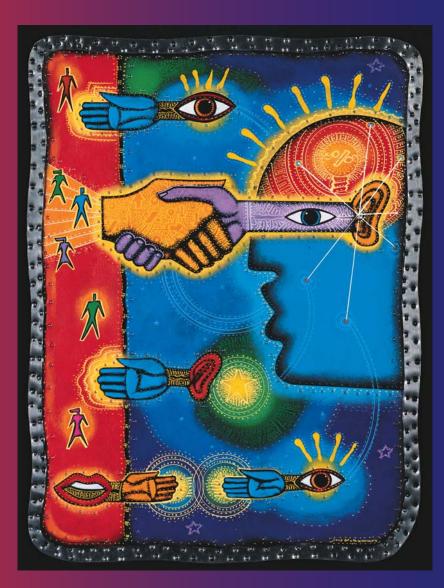# Promoting Student Leadership on Campus:

A Guide for Creating a Culture of Engagement

INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

MARÍA "CUCA" ROBLEDO MONTECEL, PH.D.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Mission: Creating schools that work for *all* children.

Vision: IDRA is a vanguard leadership development and research team working with people to create self-renewing schools that value and empower all children, families and communities.

Functions:

POLICY AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT – IDRA policy and leadership development promotes accountability and responsibility. Using inclusive, cutting-edge and broad-based strategies, we develop leadership within communities, schools and policy-making bodies to create collaborative and enlightened educational policies that work for *all* children.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION – IDRA research and evaluation advance educational policies, programs and practices. Using collaborative and innovative methods, we investigate important questions and provide insights into compelling educational issues. As a national resource, we set standards in the design, analysis, and synthesis of timely and useful research involving diverse populations.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – IDRA professional development causes people across the country to take action that empowers others. We assist people to create educational solutions through innovative, participatory, and hands-on presentations, workshops, and technical assistance that promotes sustained growth and development.

Our assistance values the needs and cultures of our participants and acknowledges their experiences. We carefully craft training designs that include reflection and application. IDRA professional development causes participants to take a new look at persistent problems and equips them to take action that produces positive outcomes for *all* children.

PROGRAMS AND MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT – IDRA programs and materials cause people across the country to improve education for *all* children. Our programs produce results. Our materials are useful and timely; attractive, cost-effective and intuitive; linguistically, culturally and developmentally appropriate.

IDRA pro-actively disseminates cutting-edge information to educators, administrators, decision- and policy-makers, parents and community leaders.

Promoting Student Leadership on Campus

A Guide for Creating a Culture of Engagement

Promoting Student Leadership on Campus – A Guide for Creating a Culture of Engagement
by Rosana G. Rodríguez, Ph.D., Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D., and Josie Danini Cortez, M.A.

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization, directed by María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., dedicated to creating schools that work for all children. As a vanguard leadership development and research team for three decades, IDRA has worked with people to create self-renewing schools that value and empower all children, families and communities. IDRA conducts research and development activities, creates, implements and administers innovative education programs and provides teacher, administrator, and parent training and technical assistance.

Foreword

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) is pleased to share these tools to help families and school personnel assess the degree of accessibility and readiness for parental and community engagement on the part of educational systems. They are indicators of pathways that exist or need to be created in order to begin a dialogue toward shared accountability and greater impact for student success.

Positive impact through engagement stems from partnerships between schools, parents and communities that are based on mutual benefit, respect and accountability. Engagement for impact goes beyond temporary or limited outreach on the part of educational institutions. While the process is challenging, an approach that embraces engagement can yield significant results in learning for all spheres.

To foster lasting and meaningful educational impact, mechanisms for engagement with parents and families need to be firmly embedded in the mission, vision and central activities of educational institutions from pre-school through higher education. A culture of engagement needs to be fostered that ultimately has a lasting impact on student access, success and graduation for all students. Although difficult to achieve, by forming lasting partnerships and engaging with parents, schools and universities can make an important investment in the future of their young people and have lasting positive impact on their communities.

María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Intercultural Development Research Association

Promoting Student Leadership on Campus

During a time when we are recognizing the importance of partnerships with families and communities in educational decisionmaking, one key element in the equation for student success is too often overlooked: *student voices*. It is amazing how as educators, families and communities, we often focus on new efforts at mutual collaboration, engagement and accountability, but fail to include student perspectives in this dialogue. It is not surprising that students often interpret a local landscape within schools and colleges as void of opportunities for engaging them as key members of the planning process. What is needed to complete and strengthen our picture of engagement is recognition and commitment to support emerging student leadership in the process of improving school holding power and broadening access and success from pre-school through higher education.

Long-term research from the Harvard Assessment Project is revealing that building connections between school and community life contributes to more fulfilled college graduates (Light, 2001). Students who find ways of connecting their curricular and extracurricular activities are the most satisfied. This is a powerful message to people who run schools and colleges – deans, presidents, chancellors, academic vice presidents, principals and faculty – to create opportunities that encourage students to engage *internally* in dialogues about improving institutions and *externally* in activities within their communities. This can begin in elementary through high school and into higher education.

Emerging student leadership is an invaluable resource to our educational institutions and communities as together we create a vision for the future. We should ask ourselves whether we are opting to keep students invisible and quiet on campus, or are we pro-actively advocating their involvement in decisionmaking and supporting meaningful student leadership. Students can help us keep the focus clear in our planning by asking the uncomfortable and tough key question regarding any educational environment: is this relevant preparation for my future life? Yet students are seldom asked to join into the discussion about improving schools and colleges. Most students interviewed in some of the current research complain that they are seldom if ever asked about issues and that time with advisers is too short or non-existent.

> **Students can help us keep the focus clear in our planning by asking the uncomfortable and tough key question regarding any educational environment - is this relevant preparation for my future life?**

Every community has similar educational institutions that are understood and operated in distinctive ways. And while there are no cookie-cutter practices that work for all settings, there are some guiding principles that underlie a commitment on the part of educational institutions to support emerging youth leadership and youth engagement with community. These materials are offered under the premise that most schools and colleges are striving to strengthen their connection with students, families and communities.

Below are some practices for schools and campuses that can create educational environments that foster emerging student leadership and strengthen ties with families and communities.

Acknowledge the Role of Family and the Extended Community

Research shows that family and community involvement are critical for all students. To the extent that parents and families are encouraged to become familiar with and engaged in the activities of campus, they are able to be more effective in their support of leadership development from elementary through the collegiate level. For many minority students, especially those who are first in their families to attend formal schooling or college, the role of family and extended community is vital to student success and leadership development. It is an important source of motivation and achievement because many of these students recognize that their achievement reflects on the extended family (Fries-Britt, 2002). Many Hispanic students and Black students are vitally aware that they are underrepresented in many fields; this can naturally inspire them to do better and to be conscious of the need to be engaged with their communities.

What can schools and campuses do?

♦ Campuses can support and encourage student contacts with their families and extended communities.
♦ Likewise, they can encourage participation of family members and community in the activities on campus.

Recognize and Value Students for their Contributions

Faculty can begin by establishing relationships with students, student-led campus groups and youth organizations to invite and *listen* to student voices. Administration can involve students in identifying needs and assessing opportunities for leadership development. Here are some suggestions:

♦ Offer a "diverse menu" of opportunities to receive input from youth on a variety of educational issues.
♦ Formalize the importance of student input through student representation on committees.
♦ Encourage student participation during the school day as well as after school and on weekends. Host meetings during flexible hours to allow for student schedules.
♦ Publicize the work of students and their ideas as a regular part of school and college newsletters and bulletin boards.
♦ Offer space to student organizations for performances, art shows, youth leadership symposia and other activities, create local funds to advocate student leadership activities and invite multi-generational opportunities to talk about leadership from many perspectives that honor and incorporate local leadership, values, culture and diversity.

Support Extracurricular Youth Activities in Communities

Young people working in their community, volunteering or lobbying for support for their organizations learn political skills and valuable lessons about how to move through and with the "system." With their peers and with others, they learn to assess their products and their activities, youth come to understand that quality evolves, and they can learn leadership skills about

the importance of revision, attention to detail, and pride of individual and group effort (Community Counts – Public Education Network). Emerging student leaders learn about the joy of giving back and civic responsibility. Their unique perspectives can energize efforts and bring greater clarity and new dimensions of accountability to planning efforts.

♦ Campuses can increase opportunities for students to work with faculty and with other students in problem solving, policy review and planning.

Collaborate with Effective Community-Based Organizations Supporting Youth

It is important to consider which community-based organizations or clubs are the most effective partners for schools and colleges in fostering youth leadership. Consider the following in selecting organizations for partnerships:

♦ High quality youth organizations are youth-centered and respond to diverse skills, talents and interests of students. They build on strengths and chose appropriate materials and activities that reinforce a positive approach. They reachout to *all* youth and provide personal attention through focused activities.

♦ Embedded within the organization's programs are activities that build a range of life skills. The adults within effective youth organizations recognize the many kinds of knowledge and skills youth need to succeed in school and life, and they deliberately try to provide them.

♦ Effective community-based organizations focus on building relationships among youth, adults, and the broader community. They are sensitive in honoring the diversity of race, language and culture within the broader community.

Support Student Leadership in the Budget

In order to seek out and underwrite committed individuals and enable their work in supporting student leadership, sufficient funds must be in place. Students quickly learn about the support and constraints of their schools and colleges. If this is a priority for a campus, financial support for leadership fostering activities and student groups must be evident in the budget. Given the current climate of limited funding, students have ineffective voice and claim upon educational resources, and therefore organizations need to make this commitment evident.

♦ Effective campuses recognize that student leadership development is school and community development.

Support Student-Led Campus Groups

Many student-led clubs, organizations, and campus groups provide a platform to support emerging student leadership as well as focus on engagement with community, such as MEChA – Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan and others. Researchers Anthony Antonio (2001) and Darly Smith et. al (1997) report in their reviews of the literature that organizing and supporting student groups with attention to race and ethnicity can have educational benefits. For example, student organizations that are specifically designed to support students of color appear to contribute to those students' retention, adjustments, and attachment to their institutions. What can campuses do?

- Encourage students to use their social support groups as academic support groups and provide counseling and advisors to help foster and fund these activities.

Create a Shared Vision of Student Engagement

In order to create an "intentional" environment that supports youth leadership, a shared vision and commitment to do so must first be in place. Leadership and passion often go hand in hand, therefore, the commitment and enthusiasm of everyone, especially key administrators involved, brings essential elements of stability and momentum necessary to sustain campus efforts. Supporting student leadership needs to be seen as a shared mission to achieve and be held accountable for. To accomplish this:

- Policies and practices need to be in place to support youth leadership;
- Ongoing assessment of progress toward that mission needs to occur, with adjustments toward that goal made regularly; and
- Progress reports should be shared among *all* stakeholders, including students.

Chris Argyris, in his book *On Organizational Learning*, speaks to the dichotomy of thinking and doing as theories of beliefs versus action (1999). Basically, students would say that educational institutions need to "walk their talk" – they can't purport to be about student success and not involve students in the dialogue. In order to do this, we need to close the gaps between our talk and our action. If we can plan together, we can begin to understand the scope of how things really work in our educational environments through the eyes and ears of students, and take appropriate and effective actions to move forward toward our desired results. Through honest dialogue with students, we can know where we are and together plan where we want to go in supporting leadership.

A positive approach to planning collaboratively involves the following:

- Be open and honest to promote healthy exploration of the topic at hand.
- Allow everyone to contribute their best thinking and respect their ideas.
- Continuously check-in to see what is working.
- Create a reward system that values student leadership and shared decisionmaking.
- Follow through with actions – only make promises you can keep.

As we ask ourselves what support systems our students need to develop leadership for the future, the answer will require many perspectives coming together to move beyond our traditional approach to business as usual. Involving students *now* will help to foster the kind of leadership for transformation that is needed, not only for our educational systems, but also for our communities and our world.

We hope you find the following checklist helpful in planning to support student leadership in your campus.

Creating a Climate for Student Leadership

Directions: Use this checklist to assess how your campus is supporting student leadership and for planning next steps. Involve students, administrators, faculty and families in the process.

Dimension	3 – Yes	2 – Somewhat	1 – No	4 – Don't Know
1. Acknowledging the role of family and extended community	3	2	1	88
2. Recognizing and valuing students for their contributions	3	2	1	88
3. Supporting extracurricular youth activities in communities	3	2	1	88
4. Collaborating with effective community-based organizations supporting youth	3	2	1	88
5. Supporting student leadership in the budget	3	2	1	88
6. Supporting student-led campus groups	3	2	1	88
7. Creating a shared vision of student engagement	3	2	1	88

Acknowledging the Role of Family and Extended Community

What is working?

What is holding us back?

What can be improved?

Action steps and time line:

Recognizing and Valuing Students for their Contributions

What is working?

What is holding us back?

What can be improved?

Action steps and time line:

Supporting Extracurricular Youth Activities in Communities

What is working?

What is holding us back?

What can be improved?

Action steps and time line:

Collaborating with Effective Community-Based Organizations Supporting Youth

What is working?

What is holding us back?

What can be improved?

Action steps and time line:

Supporting Student Leadership in the Budget

What is working?

What is holding us back?

What can be improved?

Action steps and time line:

Supporting Student-Led Campus Groups

What is working?

What is holding us back?

What can be improved?

Action steps and time line:

Creating a Shared Vision of Student Engagement

What is working?

What is holding us back?

What can be improved?

Action steps and time line:

Other Resources

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Feedback Form

Please copy or tear out this form, respond to the questions below, and send to IDRA by fax (210-444-1714) or by mail (IDRA, 5835 Callaghan Road, Suite 350, San Antonio, Texas 78228-1190). Or, visit the IDRA web site and complete this form online (http://www.idra.org/enlace/slreview.htm).

1. With whom of the following did you use the *Promoting Student Leadership on Campus*?

   ☐ Higher education faculty
   ☐ K-12 educators
   ☐ Parents
   ☐ School administrators
   ☐ Students, K-12
   ☐ Students, higher education
   ☐ Other _____

2. Number of participants _____

3. How much time did you spend using these materials? _____

4. Was the time allotted sufficient?
   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

5. Does your school have family engagement objectives that were not addressed in the guide?
   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

6. If yes, what are they?

7. Was the guide effective in identifying elements of family engagement?
   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

8. Did the guide help facilitate discussion?
   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

9. Did the guide help facilitate planning and decision making? ☐ Yes   ☐ No

10. What feedback was received from participants?

11. What worked well?

12. What would you do differently?

13. Would you recommend this guide and process to others?
    ☐ Yes   ☐ No

14. Other comments:

Name of School or Organization:

_____

Date: _____

City, State: _____

Contact person*:_____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

* For potential clarification purposes only, not for attribution.

IDRA is a non-profit research and development organization dedicated to the
improvement of educational opportunities for *all* children.