

Embracing Our Reality: Key Ingredients for Fostering Campus Diversity Success

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An institution's mission should adapt to the changing forces around it. This statement has never been more true than with respect to the infusion of diversity on our college campuses. Indeed, the process of organizational change and diversity is of paramount importance in the context of higher education. Diversity continues to evolve on our nation's campuses as legal challenges, rapidly shifting demographics, changing needs of the workforce, and social, economic, and political (internal and external) pressures for institutional change around issues of equity and access press institutional leaders to consider how they conceptualize, organize, and implement their work to achieve diversity.

The challenges that confront higher education institutions are complex. One of the most difficult is that some feel that promoting diversity, particularly racial and ethnic diversity, is not compatible with the institutional mission involving academic excellence and quality undergraduate education. Furthermore, over the past several years, efforts to diversify campuses throughout the nation have faced legal challenges in the courts and ballot initiatives designed to eliminate affirmative action-related programs. The prevailing question remains of how to demonstrate the need for diversity and provide compelling evidence that will justify to the courts and a skeptical public that diversity benefits all members of the campus community and the nation in general.

While institutions have claimed that educating all citizens is an integral part of their educational mission, there is considerable disagreement regarding how institutional change should occur in addressing this value. Thus, more and more higher education institutions are being called on to demonstrate that their commitments to campus diversity are a benefit to all students and are compatible with their institutional missions and goals relative to academic excellence.

Additionally, in the 2003 Supreme Court ruling on the value of diversity in higher education, the Court concluded that diversity provided an educational benefit to all students and was essential to preparing students to work in a global community and participate in civic engagement and leadership. This ruling highlights the key role of diversity on our college campuses and warrants the inclusion of campus diversity as a key indicator of overall institutional effectiveness. In alignment with this notion, the leadership at the University of Michigan (U-M) has implemented and sustained a number of strategies and initiatives designed to enhance the institutional climate for diversity. The diversity efforts at U-M have long been regarded as aspirational by many colleges and universities nationally. The resolve to maintain this institutional diversity focus is in direct alignment with the spirit of nationally emerging diversity centers and programs.

For more than twenty years, U-M has been at the forefront nationally regarding the advancement of campus diversity. The original blueprint of these efforts was "The Michigan Mandate: A Strategic Linking of Academic Excellence and Social Diversity."¹ This document reflected a deliberate and progressive articulation of how building and sustaining a community that values, respects, and draws its strength from the diversity of people was an essential element in making the institution highly competitive for the future. Our focus is on sustaining a culture that is committed to advancing campus diversity as an integral component of the institutional mission.

While the emergence of this approach at U-M and other institutions has ushered in a new era of institutional change thanks to resultant diversity initiatives, diversity is not without its detractors. In fact, with the increased commitment to diversity and inclusion comes an increasing backlash through legal challenges and public referenda, with U-M taking center stage in both instances. First, the 2003 Supreme Court decision, referenced above, supported U-M's admissions program. Most recently, Proposition 2, which, among other things, prohibits the consideration of race and gender in college admissions and financial aid in the state of Michigan, passed in November 2006.

As a critical component and outgrowth of the Michigan Mandate, we have been involved in a comprehensive, longitudinal campus diversity research project that examines the impact of diversity on students.² We have given numerous national presentations to and consulted with a wide array of higher education institutions. During this time, we have learned much about what it takes to make campus diversity work.

Given the pressing negative reaction against concepts of affirmative action, diversity, and inclusion, it is important that colleges and universities appreciate and understand how to strategize, plan, and implement campus diversity efforts. In this spirit, listed below are twelve observations and recommendations that may help campus leadership gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics of campus diversity. These points illustrate critical lessons learned along the way, including the avoidance of pitfalls that institutions can encounter.

Generally, while U-M's focus on diversity tends to be very broad, inclusive of not only race and ethnicity, but also of gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, and so on, the study from which many of these lessons are drawn was primarily centered on racial and ethnic diversity. Further, the contentious nature of the national diversity/affirmative action debate is rooted in the politics of race. So, while we feel that these suggestions are broadly applicable to a wide spectrum of difference, they are principally centered on racial and ethnic diversity.

Key Ingredient 1: Campus Leadership Must Be Visible and Heard

Without visible and sustained commitment from campus leadership (including academic leaders), it is unlikely that institutional approaches to campus diversity will be successful. There are pockets of diversity activities throughout any given campus that many key administrators know very little about. In fact, these activities are often achieved despite a lack of campus leadership involvement.

In general, the campus community needs to know that diversity is a priority of the president or chancellor, the executive officers, and the governing board. These leaders must strongly advocate for diversity and deliver consistent, clear messages regardless of the audience. They also must commit to providing requisite resources so that the work can be done with excellence. Campuses with well-articulated visions of diversity—and campus leaders who put these visions into practice—will experience a more vibrant commitment to diversity achievements.

Key Ingredient 2: Institutional Diversity Is Everyone's Business—No Exceptions

The ways college and university campuses approach diversity have changed dramatically in the last ten to fifteen years. Long gone are the days of solitary offices, or, in some cases, single individuals charged with and held accountable for pushing the diversity agenda for the entire campus. When diversity becomes an institutional priority, such practices cease.

Institutions must be sensitive to the fact that campus diversity is everyone's business. In order to have sustained success, strategic diversity planning and implementation must touch the entire campus. Institutions must demonstrate a commitment to reform the "untouchables," that is, those academic units that often convey the message that diversity doesn't apply to them. The lack of involvement of key academic units can leave the impression that campus diversity initiatives pertain only to students and student affairs units.

However, there is cause for hope. Nationally, many institutions have come to grips with the sobering reality that achieving campus diversity success requires a well-crafted, well-articulated, and integrated strategic plan that engages various aspects of the institution and reflects a commitment to action. This shifting paradigm is embedded in the belief that the breadth of responsibility for creating and advancing campus diversity initiatives should span across all levels of the institution. It also should include a regimen of planning, implementation, and assessment that addresses broad and specific diversity-related goals.

Key Ingredient 3: Stop Reinventing the Campus Diversity Wheel

While much energy is committed to designing diversity plans with lofty goals, most campuses fall short on the strategic implementation of these plans. They don't tackle the tough issues, such as funding, implementation strategies (including periodic assessments), and institutional leadership. Campuses often update or develop new plans without fully assessing the successes and challenges of previous plans. "What was wrong with the previous plans and what happened to them?" is a frequent question heard by stakeholders. Many become weary and wary of another initiative to develop another plan.

For some institutions, developing a plan every five years or so seems to be the norm. However, it is essential that plans contain not only strategic implementation, but also action steps that are monitored by leadership and reported to the campus community. A good place to start is by analyzing the efficacy of previous plans. Campuses have to do more than just give the appearance of valuing diversity by merely trotting out a diversity plan at the beginning of each year or during accreditation reviews. Such maneuvers, whether performed sincerely or not, produce considerable cynicism across campus. Supporters of diversity will say that nothing is being done, while opponents will argue that the lack of progress demonstrates that diversity efforts don't work and are divisive.

Key Ingredient 4: Integrate Campus Diversity Priorities with the Institutional Mission

Institutional diversity priorities must be aligned with the institutional mission. A good diversity plan links the goals of diversity with other components of the institutional mission, such as instruction, research, and service, and weaves these objectives into the fabric of campus priorities. For example, most institutions claim in their mission statements that if students attend their institution, they will be better prepared as citizens of the world. All campuses have these lofty statements. Yet, many of these institutions have failed to consider, let alone clearly articulate, how institutional diversity fits into this equation.

For example, when the University of Michigan developed its initial diversity plan in 1988, it gave considerable emphasis to “strategically linking social diversity to academic excellence.” This signaled to the campus community that diversity was so important that it was going to be interwoven into the instruction, research, and service mission of the institution. This linking, as a broader outcome, was critical in the Supreme Court decision on U-M efforts to demonstrate that diversity was critical to the mission of the institution.

Further, the more than five hundred amicus briefs submitted in support of U-M’s case (by corporations, educational associations, and the military) created a powerful package and captured the attention of the Justices, who concluded that diversity provided educational benefits to all students and prepared them for civil engagement, voter participation, and work and leadership in a global community.

It is important that campus diversity efforts and commitment be viewed as essential to the fulfillment of an institution’s overall mission. This is unlikely to happen when poorly conceived diversity plans are isolated and operate separately from campus priorities. Isolated plans give the appearance that diversity has low priority on campus and is not related to important institutional goals. Diversity efforts can then become marginalized and prime targets for budget cuts and campus cynicism (“This is just a public relations gimmick” or “all talk, no action”).

Key Ingredient 5: Campus Diversity Is More Than a Numbers Game

Measuring the success of an institution’s racial and ethnic diversity has to move beyond issues of access and increasing numbers. Too many campuses obsess over how many students of color enrolled this year over the previous year. The marker of success or failure then becomes the numbers—did they rise, stay the same, or decline?

Campus leaders often fail to appreciate the interrelationship between access, success, and retention/graduation. Better measures of diversity success are how many underrepresented students return after the first year and how many graduate. There often are vast differences in the graduation rates of various racial and ethnic groups on campus, yet institutions rarely incorporate systematic efforts designed to close these gaps. Graduation parity has to be one of the key goals and measures of campus diversity success.

A well-conceived diversity plan should include strategies that address (1) access, persistence, and retention, (2) disparities in graduation rates, and (3) overall satisfaction with the campus experience.

Key Ingredient 6: Campus Diversity among Students Is Complex and Multifaceted

Colleges and universities must recognize the complexity of campus diversity from the student’s perspective—especially the interrelationship of equity and social justice issues and institutional efforts to demonstrate that diversity represents a benefit to all students. To have successful campus diversity, an institution must address both issues.

Campus leaders must realize that students come to campuses loaded with misperceptions and stereotypes about other groups—even when they are open to learning about others. Students in general still come from highly segregated high schools and communities. Thus, the student curricular and co-curricular experiences must move beyond soft “feel good” diversity programs that really don’t contribute to systemic institutional changes. These may only reinforce or validate stereotypes that students already harbor about different groups. There must be a commitment to tackling campus myths about diversity—especially racial and ethnic diversity—and to creating safe spaces for students to explore their own identities as well as those of others.

Leaders must also acknowledge the remarkable diversity within various racial and ethnic groups (for example, the various subgroups that exist within the broad Asian American, Latino, and African American categories). Emphasis must be placed on supporting students’ intergroup and intragroup identities through programming, services, and policies. Failure to recognize and appreciate within-group experiences can easily convey the view that all groups are monolithic in their values, expectations, and experiences.

Furthermore, it is imperative that campuses be prompt, and proactive when possible, in addressing racial incidents involving students, faculty, and staff. Students expect campus administration to resolve racial incidents in a timely manner and to cultivate a climate that encourages the success of all students. Additionally, students of color hold university leadership accountable for addressing overall campus climate issues at all levels. If leaders fail to address racially charged incidents effectively, they are likely to face major and sustained conflicts that can quickly derail any recent climate improvements. Above all, institutions must take the stance that students have the right to live, learn, and work in environments that validate their myriad identities and cultivate their social, emotional, intellectual, and professional development. This message must be clear and consistent. Diversity can’t be a code word for assimilating into the dominant campus culture, practices, and traditions. This subtle message can’t be “The sooner that you figure out how you fit in, the better off you will be.”

Key Ingredient 7: Maintain a Commitment to Racial and Ethnic Diversity as the Institution's Diversity Focus Broadens

Over the past twenty-five years or so, the diversity agenda has broadened from a focus on African Americans to other racial groups to greater concerns relative to gender, international, and sexual orientation issues. However, there is a danger that as the diversity agenda broadens, some campuses appear to be shifting away from a civil-rights-determined focus on social justice and equity issues related to diversity, such as increasing and retaining adequate numbers of underrepresented students, faculty, and staff. Perhaps this is related to continued attacks on campus diversity efforts, which tend to make campuses more cautious and less aggressive in pursuing diversity.

At many campuses, there is the perception that campus leaders often pit diverse social groups against each other, forcing them to compete for resources and attention. Such practices make it difficult for the various diversity groups to work through their differences because their interests have been made oppositional rather than mutual. A good diversity plan recognizes the importance of all components of diversity that enrich the campus, while consistently addressing the paramount diversity issues involving equity. Affirmative action initiatives are rooted in the civil rights and social justice activities of the 1960s, and the racial aspects of this dilemma remain unresolved and contentious despite the continuing expansion of the diversity definition.

Key Ingredient 8: Assess the Impact of Campus Diversity on All Students

It is essential that campuses assess their diversity efforts with both longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data. Increasingly, institutions are being asked by the legal system and the public to demonstrate that campus diversity really has an educational benefit for all students. However, few institutions can produce data beyond anecdotal stories. Most fail to provide the much-needed concrete and long-term evidence of the value, importance, and effectiveness of diversity efforts.

Comprehensive institutional examinations can have a significant impact on an institution's ability to develop and evaluate strategic planning and implementation related to campus diversity. Institutional report cards help meet the outcry from both the courts and an even more skeptical public for proof that diversity works. These progress reports also justify the benefits of diversity success when an institution's campus diversity practices are challenged.

Institutions that plan to conduct quality institutional research relative to diversity may wish to consider the following suggestions:

- Track the short- and long-term impact of campus diversity initiatives on students in their social, academic, and professional experiences across all four years in college and after graduation.
- Study instrumentation should include items specific to race-related attitudes and behaviors, but also attitudes and behaviors centered on assessing students' general college experiences, permitting a broader and more balanced analysis.
- The study planning and implementation team should reflect a true collaboration between academic and nonacademic units, ensuring that all perspectives are represented in the study design and deployment.
- Students should be involved and provide input in developing and validating survey instruments and data collection processes.
- A broad-based qualitative component should supplement a large-scale quantitative survey effort. This allows researchers to probe more deeply into how students' views on life relate to their experiences with diversity at their institution.

Key Ingredient 9: Communicate Institutional Diversity Priorities and Successes

Once a formidable diversity agenda has been set and work has begun, sharing the agenda with the campus community fosters support and momentum for the diversity goals. Communicate campus diversity successes, and address stereotypes and myths that can derail the efforts (such as that all financial aid funds are allocated to students of color or that students of color don't interact with other groups).

The lofty statements of most institutions proclaim their support for campus diversity. However, if they lack clear communication plans or send mixed messages to the campus community, they will convey the message that diversity is merely tolerated, thus thwarting the hard and dedicated work of many administrators, faculty members, students, and alumni. Campuses have to be proactive and aggressive in communicating diversity success to counter some of the media and campus constituents that view diversity only in negative terms.

Key Ingredient 10: Consult Your Friends at Other Colleges and Universities That Have Faced Challenges

When faced with challenges such as ballot initiatives or simply stagnation relative to diversity programming, it is useful to consult with your friends at other colleges and universities. This is a means to share best practices, process recommendations, and outcomes.

In the last three years, the U-M has been engaged in a variety of new and creative efforts to generate new thinking and best practices for moving forward. The first was an intensive self-study conducted throughout the campus to generate new ideas for programs and

initiatives—the Diversity Blueprints project. Second, we have reached out to other institutions that have faced legal challenges similar to those that we have endured—the University of Washington, UCLA, UC-Berkeley, and the University of Texas-Austin. Last year, representatives from these campuses came to U-M to participate in symposia to offer insights and lessons learned for advancing diversity in this anti-affirmative action climate. U-M also has conducted campus visits to each of these institutions to meet with various constituencies at the administrative, faculty, staff, and student levels.

Key Ingredient 11: Continued Assessment of the Evolving Nature of Diversity

It is imperative that higher education institutions be in touch with not only the changing mood in the country relative to diversity, but, equally important, the changing mood on campuses. We stress this because these shifts can quickly alter the missions of programs and activities and, in many respects, the attitudes of students. For example, public perceptions of diversity seem to impact campuses that have major concerns about legal challenges to diversity and, at the same time, thwart efforts at campus diversity.

Many of the previous observations can be neatly packaged in this one. Have diversity priorities changed when programs are altered, combined, expanded, or reduced or made race neutral? Do all elements of diversity have status, or have priorities been rearranged? As diversity evolves on campuses, goals and objectives must be periodically reexamined—one cannot have 1999 approaches in a 2009 world. Diversity efforts impact the entire campus community. We must stay on top of the diversity shifts occurring in the world, the country, and our campuses. One has only to look at the diversity of the presidential and vice presidential candidates, where the nation, to the surprise of millions, elected its first African American president. It is obvious that the shifting demographics resulted in significant changes in America's voting patterns.

Key Ingredient 12: Garner External Support for Campus Diversity

External support from alumni, donors, and the corporate community is essential to the long-term success of campus diversity initiatives. These external groups are often overlooked as potential supporters of and contributors to diversity efforts, and they can be powerful allies in fostering support for overall campus diversity initiatives. Campus leaders also can serve a pivotal role in informing these populations about the importance of campus diversity and how such efforts benefit society in general. This is, unfortunately, an opportunity that is often overlooked.

A notable example that speaks to the necessity of fostering external relationships was the extensive filing of amicus briefs by corporations, unions, and the military in support of the University of Michigan in its defense of its admissions policies. The more than five hundred briefs were the most filed in the history of the U.S. Supreme Court. The briefs were of critical importance to the success of the cases and highlighted to the broader community the importance of diversity in preparing educated and competitive citizens for today's increasingly global democracy. These supportive actions further illustrated that diversity not only is key to a quality education, but also is critical to the current and future economic vitality and security of our nation.

It is surprising that many institutions do not reflect their commitment to diversity in their capital campaigns and fundraising efforts. What is often said is that donors are not interested in contributing to causes that advance diversity—especially to those relating to race and ethnicity. But such assertions contradict the commitment to diversity proclaimed and practiced by the leading corporate and foundation communities.

Notes

¹ This document was written by former President James Duderstadt in 1988.

² This project, funded in part by the Ford Foundation, began in 1990.

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