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Making Diversity Matter: Inclusion is the Key



Chief Diversity Officer, Disrupter

Much of my role as a diversity, equity, and inclusion professional is that of a disrupter. That term is nowhere in the leadership profile that has drawn me to the various positions that I have held over the past two

decades, or in my current job description as Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Augustana College. A disrupter of what? A disrupter of patterns, processes, and systems that are barriers to change.

Prior to working in higher education, I was a social worker employed by the largest public child welfare agency in the wealthiest county of a state on the east coast. The families for whom I provided services were some of the most vulnerable in the United States. These were poor families with young children. Not only were their resources limited, but also the communities where they lived were under-resourced. Yet, they were expected to meet the needs of their children according to a social standard that did not recognize the vulnerabilities inherent in these communities.

The roles of a social worker are vast—mediator, advocate, counselor, case manager, investigator, broker, educator, facilitator, organizer, manager. Over the span of a decade, I performed and fulfilled these roles multiple times over. Much of what I did as a social worker and now as a chief diversity officer (CDO) was to disrupt detrimental patterns. Sometimes the patterns prevented parents from meeting the needs of their children. Too often, I recognized that the processes employed by the systems allegedly helping these families preserved the detrimental patterns that needed disrupting. The very systems that were supposed to be helpful were in fact barriers to attaining the goal. Organizations, programs, and systems only work as well as those people who represent them.

Diversity Happens

The United States Census Bureau projects that within the next 25 years nearly half of all Americans will belong to a minority group.

The Public School Review reported in September of 2018 that non-Hispanic white students are now the numerical minority in public schools (49.7 percent), a decline by 15 percent since 1997. In that same period, the number of Hispanic students has grown by 50 percent to 12.9 million,

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and the number of Asian students has increased significantly as well (46 percent to 2.9million). The African American student population has remained relatively steady over the last 20 years, at 7.7 million in Fall 2018 (Pew Reports).

In March 2019, *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report* was released by the American Council on Education. The report noted that “the student population in U.S. higher education is more diverse than ever” (ACE). In 1996, students of color made up 29.6 percent of the undergraduate student population: that percentage increased to 45.2 percent in 2016. The percentage of graduate students of color increased in the same period as well—from 20.8 to 32.0 percent. According to the report, however, “despite these gains, many areas of higher education continue to *underserve* and *underrepresent* students of color” (ACE, emphasis added). While the racial and ethnic makeup of students in higher education has become more and more diverse, faculty, staff, and administrators remain predominantly white, with nearly three quarters (73.2 percent) of full-time faculty identifying as white (ACE).

“Students who will be most available for college will be students of color—the very students who are currently underrepresented and underserved and whose rate of persistence through graduation is currently lower than non-Hispanic whites.”

In September 2018, the Hechinger Report noted that “the college-going population will drop by 15 percent between 2025 and 2029 and continue to decline by another percentage point or two thereafter” (Barshay). This is referred to as the demographic decline. Given the decline (which will affect nearly all 4-year institutions, especially privates), students who will be most available for college will be students of color—the very students who are currently underrepresented and underserved and whose rate of persistence through graduation is currently lower than non-Hispanic whites.

And we are already seeing the impact this has on higher education. The student body at historically white, persistently white, and predominantly white colleges and

universities is more diverse than ever before. This trend will certainly continue, at least at those institutions that are interested in remaining relevant. Especially in light of the United States’ political climate and the social realities of our communities, higher education must recognize the realities of race and culture and the experiences of students of color—again, if we are to remain relevant.

Of course, diversity encompasses much more than race and ethnicity. Sex, nationality, gender, gender identity and expression, ability, religion and belief systems, age, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation—all of these are characteristics of diversity. People are diverse. I focus on race and ethnicity here because of the above demographic projections that impact higher education and because racism is prevalent in colleges and universities.

Think about the history of your institution. Who created it? For whom was it created? When you consider the history of the Lutheran institutions, racial exclusion is embedded in that history—as difficult as that is to admit. Among the many demographic diversities, race is the most visible. And yet, it is also at the greatest risk of being erased in our institutional discussions and ignored in our policies, practices, and procedures.

These statistics highlight the fact that diversity will happen—indeed, it has already happened. Inclusion, however, is not automatic. Inclusion is a *choice*.

Inclusion is a Choice

Colleges are a reflection of United States society. Consequently, colleges, too, suffer the effects of our turbulent history and poor race relations. Unfortunately, poor race relations mark not only our history but also our present and threaten to continue in our future.

Enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is on the rise. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, total enrollment in fall 2017 was 298,138—an increase of 2.1 percent over the previous year. The increase occurred even as enrollments across the nation continued to decline. In the previous six years, HBCU enrollment at HBCUs dropped (beginning 2011) until reaching a fifteen year low in 2016. To what can the increase be contributed? Analysts suggest that setbacks in national race relations and the desire of

students of color to learn in safe and nurturing environments have played roles. (Washington and Gasman).

Despite the financial challenges, students are still going to college. Why these colleges? What are they doing? HBCUs are more closely connected with the issues that black and brown students face and are equipped to assist in responding. It would seem that students of color establish their own social and academic environment when they do not feel accepted by the majority culture. They attempt to achieve unity with other black students to combat racism.

"They hunger for their identities to be affirmed so that they can consider their vocations, rather than merely *surviving* the college experience."

Surely, this is one of the reasons that HBCU student populations are on the rise since the parallel rise of Black Lives Matter. Students seek support in comfortable places. On historically white and persistently white campuses, students of color typically find a niche in the campus's corners, in certain offices, and participate in programs created for "them". Studies on the value of afrocentric experiences in constructing comfort zones at persistently white colleges and universities (PWCUs) reveals that 90 percent of the students of color were strongly in favor of an identifiable black community to support them academically and socially and to contribute to their ethnic identity development. This presents a major issue for PWCUs. They are after all PWCUs by historical design and current circumstances. There just don't seem to be enough black and brown employees to create the kind of accepting, nurturing, supportive environment that students of color find in HBCUs.

Many of us posit that higher education is or should be a transformative experience. I argue that for students of color at PWCUs, their expectation is that *the institution will transform to meet their needs* so that they can thrive, so that they can embrace the academic experience without the distractions and damage that microaggressions cause. They do not want to feel tokenized, to be repeatedly involved in pilot programs, or invited to participate in ways that benefit the institution more than they benefit the

student. They want and need to see themselves and hear the voices of those who look like them in course content, at the front of the classroom, and in co-curricular leadership. They hunger for their identities to be affirmed so that they can consider their vocations, rather than merely *surviving* the college experience.

What can historically, predominantly, and persistently white colleges and universities learn from HBCUs to better meet the needs of students of color? We must look for ways to involve underrepresented minority students. How can we get them involved? What should we do? When we employ inclusive practices, their involvement will naturally increase.

Toward Inclusive Excellence

Inclusive excellence in higher education requires educators and campus administrators to ask whether "underserved students are experiencing the most empowering forms of learning and whether they are successfully achieving the knowledge, adaptive skills, and hands-on experiences that prepare them to apply their learning to new settings, emergent problems, and evolving roles" (AACU, *Committing* 7).

"Inclusive excellence is a comprehensive approach that requires a *fundamental transformation* of the organization by infusing inclusion in every effort, aspect, and level of the organization."

Inclusive excellence is a comprehensive approach that requires a *fundamental transformation* of the organization by infusing inclusion in every effort, aspect, and level of the organization (AACU, *Committing* 7). This requires active, intentional, and continual engagement with diversity throughout the organization—in any place where people might connect (AACU, *Making*). In short, inclusive excellence is the approach used to expose and address the barriers to institutional equity. It involves the recognition that an organization's success is dependent on how well it values, engages, and includes a rich diversity of constituents.

How does your organization show that it values diversity?
How does your organization engage—that is, intentionally include—individuals and cultures)?

The work of the Chief Diversity Officer is far-reaching and encompasses a wide range of *social identities*, *focal groups*, and *core areas* (Worthington). Those same dimensions—different diversities or social realities, focal groups (or different constituents), and the core areas or work of the college—also help structure opportunities for institutional change itself, as depicted in Figure 1.

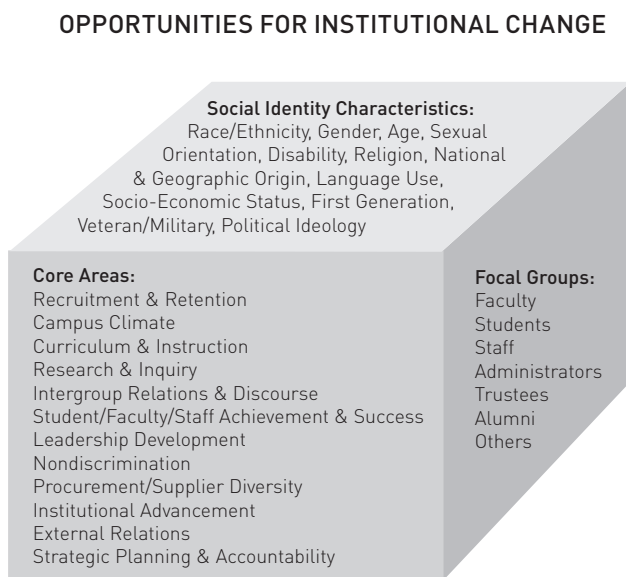


Figure 1: Three Dimensional Model of Higher Education Diversity
Adapted from R. L. Worthington, “Advancing Scholarship,” p. 2.
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in Higher Education.

As noted earlier, inclusive excellence requires active, intentional, and continual engagement with diversity throughout the organization, in any place where people might connect—make that *every* place! Opportunities for inclusion are abundant throughout the institution. Traditionally, it was “minority offices” that provided the perspectives and practices related to diversity and inclusion. While this method proved to be effective decades ago, it is no longer an effective model. Core areas throughout the institution should be targeted for inclusion. Opportunities for change must target all of the key focal groups (See Figure 1). Colleges and universities must do *more* to engage underrepresented students and

employees. They must also do *better* with the current resources allotted for targeting underrepresented students. Assessment of the effectiveness of existing programs is essential to determining progress on strategic goals.

Inclusion is a choice. Inclusive excellence must involve *institutional* change, which constitutes change in the *ideas* that govern institutions (Halal). If the institution’s practices have not evolved toward understanding underrepresented cultures, ensuring access to positions throughout the organization, and expanding the environment to create a more inclusive climate—one that embraces the needs and the humanity of underrepresented persons—then the ideas that govern the institution are still barriers toward institutional change.

What follows are some key changes that must be made if an institution is to strive for inclusive excellence. The list is not an exhaustive, but it can serve as a guide toward becoming more inclusive. The first three work from the premise that representation matters and that visibility matters.

Diversify Faculty

Other than coaches, faculty spend the most time with students during their years at college. Faculty have the greatest influence on the student body. They shape students’ learning by assigning reading material and assignments, and by identifying important aspects of the discipline(s). They help students to determine what is important and to think critically about tough topics. They prepare students for productive citizenship and job readiness. Students need to see themselves at the head of the classroom. Diversify the faculty.

Diversify Staff

Similarly, since the entire institution comprises the learning environment, students need to see representation across campus. At predominantly white institutions, racial and ethnic affiliation is obvious for students of color. Non-Hispanic white students see themselves throughout the campus—from the admissions process to athletics and other extra curriculars, to residence halls, financial aid, counseling offices, tutoring centers, and other student support offices. For non-Hispanic white students role

models are everywhere, given the typical demographic composition of a historically and persistently white institution. Students of color at these institutions do not experience this unintended but still added benefit.

When students see themselves in professional positions, they can imagine themselves in, and aspire to, those positions. Currently, underrepresented students at most of our Lutheran colleges and universities have more of a chance to see themselves in areas where persons have not earned a degree than those offices where degrees are required. We must offer all students the similar benefit of role models on our campuses.

For first generation students, in particular, many have little idea of all of the doors their liberal arts degree can open for them. When students are able to see people of similar racial/ethnic identities and similar backgrounds in professional roles, they are affirmed. They can imagine their future; they also have someone they need to chat with who understands their plight. Those of us who graduated from liberal arts colleges know the possibilities. We must now implement practices that will inspire all and equalize access.

Infuse Diversity into the Curriculum

Infusing diversity in the curriculum offers students opportunities to discuss difficult topics and enhances skills necessary to address social realities. Many colleges are using courses to explore cultures and emphasize differing worldviews. The Association of American Colleges and Universities recognizes this as a high impact practice

“Exposure to an inclusive curriculum helps to develop skills necessary for the diverse workplaces student will enter.”

(AACU, High-Impact). There are many benefits of an inclusive curriculum. It affirms and normalizes many dynamics in the lived experience of underrepresented students on persistently white campuses. Non-Hispanic white students are also exposed to the realities of difference—to the power and privilege—attached to race and ethnicity in the United States and around the world. The educational benefits of an inclusive curriculum empower

all students, with some level of competence, to engage in our diverse and changing world. Finally, exposure to an inclusive curriculum helps to develop skills necessary for the diverse workplaces student will enter. These skills are an added advantage when seeking employment. Employers seek culturally competent employees (Szrom).

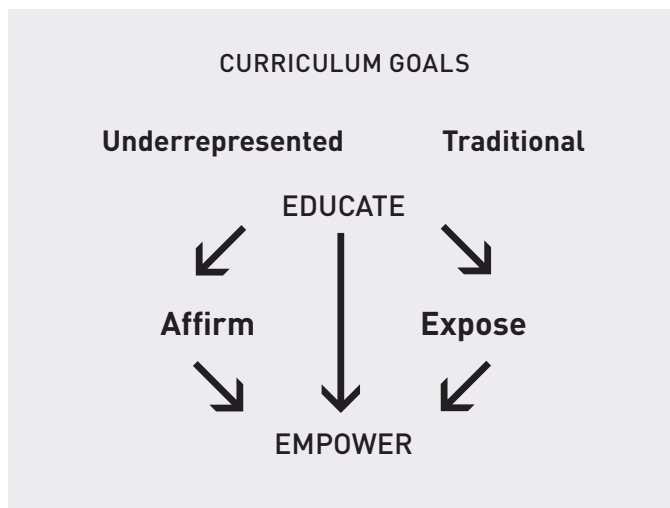


Figure 2. Inclusive Curriculum Goals Diagram. Copyright 2018 by Monica M. Smith, The Smith Approach™

Invest in Learning

Students make a great investment to get a college education. Colleges must make a similar investment to ensure that the students’ learning is relevant, useful, and prepares them for society and the work force. Professional development is important. I have lost count of the amount of times a participant in a seminar or workshop has admitted that they don’t know “what to do with, about, or for” underrepresented students. They don’t know how to address issues such as slavery, systemic racism, and situations these students face. These weaknesses come from professionals who represent every facet of the college.

What is disappointing to me is that we allow professionals to continue to work with students without having the skills to engage, partner with, guide, and promote success for underrepresented students/students of color. Dare I say, we would not allow this lack of knowledge in any other area or for the bulk of our student body. Why do we accept lack knowledge around the culture and needs of underrepresented students? Don’t answer that! Just think on it.

"We allow professionals to continue to work with students without having the skills to engage, partner with, guide, and promote success for underrepresented students."

There is a massive learning curve here. What will we do about the deficit of knowledge related to diverse populations? Answering that question gets us to where we want to go. Professional development is necessary. We must create opportunities for employees to learn about the populations they serve, as well as their co-workers. It goes without saying that colleges must sustain those programs and practices that are already effective and improve those that are ineffective.

Draw on Senior Leadership

Senior leaders must invest in the process of transforming the institution. Institutional change will not occur unless senior leaders shepherd the process. Senior leaders must practice inclusive leadership. They must understand diversity, equity, and inclusion and value each. They must explicitly recognize and support this work. They must include DEI goals as strategic pillars to institutional success and outline a clear plan to address and accomplish these goals. They must invest time to assess the institution's relationship with diversity and its courage to identify barriers to inclusion. Finally, they must free up adequate resources to address the barriers, assess progress, and otherwise strive for inclusive excellence.

Conclusion

Inclusive practices do not come easily. They must be *learned*. There must be a thirst for cross-cultural learning that leads one to value cultural differences. While all of these suggestions (and others) are important, I cannot say enough about the importance of learning. When institutional leaders commit themselves to cross cultural learning, there will be less dependence on underrepresented students who are willing to call out institutional

deficiencies and who then find themselves in situations where they are educating (or pleading with) administrators to transform the institution.

Inclusion must be an institutional value. I would posit that issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion might be the biggest challenge to our institutions, but also the most powerful driver of institutional change. Diversity motivates change. And inclusion is the evidence of it.

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