

Inclusive Leadership Amid Civic Unrest Exploring Solutions to Police Brutality and Inequity

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ABSTRACT

During the Fall 2020 academic year, students in a graduate research course had just experienced a volatile summer with racial unrest and civic discord in the midst of a global health pandemic, which required a transition to online learning. As part of the course, and given the ongoing number of killings of unarmed Black men and women by police, the course would take a heightened approach to discussing the events of the Summer of 2020 and to working towards a solution of societal ills such as police brutality, inequity, and low levels of civic engagement among young people. This work, a qualitative case study using theoretical lens of inclusive leadership, sought ways to empower scholars in a graduate research course at a Mid-Atlantic HBCU by exploring the themes of community-oriented policing, qualified immunity, civic engagement, and equity. The study found that ideas such as the use of social media, holding online forums to meet with police, and starting civic groups in one's own neighborhood can serve as starting points.

KEYWORDS

Civic Engagement, Community-Oriented Policing, Equity, Graduate Studies, HBCUs, Meta-Analysis, Online Learning, Police Brutality, Qualified Immunity, Social Justice

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, universities across the United States and around the world shuttered their doors and ushered students and faculty into an online learning environment. The abrupt shift from in-person learning to digital modes was shocking to many, in particular students themselves. In the wake of the educational upheaval, educational instruction continued largely uninterrupted. During the fall 2020 semester, once everyone became acclimated to online learning, brought a welcome respite after a summer of social unrest and the continuation of a global health crisis. This work, explores the virtual experiences in a graduate research course at an HBCU located in a Mid-Atlantic state, and serves marquee assignment for the course. This assignment explored, using a meta-analysis article (Gill et al., 2014) and a news article about the meta-analysis article (Maximino, 2015), the manner in which community-oriented policing could potentially serve as a solution to the continuing spate of killings by law enforcement of unarmed men and women in the United States who are classified as Black or African American. In addition to reviewing and exploring the journal article on community-oriented

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policing, the class also featured a watch party and screened the PBS Frontline documentary *Policing the Police 2020*, and a Q&A session followed the screening.

In addition, scholars in the course were divided into three groups and were assigned to explore topics related to community-oriented policing and the civil unrest witnessed in the United States in 2020. Those topics were qualified immunity, community engagement, and the concept of equity. Qualified immunity, a legal disclaimer or sort introduced during Freedom Summer by lawmakers in Mississippi that prevented victims of police abuse from bring civil and criminal charges against law enforcement officers unless they were found to have violated a plaintiff's human rights. At the close of the Civil Rights Era and the passing of the 1965 Civil Rights Act by Lyndon B. Johnson, most of the nation's local precincts had adopted the law based on the legal precedent established in Mississippi (Manns, 2021). The nationwide law backed by the U.S. Supreme Court in numerous instances, absolved officers and other public officials from responsibility. In 2021, New York City passed laws ending the practice of qualified immunity for NYPD officers in the wake of years of violations that left families unable to seek criminal charges for egregious misdeeds (Ali & Clark, 2019; Manns, 2021; Williams, 2021). This topic was central to the assignments and discussions of police brutality and unwarranted killings of unarmed Black people and others as the failure to prosecute police leaves the impression that they are "getting away with murder of citizens."

According to Pace Funders (2021), civic engagement is defined as the "process of helping people be active participants in building and strengthening their communities, whether defined as a place or a shared identity or interest." This topic was also explored by one of the student groups in the course in order to incite the idea that change is a collective responsibility and scholars themselves must be encouraged to engage in this process to in order to improve their communities and solve existing challenges. Equity, is the concept of "achieving equality" by providing necessary resources and financial support to close existing economic, political and educational gaps in society with all public serving institutions engaging in fair, just and equitable distribution of associated resources (Longley, 2021; National Academy of Public Administration, n.d.). Equity was added to the assignment in order to assist scholars in learning about the historic and systemic imbalances in place under the system of white supremacy and to provide insights on how to challenge such imbalance.

These assignments, including the video screening, wiki development and podcast, was designed to create potential solutions to an ongoing societal challenge—police brutality and the killings of unarmed citizens, particularly those who are classified as Black or African American. Accordingly, the purpose of this work, a qualitative case study (Creswell & Cresswell, 2018; Warren & Karner, 2015), under the theoretical backdrop of inclusive leadership (Fournier, 2020), seeks to demonstrate the manner in which experiential learning opportunities in a digital and online environment can in fact lead to viable solutions for scholars to apply in their own communities and in the digital sphere. Further, and also aligned with the goal of this work and the assignments in the course, the class explored the manner in which online learning during a global health crisis and social unrest can be tailored to encourage self-efficacy, agency and leadership among students in a graduate research course at an historically Black university or an HBCU. The primary aim of this work, similar to that of the meta-analysis and wiki assignment in the course itself, serves to exemplify how scholars can be encouraged to engage in critical thinking, civil discourse and troubleshooting for challenges that may plague society such as police brutality and social inequity.

BACKGROUND

As noted earlier, the meta-analysis assignment on community-oriented policing was completed during the fall 2020 and was first introduced to the class in the fall of 2015 with the first of a series of amplified killings in the media of unarmed citizens who are classified as Black. These killings and the subsequent media coverage brought laser focus to an ongoing phenomenon and caused much consternation among students who expressed uncertainty about "what to do about" these events or

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