articulation of EDL culture in department core values. By Fall 2016, EDL experienced four senior member faculty turnovers resulting in the opportunity to hire three new tenure-tracked faculty members. With essentially a new faculty, the two assistant professors that

planted the seeds for this transformation, respectively, realized that to move forward as a cohesive unit, the department's new vision and mission needed to be formalized. Notes revealed that on 8/24/2016, during the departmental retreat from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m., the group of essentially new faculty met "to prioritize our purpose/vision/mission… to provide guidance in crafting our Ed.D. mission statement" (Ed.D. Redesign notes, 8.24.2016). To accomplish this task, they asked themselves four questions about the department: 1) What do I believe about the Department of Educational Leadership?; 2) Who does the Department of Educational Leadership serve; 3) Where is the greatest need in educational leadership; and 4) Who do we want to be [as a department]?

They listed each of these questions on large post-its and displayed them around the room. Faculty members were asked to write their responses on the post-its, which were subsequently tallied. The collected responses to "what do I believe about the department?" and "who do we want to be?" were central to developing our mission and values. The results from department members' collective thinking became the values from which we crafted our existing mission statement and core values. Among the five value statements, two of them relate to the key elements of the EDL Culture:

We value a Supportive and Positive Departmental Culture where we thoughtfully interact with Each Other as Accomplished Colleagues. We acknowledge each other's expertise, and we realize that the success of each of us benefits the Department as a whole.

Likewise, we value Dialogue, Collaboration, and Democratic practice as a Department. We value our relationships with each other, our students, our graduates, and our school and community partners. In our relations, we strive for honesty, integrity, transparency, and inclusiveness.

The explicit role of department culture in the hiring process. Another key aspect of this intentional culture-building was thinking critically about hiring processes. Faculty Retreat participants remember discussing the type of faculty EDL would seek to hire. We agreed that future departmental faculty would be academics who could support our students in their learning and guide quality dissertations, who understood our students as having lives outside of school (careers, family, other obligations, etc.) and who recognized that we are tasked in supporting students' learning as they navigate those challenges. The faculty at that time decided that these characteristics were more than important—they were critical to building a positive departmental culture. As a result, in every faculty search since, we have been clear and upfront about the importance of culture to potential hires and have solicited their thoughts on how they felt about a culture such as ours. For example, in every faculty search, there would be at least one interview question that related to department culture, such as asking each candidate to explain the meaning of collegiality in his or her perspective to better understand each candidate's perspectives and gauge the candidate's goodness of fit. Additionally, many applicants, upon learning of the positive, supportive culture, see said culture as a benefit and reason to consider joining.

Research Question 3: What were the faculty's experiences that demonstrated a healthy EDL culture after the shift?

Based on the accounts of the study's faculty members, the aforementioned key pillars of the intentional departmental culture have been sustained within the department. Specifically, current faculty experience the culture as professional, familial, diverse, and authentic.

Professional Culture

In our initial round of group coding, we identified professional culture as a theme. Colleagues felt that collectively, the department maintained a high-level of professionalism, which led to strong feelings of being heard, valued, and supported by most participants. Beth described the

feeling this way:

I feel really safe in our department bubble and am learning how I fit. I find the culture to be supportive and encouraging. It really is like a family. I think the department would come together to support anyone in need.

Ultimately, the professional culture described by participants exists in stark contrast to the hierarchical structure the department operated in prior to the intentional culture building. Faculty feel supported within the department's setting and trust each other, producing a culture of community and belonging. In our second round of coding, we recognized that this culture of professionalism was not expansive enough to articulate the deep sense of culture experienced by faculty in the EDL department. Therefore, we revisited our initial codes and identified familial culture as a key theme in relation to EDL department culture.

Familial

In our group discussions and written narratives, it was often conveyed that the EDL department was a family. The faculty described this in two ways. First, families may argue and disagree, but they do so at times respectfully, and with a focus on finding solutions. Second, faculty felt supported by the department in both their personal and working lives, leading to increased job satisfaction. Sierra wrote, "I was grateful for the concern and care shown when I had my child." Others echoed this sentiment. Loretta stated,

Colleagues/friends showed up for me from the most happiest moments to the sad. I will never forget the baby showers for my two children - I was enveloped with so much love and these are memories that will be forever etched in my heart.

Van's narrative described the culture this way:

> I experience the culture in EDL as I experience family. The main word I would use to describe our culture is trust. I trust the people I work with implicitly. They are family. We show up for each other. When both my mom and my dad died, people from the department showed up. They drove 2+ hours to show that I mattered. While I grieved, a colleague offered to handle my courses. I did the same previously when another colleague lost a parent. When colleagues have lost parents and spouses, I show up. We support each other through those life events because we know each other outside of work. We send food gift cards to each other so people don't have to worry about dinner and can focus on their grief. We do our best to take care of one of the most important members of our family.

Regardless of how long they had been members of the department, nearly all participants noted that the departmental culture in EDL was familial, further demonstrating the collegial culture within the department.

Diverse

In addition to the professional and familial culture that was in direct contrast to the pre-shift culture, participants also described the present culture as diverse. Beyond the sheer increase in racially diverse faculty visible in Table 1, in EDL we celebrate that our teaching dispositions collectively prioritize diversity. The diverse culture of the department is not limited to the faculty experience, as students are at the receiving end of the culture, and it changes the way that they engage and experience our department and courses. Adrienne wrote it this way:

> When I joined EDL, only one African American student out of about 13 was in the EDD program. Now there are about half as many students of other races…We have a concerted emphasis on diversity throughout our programs and faculty. Students also report that the EDL experience is different. One student commented that when she looked at programs, she noted the diversity in our department. That diversity was attractive to her.

Beyond the student experience, faculty wrote about feeling seen and being able to honor their intersectional identities without fear of being ostracized within the department. Emma wrote:

> As a Black woman, finding safe spaces where I don't regularly experience the impacts of racism through microaggressions (…) and stereotypes is rare…I joined the EDL department at [IHE] solely because of the community of scholars in the department and the way they talked about their experiences. I stay because these are the types of colleagues I want to continue this work with. I can do research, teach, or serve anywhere, but the community I do those things with matters to me. This is a direct representation of the power of a positive culture in a department!

The diverse culture experienced by both students and EDL faculty is closely related to the authenticity that echoes throughout the department and creates a safe space for faculty members in their working lives.

Authentic

Authenticity was found to be functioning throughout the overall department culture and the department's commitment to hiring faculty who value the newly transformed culture. This was clear in Loretta's statement, "I knew when I interviewed that there was a significant difference in the interactions I saw among the faculty and most especially with the chair. There was a warmth and kindness that was genuine." Beth echoed those sentiments writing,

> The Department Chair at the time was unbelievably supportive and welcoming. She was also very real with me about the difficulty I was facing in my P&T process. I was assigned a mentor who was such a blessing; not sure I can even thank her enough…The authenticity and ethics of my colleagues are motivating to me. ...when anyone asks, I honestly say that in the end, it worked out for me.

Simone discussed the authenticity she witnessed during the hiring process,

> During my interview process I appreciated how honestly and candidly my questions were answered. As I look back on it, every answer has played out just as it was described. Nobody was trying to make things look shiny and fancy—just real. Even more important was that the team was clear that they were looking for the right fit and would not compromise on that.

These quotations specifically point to the idea that the authenticity within the EDL department was experienced by faculty members first and foremost during the hiring process. The decision to prioritize the hiring process as a key opportunity to model the department culture by remaining authentic was key in sustaining the transformed department culture.

Associated Finding: Sustaining EDL Healthy Culture through Guardianship

The notion of "family" was experienced in the department's culture through shared learning, problem-solving, and internal integration (Schein & Schein, 2016). Faculty members took ownership of the departmental culture leading them to have a desire and a natural tendency to protect it.

Adrienne described her role in sustaining the departmental culture stating, "Over the years I have remained because I see myself as one of the 'guardians of the culture—equity' not just for my colleagues, but also for my students." Sierra recognized engaging in the intentional work to maintain a positive culture stating, "I stay because of the respect I have for colleagues and the focus they have on maintaining a supportive culture regardless of the challenges that exist on the college and university level." Additionally, Van highlighted the intentionality in developing the culture implying his desire and intent to also protect the culture. He noted, "The creation of the culture was

done purposefully, and we cherish it. We hire to it. We believe in it."
Ultimately, within the department, this collective sense of responsibility and dedication to the culture is key to sustaining its vibrancy and resilience.

DISCUSSION

Our findings highlight an important aspect of cultural transformation during intensely challenging times (Tierney, 2008). Pivotal times of change are distinguished by leaders' and faculty's learned ability to question, challenge, change, or support institutional structures. In the context of our EDL department, the pivotal time of change occurred when faculty members left the department for several reasons (death, retirement, relocation, etc.), coinciding with our department's ability to recognize and respond with intentionality. These two pivotal elements created a window of opportunity to engage in a transformational process of changing a toxic departmental culture to a healthy culture (Quan et al., 2019). According to Tierney (1988), organizational change may occur as a result of a significant crisis.

Initially, faculty members described their experiences within a toxic culture characterized by hostility, inequity, and a hierarchical working environment (Florczak, 2022; Tastan, 2017), which formed the basis for a transformation in the departmental culture over a 2-year period. This finding highlights the critical need for recognizing and acknowledging the existence of toxic cultures within academia. The impact of toxic departmental culture on the overall well-being and productivity of faculty and students cannot be underestimated (Tight, 2023).

Another pivotal aspect of our research was the role of intentionality in effecting cultural change (Croft et al., 2019). In the face of departmental personnel changes, including a new department chair, key faculty members intentionally envisioned and, with the active support and assistance of the collective faculty, implemented a cultural transformation. This finding underscores the importance of proactive leadership in fostering healthy departmental cultures (Driskill et al., 2018; Tierney, 1988). It also highlights the influence that individual actions and intentions can have in reshaping the culture of an academic department. This is particularly relevant regarding hiring practices, as individual hiring decisions play a major role in sustaining departmental culture through continued guardianship.

In alignment with the pedagogy of intentionality, the evidence from our study suggests that the current departmental culture is characterized by a sense of community, collegial interdependence, and authentic relationships. Faculty members described their experiences within a healthy culture as professional, familial, diverse, and authentic. These characteristics emphasize the importance of inclusivity, collaboration, and a sense of belonging within academic departments (Hildesheim & Sonntag, 2020; Lee, 2007; Manning, 2018; Macfarlane, 2012; Tierney, 2006).

Importantly, this study contributes to the literature in organizational transformation in that it relates to a total transformation of a department rather than a particular aspect of a department (Duryea, 2000; Hearn & Anderson, 2002). Our study findings highlight the transformative power of intentionality in reshaping departmental culture within higher education institutions and across all educational planning activities. Findings, moreover, underscore the critical importance of fostering inclusive, supportive, and authentic academic environments. As IHEs seek to create and sustain effective and sustainable cultures, recognizing and acting upon the significance of intentionality and collective effort in achieving these goals by administration and faculty is paramount.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The transformation from a toxic to a healthy departmental culture has significant implications for student and faculty success. A healthy culture can positively impact faculty motivation, job satisfaction, and overall well-being, which, in turn, can enhance teaching, research, and mentorship (Macfarlane, 2012; Mintrom, 2014). Such an environment can also contribute to student success by creating a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. Our department established a mutual understanding of explicitly defining culture for the good of the whole by intentionally building a departmental culture that actively focuses on collaboration and equity. Given the constantly evolving higher education landscape, it is evident that departmental culture will continue to play a significant role in determining faculty recruitment and retention efforts. Therefore, in addition to prioritizing cultures of excellence (Mintrom, 2014), institutions and departments must be willing to prioritize healthy cultures whose central focus comprises collegiality, authenticity, and diversity.

Our study has implications for future research regarding the impacts of a healthy departmental culture on faculty well-being and overall faculty retention rates. Likewise, we sense that the good-of-the-whole mentioned previously extended beyond the faculty to the students we serve, such that leadership candidates can carry forth the ideals of fostering equitable environments, as they have experienced equity first-hand in their own graduate experiences. This area is another area for future research.

An important consideration for the sustainability of a healthy departmental culture is the need for ongoing commitment and vigilance. Leaders and faculty members must continue to be intentional in their efforts to maintain and nurture the positive aspects of the culture and guard against the re-emergence of toxic elements (Driskill et al., 2018; Tierney, 2006. Our study's findings suggest that an intentional departmental culture is essential for the well-being of faculty as well as the students the faculty serves—particularly a culture that is both professional and collegial, values diversity and authenticity, and intentionally protects the department culture. It is evident from this study that, in contrast to departments built on toxicity, departments constructed on an ethos of community, interdependence, and relationships provide a healthy and nurturing environment for which schools of educational leadership may benefit.

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