



Toward a Diversity-Competent Institution

An Ohio administrator and professor offers a 14-point framework for institutional change.

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LAST YEAR, ANNE ARUNDEL Community College (Md.) invited me to give a keynote address on the topic of diversity-competent institutions at its annual staff/faculty conference. The topic itself was thought-provoking, because it assumes there can be a diversity competent institution with discernible, observable, and palpable characteristics that set the institution apart from the rest.

I reviewed the relevant literature on organizational change, diversity, and management and ruminated over the task of describing a diversity-competent institution. I came to this conclusion: There are indeed attributes that distinguish genuine diversity commitment from diversity façade in a higher education environment.

Institutions with a strong commitment to diversity have certain things in common. The list of 14 characteristics below may not be exhaustive, but efforts to manifest these characteristics and achieve their goals should ensure a more effective path toward diversity progress.

1. Mission Statement

Diversity-competent institutions reflect their commitment to diversity in their mission statements. The mission statement defines an institution's purpose or reason for existence. The vision and values described in the mission statement provide legitimacy for institutional activities. The process of developing a mission statement itself invites cross-campus dialogues that provide important education to members of the community. Diversity-competent institutions provide legitimacy for diversity initiatives in their mission statements.

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2. Diversity Definition

Often institutions invest resources in diversity activities without actually defining what they mean by diversity. Some shy away from defining diversity because of the controversial nature of a diversity agenda. Others shy away because of the challenge or the inability to please everyone. However, if we cannot define it, we cannot measure it, and if we cannot measure progress, then anything we do in the name of diversity may or may not be considered appropriate or worthwhile.

A definition of diversity in higher education ought to stem from higher education philosophy. It should be based on the role higher education is expected to play in our civilization. Here is a definition based on a good understanding of what the role of higher education ought to be: Diversity refers to the human differences that make variable a group's conceptualization and experience of reality, that bestow unearned privileges and/or confer underserved disadvantages on members of the group within a geopolitical and cultural environment, and that provide a platform for the development of unique talents that can be leveraged for the advancement of humanity.

Diversity-competent institutions embrace comprehensive diversity definitions that enable institutions to continue to strive for excellence.

3. Leadership Commitment

Successful organizations have effective leaders who are committed to the vision articulated in the mission statement. Diversity-competent institutions have leaders with a deep commitment to diversity, embracing it as a value and vision that permeates institutional culture and compels institutional investment. Leaders reflect this commitment by advocacy as well as by hiring, mentoring, promoting, and associating with people from diverse backgrounds.

4. Structure

A growing number of institutions are centralizing their often fragmented and disjointed diversity-related activities. One result of this is a change in organizational structure to include a senior or chief diversity officer. Chief diversity officers often have institution-wide policy-making roles; they generally report to the president and have an agenda that transcends compliance. A diversity-competent institution provides an organizational structure that maximizes institutional effectiveness.

5. Diversity Plan

A diversity-competent institution has a living diversity plan. A living plan does not sit on the shelf to gather dust. Rather, it is a document actively used to guide institutional activities. The process of developing the plan is inclusive; hence, the plan enjoys a wide community ownership. The plan provides broad strategies for unit level implementation. In short, diversity-competent institutions do not operate in the dark but under the light of a well-developed plan.

6. Diversity Model

A diversity model provides a conceptual illustration of diversity variables that are critical in realizing diversity vision. Where models have been discussed and adopted, planning efforts and progress assessment are made easy. Diversity-competent institutions have effective diversity models guiding operations. They may not have developed a model from scratch, but they have examined several and have adopted or adapted one to meet their unique needs.

7. Assessment and Progress Report

An important characteristic of a progressive organization is attention to data. Diversity-competent institutions measure progress over time and utilize data generated to redirect institutional efforts. Progress, or the lack of it, is made public, and campus wide conversations are undertaken to digest the data obtained.

8. Accountability and Reward

Beyond assessment, diversity-competent institutions establish accountability and provide performance incentives. With accountability and reward systems, good leadership is reinforced and poor leadership is discouraged. Diversity-competent institutions include diversity progress in the annual evaluation of chairs, deans, vice presidents, and unit leaders.

9. Visible Diversity

No two human beings are the same in all respects. But the diversity we strive for goes beyond that. An inclusive campus reflects the diversity of society. A diversity-competent institution is a campus bubbling with people from many races, religions, economic, and political backgrounds, as well as genders and cultural lifestyles. Diversity is not hidden to the naked eye at a diversity-competent institution; rather, it manifests the rich diversity of society itself.

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10. Academic Diversity

Reflecting the adoption of a comprehensive diversity model, diversity-competent institutions expand diversity activities beyond recruitment and retention. At the heart of a diversity agenda lies the need to expand our narrow socialization, broaden our worldview, and break down the shackles of fear, ignorance, and bigotry. A diversity-competent institution attends to diversity curricula, and it ensures educational experiences aimed at equipping graduates with knowledge and skills to function effectively in an increasingly diverse world.

11. Healthy Tension

A diversity-competent institution is not a dormant, conflict-free school but a place where healthy tension exists and where conflicts of ideas provide opportunities to learn and grow. New students will continue to come with their narrow socialization and limited worldview and continue to be prone to making mistakes. Cultures, like the people who create them, evolve as they interact. A diversity-competent campus provides opportunities for cultures to "clash," evolve, and flourish, and for people to change and adapt in a nonviolent manner.

12. Contributions to Society

Diversity-competent institutions accept their role as catalysts, as agents for societal change and transformation. They engage in consultations to further the course of diversity in organizations and communities. They engage in empirical investigations to learn more about the benefits associated with human differences. Realizing that society is their source of the diverse talents needed to fulfill their mission, diversity-competent institutions also promote diversity within their communities, across the nation, and in the world as a whole.

13. Pervasive Ethos

Diversity-competent institutions embrace diversity not to placate agitating interest groups and not as a ploy for political correctness. Across the campus, there is a culture that values differences—a tradition that welcomes diversity and a custom that affirms diverse talents. A diversity ethos permeates the campus at diversity-competent institutions and serves as a force that galvanizes faculty, students, and staff toward inclusive excellence.

14. Diversity Celebration

Closely akin to pervasive ethos and accountability and reward is the culture that celebrates differences. Diversity-competent institutions have well-established programs for celebrating diversity. Beyond celebration, they use this opportunity to broaden knowledge and enjoy the dividends that can accrue from well-managed diversity.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Diversity-competent institutions have characteristics that can and should guide diversity efforts in higher education. These characteristics represent the excellence that institutions pledge, and they are consistent with the expectations that society holds for the bastions of knowledge.

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