

Impact of Cultural Competence in Graduate School Settings

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Abstract: The range of challenges for educators in the graduate school setting includes student's differences associated with age, language barriers, learning styles, disability, and culture. The literature also demonstrates student populations in higher education differ in academic ability, gender, socioeconomic factors, religion, and life experiences. Thus, the integration of cultural competence in the graduate school settings is imperative as the student populations becomes increasingly more diverse. The educators must demonstrate an understanding to the student to engage and motivate them to learn. Higher education faculty and administrators must determine the strategy they will employ to meet the student demands and simultaneously compete with other colleges. The strategy should address arenas where the curriculum engages the diverse student population in humanities, liberal arts, professional activities, and conveys the career opportunities. The purpose of this research is to understand the types of learning barriers in higher education, assess the importance of cultural competence, and evaluate the correlation between cultural competence and learning outcomes.

Keywords: Cultural competence, Higher education, Student diversity, Graduate school

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Introduction

The integration of cultural competence in higher education settings is imperative as the diverse student population continues to escalate. Colleges and universities must determine the strategy they will implement to meet student demands amid the demographic differences present among student populations and faculty populations. The range of challenges in the education environment include differences associated with cultural background, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, learning styles, and language barriers. According to Browers & Ho (2022), to facilitate success, all school settings must address the nuances of student backgrounds, including their social and emotional needs.

Research shows that understanding the culturally and racially diverse needs of students is vital for academic success, achieving educational goals, and priorities. Furthermore, it is necessary to adequately prepare students to thrive in increasingly diverse communities after they graduate. This is more challenging to accomplish in the United States as increasingly more diverse across racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic groups in higher education settings. The level of diversity present on college campuses could be correlated to the geographic

location of the school. For example, urban versus rural or densely populated versus sparsely populated.

Clearly, college and universities located in metropolitan areas would possess a more diverse student population than higher education institutions in rural areas. The campus demographics and culture present are important factors in creating an environment of inclusivity to students. Based on the research of Nicola Bianchi, even within nations, there tends to be a significant gap between urban and rural education outcomes. According to one 2015 standardized assessment, 15-year-olds studying in urban schools in 37 countries outperformed rural students by roughly the equivalent of one full year of schooling, even after controlling for students' socioeconomic backgrounds (Kellogg Insight, 2021).

As noted by Jayakumar (2008), as the United States becomes increasingly diverse and a global society, neighborhoods and schools are paradoxically returning to levels of racial segregation not seen since the 1960's. As such, incoming students within higher education environments have been primarily exposed to people of their same race prior to college entry. To further illustrate the challenge in developing cultural awareness, Browers & Ho (2022) note rural universities primarily enroll students near the primary campus.

Cultural competence enables individuals to respect and appreciate the diversity of human experiences, and work towards creating inclusive environments that support the needs of diverse populations. The benefits of university students' exposure to diversity and inclusion experiences have been discussed in multiple publications. The Council for Higher Education Preparation (CHEP) notes Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are rooted in cultural identity. Moreover, college and universities are the bedrocks of change and foster free thinking, individualism, and freedom the just the simple right to "be".

Sandell and Tupy (2015) explain that students' actual knowledge, understanding, and reflections are not based on life experiences that enable them to deeply understand and accept the other culture and its complexities. Exposure to other cultures or environments is important aspect of life experience. Focus-group interviews of graduate and undergraduate students completed by Browers and Ho (2022, p. 9) revealed the importance of life experience in developing cultural awareness. For example, one student commented, "I grew up in a small town of 8,000 people and I went to school with every single person from preschool to my senior year in high school." Another student claimed, "out of 557 students that I graduated with I think 555 of them were White, and we all grew up in that area."

Jayakumar (2008) suggests universities need to produce cross-culturally competent citizens who can work in diverse environments. Research findings of Bikson and Law who assert colleges are failing to develop students who can work effectively with individuals who norms, preferences, beliefs, styles, and values are different from their own. As such, exposure to racial diversity in college is important for individuals from segregated backgrounds as they are unlikely to gain such exposure and associated interpersonal challenges within their neighborhoods as adults. Therefore, the aim of this research is to understand the impact of cultural competence in graduate school settings and the influencing factors related to learning outcomes and student engagement.

Defining Cultural Competency

There are several working definitions of cultural competency depending on the industry or focus. For example, The National Education Association defines it as “having an awareness of one’s own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build in the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families” (Fostering Culturally Competent Classrooms, 2023). Whereas the National Quality Forum defines cultural competency as “ongoing capacity of healthcare systems, organizations, and professionals to provide for diverse patient populations high-quality care that is safe, patient and family centered, evidence based and equitable” (NQF, 2009).

Overall, culturally competent individuals effectively interact with people from cultures different from one’s own. In the education arena, cultural competence emphasizes the ability to serve students and families from diverse cultures and backgrounds in an effective manner. Organizations should demonstrate several characteristics along the cultural competence continuum (Gilbert, et al., 2007). Thus, the topic of cultural competency requires an understanding of other key terms such as culture, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, Intercultural Competency (ICC), and linguistic competence.

Gilbert, et al. (2007) describe culture as the “lens” through which people in a specific group view the world. learned and shared knowledge that specific groups use to generate their behavior and interpret their experience in the world. These authors point out that (1) cultural groups are not synonymous with racial groups and (2) culture is not genetically transferred as it is learned through language and modeling. As such, race is a social construct used to identify people by physiological characteristics such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture. Therefore, when members of a society routinely divide people into groups based on the possession of these characteristics race becomes socially significant. Of importance, the subjectivity of race and the heterogeneity within population groups add further ambiguity to classifying different populations by race (National Academies of Science, 2004).

It is important to understand cultural awareness is the foundation for cultural competence. The National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) define it as being cognizant, observant, and conscious of similarities and differences among and between cultural groups (Gilbert, et al., 2007). Whereas Purnell (2014) discusses cultural awareness as the appreciation of external and material signs of diversity such as music, dress, or physical characteristics. These distinctions are important because cultural awareness has far reaching ramifications when coupled with implicit bias. Thus, it is important for faculty to assess both because the classroom experience could be impacted significantly (Hanover Research, 2019).

There is an increasing number of intercultural encounters occurring in higher educational settings supporting the importance of cultural sensitivity in educational settings. This is a soft skill that can be measured, learned, and developed. The term, cultural sensitivity, is generally viewed as one’s ability and desire to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that stimulates appropriate and effective

behavior in cross-cultural encounters. Further, it should be acknowledged that it is important when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different (Szoke, 2023).

Sandell & Tupy (2015) discuss the importance of ICC and that primary, secondary, and post-secondary teachers should demonstrate proficiency. These authors note the “ability to accommodate cultural differences into one’s reality in ways that enable an individual to move easily into and out of diverse cultures and to adjust naturally to the situation at hand” as the definition for ICC. However, they also illustrate the definition of ICC for teachers is the “ability to effectively respond to students from different cultures and classes while valuing and preserving the dignity of cultural differences and similarities between individuals, families, and communities.” Effective responses are an important differentiating factor when working with varied cultures.

Linguistic competence is defined as the capacity of an organization and its personnel to communicate effectively and convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences including persons of limited English proficiency, those who have low literacy skills or are not literate, and individuals with disabilities. Organizations must have policy, structures, practices, procedures, and dedicated resources to support this capacity (Gilbert et al.,2007).

Research Theory

Leininger’s Theory of Culture Care Diversity and Universality also known as the Culture Care Theory (CCT) roots are to guide research and discovery for evidence-based nursing practice. Its design also guides future culturally competent administrative and leadership policies and procedures and informs public policy related to cultural diversity and underserved populations; thus, it is applied to this research. McFarland & Wehbe-Alamah (2017) point out the purpose of Leininger’s theory is to “discover, document, know, and explain the interdependence of care and culture phenomena with differences and similarities between and among cultures.” In addition, it is possible to apply Leininger’s theory to explore organizational cultures. As such, CCT guides the research in determining the influence of cultural competency proficiency on students and faculty.

Method

A systemic literature review was undertaken of the following databases: Ebsco, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest and PubMed. All papers reviewed were published from 2004 to 2023. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education - (NCATE), Council for Higher Education Accreditation – (CHEA) and the United States Census Bureau were key resources for this research.

Discussion

Diversity and cultural competence discussions are more widespread than ever with the changing demographics

in the United States. The surge of immigrants over the last thirty years has brought an abundance of foreign language and cultures. To illustrate, the Diversity Index published by the United States Census Bureau shows California, Nevada, Maryland, Texas, New York, Florida, and Georgia are above 63% on the scale. Percentages are 69.7%, 68.8%, 67.3%, 67.0%, 65.8%, 64.1% 64.1% respectively. The Diversity Index predicts the chance that two people chosen at random would be from different racial or ethnic backgrounds (The United States Census Bureau, 2021b). These are important when we consider that 16.6 million undergraduate students and 4.6 million graduate students were enrolled in school in 2021. Furthermore, approximately 11.1 percent of undergraduate students and 19.8 percent of graduate students were foreign-born (Census.gov, 2023a).

The changing demographics of the United States population is critical when developing cultural competency. It is critical to understand that environmental influences further that impact student learning styles, retention, engagement, and attitudes. Goodwin (2019) reviews Gay's indicators of a culturally competent teacher as developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. Awareness of current events and other cultures beliefs is often key in acquiring knowledge about cultural groups' points of view (Guzman et al., 2016).

Examination of the literature reveals a strong mandate to remove barriers present in academic settings to improve learning outcomes, engage the student, and prepare students for professional work environments. Morrison and Conway (2006) note that communication takes place between individuals not cultures. Preparing students to thrive in diverse academic and professional environments requires an understanding of the students' actual knowledge. According to Sandell and Tupy (2015) university students are in a life-stage in which coming together around commonalities is important for tasks such as succeeding at a career or achieving a university degree. Thus, it is important for teachers to understand the invisible rules within different social and cultural structures to build productive relationships with students.

To understand the student population, it is essential to know the communities the university serves, and the cultures represented (Gallagher, 2021). Defining the population characteristics helps develop cultural awareness. Guzman et al. (2016) report the United States Hispanic population would be 25 percent by 2050 with the United States Census Bureau projecting the United States to be a "majority-minority" country by 2043. Thus, a single group will no longer be the majority even though non-Hispanic whites would be the largest group. Yet, the increased cultural diversity and globalization has not stopped inequality bias or breakdown in intercultural communications. Moreover, institutional policies perpetuate inequalities at both the individual and institutional levels. Numerous bias incidents and persistent inequalities around racial and ethnic lines remain a constant (Guzman et al., 2016).

Increasing diversity presents several challenges related to discrimination, implicit bias, and breakdown in communications. Research demonstrates subtle incidences can have cumulative and serious consequences for socio-emotional well-being (Guzman et al., 2016). Teachers are susceptible to implicit bias resulting in

differentiation in instructional quality that perpetuates achievement gaps. Generally, individuals hold implicit biases that favor one's own ingroup and have real-world effects on behavior. Therefore, training and workshops related to implicit bias are beneficial in developing a personal awareness of individual beliefs and attitudes towards people of other cultures and races (Hanover Research, 2019). Our biases may stem from our backgrounds, experiences, or personal demographics, and these biases exist whether or not we are aware of them (Guzman et al., 2016).

Engaging in ongoing reflection and learning is a key component of becoming a culturally competent teacher. It is valuable for teachers to learn about the history and experiences of other groups to better understand the diverse student population. Farmer (2020) discusses the influence of educator bias on student's development. He notes that actions are seen and felt by the students. Further gaining cultural competence requires planning and knowing the community they serve. Gallagher (2021) discusses the importance of being able to express your identity and its impact relating to others. Further, listening and observing cultures other than our own is important to becoming culturally competent. Active listening, demonstrating empathy, and effective engagement are the three elements of cultural competence (Guzman et al., 2016).

Active listening requires focus and avoidance of mental distractions. For example, listening without thinking about how you are going to respond. This entails thinking about the feeling or emotion behind the content because the emotion expressed gives real intent of the conversation. The second component of cultural competence, demonstrating empathy, is the art of seeing and feeling the situation of someone else. It requires one to see the world from another's perspective or walking in another person's shoes. Engagement focuses on the behaviors and the situation, not the person. This third component of cultural competency could be mutually beneficial for both parties as it provides a reciprocal learning experience (Guzman et al, 2016).

As a result, an understanding of how students of different cultures, races, and ethnicities relate to a broader social, economic, and political context should emerge. Student's education is driven by their individual life histories and experiences, and learning is contextualized in large part through this paradigm. Through this evolution of learning and discovery, teachers should understand the importance of a multicultural curriculum that acknowledges the perspectives and contributions of all groups. Of importance is not referring to underrepresented groups as "the other" instead integrate them into the overall curriculum (Hanover Research, 2019).

Research by Sunds, et al. (2023) discusses the importance of the syllabi to both promote engagement and communicate belonging to the student. If syllabi do give students the first impression of the course, does it affect their outlook before the course? There appears to be a correlation of student opinion if a discussion of pronouns is included or a "get-to-know-you" survey is offered for students to provide their own perspective or background. One variable that was noted to influence a sense of belonging is the quality of the relationship between instructor and student. Further, learning and retention in the classroom is tied to student engagement which subsequently, influences learning outcomes.

Demographic differences are influential in creating impactful social and cultural gaps between the student population and the teacher population. Teachers at all levels should personify ICC. Yet, the teacher licensing agencies or the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparedness decree the formative or summative assessments teacher education programs should implement (Sandell & Tupy, 2015). Accreditations in higher education typically focus on ensuring institutions meet certain criteria standards of quality and effectiveness in various aspects of education. Several regional and specialized accrediting bodies emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion, however, accreditations focused on cultural competency are limited. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education now merged with the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation includes diversity and cultural competency standards for teacher preparation programs (NCATE, n.d.).

The National Center for Cultural Competence offers professional development modules for teachers to develop cultural awareness and culturally responsive teaching practices. Completing self-assessments should raise awareness of cultural differences, biases, and stereotypes (Hanover Research, 2019). Cultural competence in schools can be summarized as educators' ability to integrate their awareness and knowledge of themselves, students' cultures, and structural inequities towards applying educational practices that effectively meet the needs of all students, regardless of background or minority status (Goodwin, 2019). This is critical since graduate schools had the highest share of foreign-born students or 19.8 percent of the total number enrolled. Gender is also important to acknowledge with 2.7 million female graduate students or 59.5 percent of the graduate student body (Fabrina et al., 2023).

Empirical investigation of the relationship between culturally competent educational practice and student outcomes has been lacking based on the literature reviewed. Browers and Ho (2015) point out that graduate students, many who take online courses, felt a disconnect in on-campus communications. Yet, the research demonstrates it is important for teachers working in higher education to possess cultural awareness of all student populations they serve (Goodwin, 2019). Likewise, administrators and staff should be informed of the same as they too impact student experiences. Cultural competency training across campus can positively impact our interactions with others. Thus, higher education institutions should be proactive in addressing such training.

Coleman et al. (2021) points out that college graduates must be equipped with cultural competence to navigate diverse environments and use academic-specific knowledge in creative ways to address major global questions to develop sustainable solutions to our local, national, and world problems. Universities have been emphasizing the importance of including diversity and inclusion instruction in curriculum offerings and campus experiences. Post secondary educational environments present students with a potentially unique opportunity for exposure to diverse peers. Colleagues may influence one another's comfort level around people of different racial backgrounds, as well as their lifestyle choices post college (Jayakumar, 2008).

The research completed by Jayakumar (2008) suggests students who are academically and socially exposed to diverse and inclusive populations while pursuing their university degree are better prepared to handle the complex issues of a global society. Further, her study indicates that the benefits of structural diversity persist

beyond the college experience into the post college year, however, any indirect effects on cross-cultural workforce competencies are dependent on the quality of an institution's racial climate. The relevance of structural diversity is validated when the students' learning outcomes who attended structurally diverse institutions are compared to those attending liberal arts institutions.

Hanover Research (2019) discusses instructional practices that teachers must actively work to embed into the curriculum to facilitate multicultural education. Three broad instructional practices include differentiated instruction, cooperative and collaborative learning, and real-world connections. A key strategy to promote student learning includes asking open-ended questions and high-order questions for which there is no single "right" answer. These questions promote discussion and should stimulate student thinking (Hanover Research, 2019). Moreover, Farmer (2020) points out that it is imperative for educators across the organizations and school districts be active listeners. Failing to listen to parents, students, staff, and peers impacts cultural awareness. Simply stated, "Far too often fail to see because they fail to listen".

External Influences

Discussions on cultural competence or cultural awareness often focus on influences of one's culture or life experiences. Further, implicit bias and its impact on learning outcomes is represented well in the literature. Of note, areas of influence such as the geographic location of higher education institutions, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion movements, the post pandemic world, artificial intelligence or social media are not all represented as influencing factors on the level of cultural competence. Yet, stakeholders' perceptions of culture are most likely impacted by these types of external influences or barriers that may be present.

Research suggests that students' learning at institutions of higher education is an intricate process that is impacted by the totality of their experience, both inside and outside of the classroom. Their attitudes, and the knowledge and skills they acquire, are affected by both their formal and informal education (Bitew, 2015). Therefore, it appears that the external environment impacts how learning occurs. For example, metropolitan colleges and universities have become prime environments for increased cultural sensitivity and perception of culture (Coleman et al., 2021). Further, metropolitan colleges and universities include efforts supported by both academic and student affairs. Metropolitan campus environments provide settings where cultural competence can serve as a foundation for high impact student success practices.

Conclusions

The literature confirms the need for and importance of managing student diversity. Cultural competency plays a significant and multifaceted role in graduate school settings. The culture within an organization communicates strong messages to all stakeholders and impacts the learning environments, student experiences, and the overall educational outcomes. As such colleges and universities must understand the needs, cultural values and

learning styles of their students while simultaneously ensuring the faculty are culturally competent. It is imperative for cultural competence to be understood across college campuses if there is to be a positive impact on student engagement, learning outcomes, and subsequent student success post-graduation.

Cultivating cultural competence among graduate student is essential for preparing them to thrive in diverse academic and professional environments. A variety of strategies and approaches that educators and institutions can use to foster cultural competence in graduate students are available. The expansion of cultural knowledge in conjunction with the dynamics resulting from cultural differences could lead to respect and empathy among all stakeholders. Cultural competence stresses the skill to bridge these differences while respecting and understanding another individual's perspective and needs. Interpersonal and communication skills including active listening, empathy, and cross-cultural communication fostered through people and organizations who are culturally competent.

It is a necessity to adapt to different cultures, perspectives, and groups if the student is to be successful in an increasingly diverse and global workplace. An understanding of other groups such as active-duty military, veterans, disabilities both learning and physical, and the LGBTQ+ community are important for students to understand prior to entering the workforce post-graduation. Learning outcomes are influenced by faculty, and student motivation is impacted by faculty engagement. As such, student success is also influenced by course design. The literature suggests opportunities to promote experiential learning through community service, internship, and study abroad programs. Experiences exposing graduate students to different communities and cultures encourage student cultural awareness. The demographics present on metropolitan campuses appear to offer more opportunities to culturally develop competency than the higher education institutions located in rural areas. Cultural centers more often found on campuses in urban areas do impact student cultural awareness.

Recommendations

A review of the relevant literature demonstrates significant gaps in predicting learning outcomes in graduate school and post-graduation. Further, since training programs related to cultural competency are not mandated in higher education environments, assessing cultural competency across faculty is challenging. Much of the existing research examines outcomes of diversity while students are in college. The literature suggests student exposure to diversity and inclusion impacts their higher education experience, and subsequent understanding of cultural differences. Yet, there are no longitudinal studies available that track students' development over time. Based on gaps in the literature additional studies to evaluate (1) students' cultural differences prior to entering higher education (2) influence of external factors on student perceptions and learning outcomes (3) cultural competency proficiency of faculty and students in graduate schools and (4) post-graduate student experiences in the workplace.

Future research should also seek to learn more about cultural awareness among individuals on campus, the

training required or offered to better understand cultural differences, and if interventions such as study abroad, internships or multicultural centers influence learning outcomes. These types of studies benefit higher education settings in preparing students for the post-graduate world. Of importance would be to follow groups of post-graduate students to assess their personal perspectives on being workforce ready after graduation from both metropolitan and rural graduate school settings.

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