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Administrators' perspectives of diversity: An examination of the University of Florida

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The issue of successful diversity management is of particular concern now because of changing demographics. This research documents how administrators at the University of Florida have struggled with the challenge of diversity in recent years and makes suggestions for how administrators at other institutions can learn from this example.

Diversity and Higher Education

Diversity has become a buzzword and some even say it is a smoke screen hiding the real issues of minorities because a common understanding about the term's meaning is lacking (Allen, 1995; Levine, 1991; Myers, 1997). In a study about diversity on campuses, Levine discovered that although most college administrators believed diversity to be important, few were able to define the term or express what their diversity programs were meant to achieve. Since the term is so commonly used, it has become indiscriminate (Adelma, 1997).

Higher education's first steps are defining what is meant by diversity and setting goals for its achievement. If these tasks are not done, confusion and non-commitment will follow. And the term will be read more cynically leading to less effective policy (Adelma, 1997).

Opponents of diversity believe that these initiatives reflect a liberal agenda, emphasize differences and use racial background as an excuse to admit students who would not otherwise make it ("Diversity on campus found to be beneficial, poll shows," 1998). Clegg (1999) argues that to suggest that diversity causes students to be rewarded or punished based on their skin color further stigmatizes the beneficiaries of diversity programs in both the eyes of their peers and members of their own race.

Chang, Witt-Sandis, and Hakuta (1999) state that race-neutral policies do not work and suggest that using the same standards to judge minority and non-minority students is unfair because of differences in power, social perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. Bowen and Bok (1998) take this argument even further stating that race-neutral policies will not only reduce the overall probability of an African-American student being accepted to a university to exactly one half that of a Caucasian student's, but also they will reduce African-American enrollments to the levels they were at in the 1960s—a drop of 50 to 70 percent.

Lastly, scholars contend that the diversity of a university's student body benefits all students. Students learn to be accepting of other cultures, participate more in community and civic organizations, and feel a greater commitment to racial understanding when they are engaged in a diverse environment (Chang et al., 1999). Further, retention rates and students' overall satisfaction with universities increase when there is a more diverse representation in the student body (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Chang et al.). Higher education has a responsibility to the rest of society to lead the way. As Bowen and Bok state universities must help to build a society in which access to positions of leadership and respect is not limited by race. Therefore, as higher education moves into the 21st Century, learning about and interacting with diverse people will be increasingly more important (Rowan, 1997).

Methodology

An open-ended survey was conducted face-to-face with nine people identified as chief decision makers at a large public university in the Southeast. The purpose of these interviews was to determine what the university's administration believed about the university's commitment to diversity and how that commitment might affect relationships with students. These administrators included members of the university's top administration, vice presidents, deans, and academic and admissions advisers and represent the areas of Academic Advising, Student Affairs, Admissions, Public Relations and the Provost's Office. The nine participants who participated in the open-ended survey included four men and five women; five interviewees are Caucasian, three African American, and one Hispanic.

These officials were chosen because of the likelihood that they have or have had a major impact on students' perceptions of their relationship with the university and diversity issues at the university. Interviews took place in the interviewees' campus offices. On average, the interviews lasted 30 minutes and all were audio-recorded. The tapes were transcribed verbatim within a day of each interview. Transcripts were reviewed by the researcher and coded for major themes. A second independent coder also reviewed the transcripts to help refine and expand the categories. It was determined that the results from the interviews would be presented most meaningfully as major themes with supporting quotations and paraphrases. Because of the richness of the data, quantitative coding of the interviews was not used.

The People's University

Interviewees were well aware of the university's heritage as a "good old boys" institution. It is obvious in their remarks that they do not see this as the university's future and understood that it is very important for all students—no matter what their gender, race, or creed—to feel accepted and a part of the university. As one respondent said,

This is a public university. It is owned by all the people of the state. It is for all of the people, not just a segment of the people. The people who work here, even the president, do not own this university. We are simply the stewards caring out the policies that the public decides that we should. This is the people's university. And that means all of the people. So we are not serving the people's needs in this state if we are not doing everything that we can to make this equally accessible and successful for every group in the state, not just some privileged group depending on money, place of residence, or color of skin or gender.

Another official noted that in addition to being open to all citizens' the university must be a leader in diversity initiatives:

It's important for the university to be a leader in diversity. And our student body in terms of numbers should be representative of the citizens of the state of Florida. So our challenge is always to recruit underrepresented populations and make them feel a part of this community. I think it's important because we are the flagship institution...It clearly is an academic institution that is concerned with access and equal opportunity and helping young people achieve their career goals and academic inspirations.

Similarly, one participant mentioned that the university should be a role model for society when it

comes to diversity in order to create a better environment and more interaction among students in and out of the classroom. He also said that the university needs to promote communication between minority and non-minority students to build understanding. However, some administrators were aware that the university has not yet attained such a goal.

Preparation for a Multicultural Society

Participants realized that the make-up of American society is changing and that students need to be prepared to function in a multicultural society. These officials also believed there is great value in learning different perspectives and in being exposed to new ideas. As one official stated,

A value of coming to a large university like this is that this is like real life. You never know what you are going to face in the work place. I think that part of what the university should do is get students to interact with the bigger world and without diversity you are missing out on it. It is a very important part of relating.

Another interviewee said that learning in a diverse environment is very important because universities must prepare students for society and how to function in it. She added that as society continues to become more and more diverse, so must the university. Still another respondent said that interaction among students with different backgrounds prepares students for real-life experiences.

One participant added that students will bring new ideas and understanding back to the communities they grew up in, helping others to see the importance of diversity to their lives. However, he also noted that diversity is an issue society is trying to tackle:

I think it's (diversity) one of the key issues for our society to struggle with. The writing is on the wall that we're a diverse community....I think that when we celebrate diversity, we're not saying that everyone should be the same. We're saying that isn't it great that we're not the same and look at the neat things in this person and I want to know more about that.

Diverse but still White

All administrators interviewed agreed that minority and majority students would have different perceptions about their relationships with the university and about the current commitment to diversity on campus. In general, they believe that majority students would be more positive and minority students more negative in their assessments.

However, some thought that assessments about relationships and diversity also would differ among the minority groups. All respondents who believed there were differences commented that African-American students would have the least positive perceptions. One respondent offered the following insights:

I think that Hispanic students have grown by far the most rapidly here.... and really feel a strong identity with this institution and feel quite comfortable here and a part of it. We have another last chunk called Asian Americans....It's hard to generalize about them but they have had a remarkable success at this institution for the last 15 to 20 years and their numbers continue to grow. And our African-American population at the university is about 2,000 to 2,500 and that figure has unfortunately not grown very much. It's kind of plateaued for some years now. I want to believe that the experience of most of these

students is more positive now than it used to be....but I also know that there is a feeling of relative isolation here because they number only six percent of the students here and there are insufficient numbers of African-American faculty and staff.

Another official noted that African-American students have difficulty with the “Whiteness” of the university in general. He commented,

When you talk to African-American students as I did earlier this week, one group of students talked about being overwhelmed by the “Whiteness” of the university. They had been told about the university being a predominantly White institution. They talked to friends. They talked to former students but they said you really don’t understand until you’re here and you’re going to student orientation or you’re going to the first week of class and you’re the only black student. You walk through your residence hall floor and you’re the only Black student on the floor and that has an impact on their perceptions about the university.

Still another interviewee suggested that some African-American students have difficulties because they do not have the support of their families when they decide to come to an institution like this university rather than an historically Black college or university. As he explained,

Within the historically white community of the state, it’s almost expected that this is where you would go....It’s not so much for the other groups because, especially for Blacks,...they have a choice. They know if they come here it’s been a choice. Their parents did not come here. We’re still in a generation where their parents could not come here. So if their parents are college educated, they went to another school. They did not come here and have pretty strong feelings about that—they (the White community) didn’t let them come here. And that’s a real conscious thing [for African-American parents]. So therefore there’s a lot of discussion because when a student makes that commitment, they are really putting a lot on the line and they are not necessarily getting a lot of support from their families that other students are. I’ve heard from other people who work in admissions, that parents will say, “I told you not to go to this school. I told you it wasn’t going to be that good”....The real crisis of an African-American family today is—do you send your child to a place that is what is called an historically Black institution like FAMU (Florida A&M University) or Howard where they will be cared for, protected and enriched as Black people or do you send them to these mega-universities that are considered the top echelon—the Berkeleys, the Virginias, the Michigans, the Harvards—where they are still the minorities and still not accepted personally and will have to pay the price for that. Which one do you choose if you are a parent? Where do you help your child go to school? Where they will be cared for and nurtured or where they will be in a battle and get a better perceived education? That’s a tough call.

Discussion

These findings seem to suggest that although the university is working towards a totally inclusive university environment, some students are more comfortable at this university than are others. Many administrators stated that African-American/Black students have a very difficult time feeling like they belong at this university because they so rarely see anyone like themselves in class, in the dorms, or walking across campus. Although these students are aware of the “Whiteness” of the university, it seems they cannot understand its impact upon their happiness until they are students here and live out their day-to-day activities. Bowen and Bok (1998) and Gurin (1999) note that students who are a part of highly visible yet under-represented groups on overwhelmingly White campuses tend to under-perform

academically and have difficulty in adjusting to the environment. According to university statistics, under half of the university's African-American/Black students earn their degree within six years while 69 percent of Caucasian and 63 percent of Hispanic/Latino students do (Klein & Kassab, 2000). Gurin (1999) suggests that the only way to alleviate this situation is to have an equitable representation of the under-represented groups thereby making the environment more comfortable.

In addition, African-American students may not have the support of their families when they make the decision to come to this university because their parents may have been denied access to the school. Many African Americans who live in the state hold the institution in low regard because of its history (Klein & Kassab, 2000). Therefore it seems that African-American/Black students often will isolate themselves from the rest of the university community, which is quite easy to do considering the size of the institution. Klein and Kassab (2000) contend that feelings of isolation are not unusual at the university, which is the least diverse institution in the state's university system and where self-segregation seems a part of the university's culture. The administration should be paying attention to this situation as a public relations problem and opportunity.

Implications for Higher Education

Administrators could use this study to design programs that promote diversity on campus. In addition, top administrators must make genuine commitment to diversity. To help gain credibility, administrators should attempt to make African-American students more comfortable at the university by increasing the presence of minority students and faculty at the campus. Greater representation of minority faculty might change the university's organizational climate and help to redefine long-held perceptions about the university. Minority students would also have more role models and the opportunity to develop more meaningful relationships with faculty. In addition if the university could engage the help of minority opinion leaders, the lines of communication might be opened between the administration and minorities. This two-way communication could lead to even more innovative ideas to bridge the chasm that has been built and stop the self-isolation that is so prevalent.

Lastly, administrators also may need to face the possibility of a backlash caused by the alienation some students may feel because of continued diversity efforts. Perhaps the best solution to this problem is to reinforce how important it is for students to understand how to live in a multicultural society.

Conclusion

Although the suggestions made in this paper may seem specific to the university at which the interviews were conducted, it seems likely that all universities and institutions of higher learning could learn from the examples. Given that higher education and diversity issues are increasingly intertwined, an important task for administrators is to better understand its diversity management efforts. Since the composition of American society is changing and the presence of minorities is increasing, it is important for all people to understand the reality and importance of diversity to their lives.

This issue is especially salient for college students as they will soon be entering the workforce and most likely will be working with people from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures than their own. College, therefore, seems a perfect time to introduce students to perspectives, points-of-view, and cultures different than their own. Doing so may be an important step toward building and maintaining

the positive relationships universities and other institutions need to survive and prosper.

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