



Reflections

From Diversity to Inclusion: Challenges and Opportunities at an Urban Community College

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REFLECTIONS

In the past decade, specific and intentional efforts have been undertaken to examine and address the state of diversity and inclusion on our urban commuter campus, which serves more than 35,000 degree and non-degree students. Here, we outline the specific steps taken to create a more inclusive campus, which involved a collaborative effort between the Academic and Student Affairs divisions of the college, along with administration. This partnering provided the opportunity to examine how the leadership of the institution has worked to allay diversity concerns, and how constituents can impact the direction taken on by the institution. Below, we also reflect on this collaborative process, noting the areas of success and those where improvements are needed. We offer recommendations that come from our experiences as we also consider our next steps towards greater inclusion, with hopes that those doing similar work at other institutions might benefit or learn from our approaches and missteps.

Creating Opportunities to Explore Diversity and Inclusion on Campus: Steps & Strategies

In accordance with our mission statement of educating and graduating one of the most diverse student bodies in the nation, our institution has demonstrated its commitment to diversity through several initiatives in its close to fifty-year history.

A group of faculty and staff of color began discussing a need to recreate a space where persons of color could address their concerns and experiences around diversity and exclusion. Such spaces had previously existed in the college's history but had ceased to function due to attrition and retirement of those leading at the time. At around the same time, White staff saw a need to come together as allies to work towards creating a more diverse and inclusive community where everyone felt valued.

These allies sought to partner with Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), a national organization concerned with addressing white supremacy and other forms of oppression to help build a racially just society. SURJ believes that anti-racism work cannot be done in isolation and is committed to partnering with the leadership of communities of color. It is “one part of a multi-racial, cross-class movement centering the leadership of people of color” (SURJ, n.d.). A small cohort of White faculty and staff began meeting regularly to learn more of the struggles facing their colleagues and students of color, and to consider activist steps they could take on campus. One such step was to lead a campus-wide “teach in” on white supremacy, white privilege and the importance of engaging in anti-racist work.

In the fall of 2017, the Faculty and Staff of Color Collective (hereafter FSOC) was created to cultivate a space to share experiences and examine the nature and perception of diversity and inclusion on our urban commuter campus where adult learners and traditional-aged students come to school daily as they work towards a postsecondary degree or certification. FSOC quickly developed strategies and approaches to bring their message campus-wide. Several subcommittees were formed, including:

- Faculty & Student Engagement
- Policy & Institutional Reform
- Reading & Scholarship
- Inquiry & Data Collection
- Fellowship & Social Planning
- Mentoring & Professional Development
- Campus Anti-Racism Training

Each committee was tasked with identifying steps to be taken to promote the broader goals of FSOC and the specific objectives of each subcommittee. These committees allowed us to consider the different aspects of the college, including: ways in which students are engaged in and outside of the classroom; how current and past policies and practices have served to support or challenge the experiences of our diverse student body; what we know, what we do not know, and how we might go about researching areas related to experiences of diversity and inclusion; and how we educate ourselves and the larger community through reading, scholarship and anti-racism training.

At a college-wide professional development presentation in fall 2018, a racially and culturally diverse group of faculty and staff presented two roundtable discussions that invited dialogue examining diversity and inclusion on campus. The goal of the roundtable was to bring together members of the community (faculty, staff and students) in an attempt to understand diversity and inclusion as it related to current students’ experiences as well as faculty and staff experiences.

To date, FSOC has presented at the college’s convocation; shared its findings at a university-wide event (sponsored by the Mellon Humanities Alliance); co-led and co-facilitated events addressing microaggressions on campus with the Senate’s Committee on Diversity and Inclusion; contributed to the college’s strategic plan; generated and analyzed a college-sponsored campus-wide survey addressing the experience of racial bias on campus; and hosted campus wide sessions to disseminate and discuss the survey results.

We were able to achieve this through meeting with representatives of the executive leadership and were subsequently invited to be a part of a college-wide strategic summit. This summit was designed to engage members of the college community to examine what should be the strategic priorities of our institution. By explicitly addressing issues of diversity and inclusion in this forum, we were able to accomplish the task of highlighting the importance of this topic.

Additionally, through conversations with the Academic Affairs leadership, it was understood that faculty who contributed to leading initiatives and engaging in work in this effort would have their efforts counted as a valued college contribution. This was especially important, as FSOC members sought to prevent “diversity burnout” -- the hidden and often unrecognized labor done by faculty and staff of color to combat issues of privilege and promote inclusivity.

Lastly, along with SURJ and the College Senate’s Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, we were invited to share and recapitulate our collective endeavors in diversity and inclusion work during a college-wide meeting of faculty and staff.

Throughout this process, our communication and transparency with our supportive college administration was essential. As leaders in a groundswell effort, we took this approach to ensure that our leadership saw the significance of this work, the value in deepening the work, and the importance of being more intentional about addressing issues of inclusion among our diverse community.

Creating Opportunities in Explore Diversity and Inclusive on Campus: Lessons Learned

At our initial FSOC meeting, faculty and staff of varying rank and employment status shared their personal experiences. These experiences related to professional advancement, growth opportunities, and sense of value. These stories were not simply anecdotes of what occurred as employees and members of the campus community; they also reflected an aggregate of the experience many had on multiple campuses where they had worked over many years. There was genuine eagerness to share stories and address what kept many members connected to the college and community. This included a shared sense of commitment to elevating the status of our diverse learners, who tended to be students of color, often adult learners, typically hailing from immigrant, working-class populations. We were able to commiserate on the challenges of working with, providing services to, and teaching students who have attended poor and underfunded elementary and secondary schools, and were therefore sometimes excluded from enriching experiences and opportunities. We were joined in our shared desire to support students striving to enhance their lives and the lives of their families. Faculty and staff sat together and could clearly see the things that connected us. Yet, we began to learn of some of the differences and challenges between us.

Unknowing staff and faculty quickly learned that there is a hierarchy in higher education, where those on the Academic Affairs side of the house are seemingly valued more than those providing student support services, for example. We learned that some women found that their voices went unheard and that their concerns could only be taken in when spoken by a man. We learned that concerns expressed by racial minorities could only be taken in when they were couched in terms that joined a broader group who had shared similar concerns (such as those of the LGBTQIA population). Some questioned whether their lack of advancement was connected to their race and/or gender rather than their competence. While these views may have reflected the personal experiences of a small group of self-selected individuals who opted to participate in an affinity group, we believe that these perspectives nonetheless have value and are worthy of deeper exploration. From this, and with the support of a concerned administration, we agreed that we would initiate a deeper dive across the campus and conduct a campus-specific survey that would provide us with a sense of how pervasive these individuals stories would be.

What was learned through conversations with students, FSOC meetings, and the racial climate survey administered to staff and faculty was both encouraging and concerning. Students expressed concerns that while there is visible diversity on campus, there were in-class experiences that left some feeling marginalized. Adult learners spoke to the use of ableist terminology in the classroom that excluded

physically disabled, physically challenged, or mentally disabled individuals; a recent graduate spoke of resistance to use of appropriate pronouns that reflected their identities, and one group of students of color questioned whether there was preference for another group of students of color who represent the largest majority on campus. These conversations highlighted what many faculty and staff of color were already aware of: that despite our “gorgeous mosaic” of students, there was the feeling among some of being diminished and marginalized on a campus that is extremely diverse. This begs the question, how can this be the experience on a campus where diversity is represented among students, faculty and staff?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Diversity only serves to further segregation if the voices, perceptions, backgrounds, experiences, and stories of differing people are not accepted and valued. Phillips (2014) reminds us that “being around people who are different from us makes us more creative, more diligent and harder-working.” This underscores the need for diversity and inclusion: diversity is not just about the numbers; inclusion is not just being around different people; rather, the intentional integration of variegated thoughts, histories, and traditions that provide nuance to educational environments is paramount.

Establishing and maintaining diverse and inclusive environments in higher education must be intentional. The stakeholders must all be committed to the work. The success of a diversity and inclusion initiative is best ensured when, influenced at the societal level, the work at the administrative/divisional and individual levels, employ collaborative partnerships, both in pedagogy and praxis (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar & Arellano, 2012). As we have attempted to show in articulating our own approach, the work must be both top-down and bottom-up. Divisions such as Student Affairs and Academic Affairs must exercise conscious and pointed cultural competence, pedagogical savvy, institutional structure and culture, and critical thinking that will assist them in creating an environment for students that will propel them forward in the classroom, in and around campus, and in life (Keeling, 2004). The administration needs to make the commitment to create a diverse and inclusive environment, including the development and implementation of policies that support their commitment. The policies should be developed in conjunction with the needs of the individuals who make up the faculty, staff, and student bodies, promoting institutional and individual success (Hurtado, et al, 2012).

Colleges and universities are obligated to address the academic, social, and emotional needs of students. Doing so necessitates that college and university administrators make conscious decisions to recruit, retain, and promote the success of staff and faculty, as well as to holistically educate students from various geographic locations, with differing socioeconomic statuses, ages, genders/identities, and other subjectivities (Keeling, 2004). Students who interact and learn with individuals of other groups are more likely to accept others’ views as well as challenges to their own, and are more likely to seek solutions to social injustices. Students who embody this broader view of society and its inhabitants will become the global employees and citizens of tomorrow (Hurtado, et al, 2012). Endeavors of this magnitude are examples of societal influences impacting pedagogy and praxis in higher ed, which in turn influence societal thought, and changes the composition of academia. Again, this work must be intentional; diversity and inclusion will not just happen (USDOE, 2016).

To that end, we offer the following recommendations, neither exclusive nor exhaustive, as mechanisms to situate higher ed institutions as bastions of diversity and inclusion:

Proactive Administrative Buy-in and Commitment

Higher Ed administrators and leaders must commit or re-commit to establishing and maintaining a diverse and inclusive environment (Chun, 2016; Dartmouth College, 2017).

Research-based Evidence

There is a plethora of research that speaks to the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in colleges and universities, as well as, scholarship directed at ways to combat this dearth and the benefits of inclusive environments on the outcomes of these marginalized groups (Anderson, 2015; Cuyjet, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2011; Hurtado et al, 2012; Pliner & Banks, 2012; Venzant & McCready, 2011; Yancy, 2014).

Campus Climate

Colleges and universities must bring together students, staff, faculty, and administrators to identify and discuss the issues that impact the climate of the institution (Dartmouth College, 2017).

Diversity & Inclusion Initiatives

Diversity and inclusion initiatives should, at the very least, include a commitment to innovate methods to attract, recruit, and retain students, staff, and faculty from underrepresented groups. Intentionality is key in seeking qualified faculty in arenas not traditional utilized by higher education institutions (Chun, 2016; Dartmouth College, 2017; Pickett, Smith, & Felton, 2017; Taylor, 2017; Yale News, 2015).

Funding

A commitment to establishing and maintaining a diverse and inclusive campus requires committed funding to support the work, proportional to the results of the campus climate assessments and the mission of the institution (Chun, 2016; Dartmouth College, 2017).

Safe Spaces

In order to discuss their feelings of frustration and isolation, students, staff, and faculty from marginalized or underrepresented groups need to have spaces where they feel comfortable, and are assured that doing so will not be punitive (Lambertz-Berndt. 2018).

Difficult Dialogues

In order to promote openness and honesty, and to forward meaningful diversity work, deep discussions need to take place. (Lambertz-Berndt. 2018).

Affinity Groups

Affinity groups - homogeneous networks of emotional support and belonging - should not be used to promote exclusion and separatism (Chun, 2016), but rather as a means to create opportunities for homogenous groups to learn from and about each other, and to promote heterogeneity across and within an institution (Lambertz-Berndt. 2018).

Campus-wide Activities

Co-curricular offerings, such as celebrations of heritage and culture that highlight and value differences on campus, are opportunities for individuals to learn about and interact with others who are part of the institutional fabric. Research has shown that all students do well when interacting with diverse peers both inside and outside of the classroom (Gurin, et al, 2002).

Multiple Perspectives

One way to foster inclusion on college campuses is to incorporate diverse voices, cultures, and perspectives in the curriculum, across disciplines. Identifying with the scholarship boosts solidarity among like-group members and encourages dialogue among heterogeneous individuals (Chun, 2016).

Student Voices

Often, scholarship surrounding diversity and inclusion in educational settings discusses and describes student experiences but does not give voice to them. Purposeful student engagement promotes, encourages, and supports successful student development, both in the classroom and in life.

Focusing on Adult Learners

Mackinnon and Floyd (2011) importantly remind us of the value that adult learners bring to the college community. Adult students, on both the credit-bearing side of the college and those in the continuing education division, must feel included in every aspect of the college, just as their younger peers. This may require a re-examination of the curriculum to ensure that its content reflects the experience of a range of learners.

Need for More and Ongoing Research

Diversity and inclusion are fluid journeys that require and benefit from quality research and best practices. Contributions to extant scholarship, while adaptable to individual institutions, can provide solid and practical guidelines for institutions with nascent or challenged diversity initiatives. In particular, research about adult education environments and community colleges would be beneficial in shaping the experiences of many non-traditional students of color. Both qualitative and quantitative research is needed to capture the subtleties of the lived experiences of the vast array of students who trod an academic journey (Tillman, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

Osei-Kofi (2014) reminds us that it is imperative to understand that the academy is part of the larger political economy. Thus, in order to address the challenges that exist in the hallowed halls of academe, we must address existing policies and practices that create the conditions for division and exploitation of one group over the other. She writes, “To think of higher education anew requires that we understand and make transparent the ways in which ‘educational, cultural, social and economic policy and practices are connected to the multiple relations of exploitation and domination – and to struggles against such relations – in the larger society.” (p. 170). And while this is useful to remind us that the challenges of diversity faced within the walls of education are not necessarily unique, we have also sought to show that there are immediate ways to combat these challenges in our immediate surroundings as faculty and staff.

Community colleges matter, increasingly so in the public eye since the turn of the century. By extension, adult learners, a major constituency of community colleges, also must matter. If diversity is an idea(1), then inclusion is a practice. As educators, practitioners, and service providers, it is imperative that we continue the work of including those who have been historically marginalized and excluded, as well as those who continue to be. The pursuit of education by students enrolled within the community college might best be thought of as a justice issue, one of equal treatment and opportunity for those often from marginalized or even forgotten communities. In turn, those who are directly responsible for stewarding these students to their goals must also fight to be best positioned to do so. As we have articulated, this requires strategic collaboration across and within areas of the college that engage stakeholders on all levels. Though that process is not always perfect, it has shown to be always worth pursuing.

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