Teaching Diversity Through Case Competition

T. Nichole Phillips
Assistant Professor of Management
Department of Management and Marketing
Winston-Salem State University
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Lynette I. Wood
Associate Professor of Accounting
Department of Accounting and Management Information Systems
Winston-Salem State University
Winston-Salem, NorthCarolina

ABSTRACT

This paper shares the process and outcomes of utilizing case competitions as an approach to diversity education. A university-wide case competition was held for two consecutive years. We detail the procedure for facilitating the competition, the role of internal and external stakeholders, and student performance and feedback.

It is our position that the use of case competitions presents a unique opportunity to engage students around topics of diversity in a non-accusatory, non-threatening environment where the primary task is to provide a solution to a diversity-related problem. By design, cases require students to think comprehensively and creatively about the topics to produce evidence-based solutions. The competitive format creates a level of excitement and opportunity where students will conduct research analysis and produce solutions above those that may be presented to an assignment in a course.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. population is predicted to experience a majority-minority crossover between 2040-2050 where non-Whites will represent a majority of the population and White, non-Hispanics will become the minority. This anticipated demographic shift requires educators to adjust their pedagogical approaches to ensure a culturally competent population and workforce that is able to succeed in an environment that is increasingly interconnected, interdependent, and diverse (Gunn, Peterson, & Welsh, 2015; Lee, Poch, Shaw, & Williams, 2012). The importance of effective diversity education is confirmed by major accrediting organizations, such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business and the Higher Learning Commission, who recognize diversity as a core competence. As a result, many colleges and universities are expanding their offerings of diversity-related courses and programs in order to develop intercultural competence in their students.

The goals for diversity education and training include increasing knowledge, improving attitudes, and developing diversity-related skills (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Exposure to diversity related topics has been found to result in students being less likely to hold racist attitudes (Chang, 2002), more likely to be civically engaged (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004), and more comfortable with issues of privilege and cultural differences (Bowman, 2010; Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011). While many universities offer diversity courses in order to provide students with this exposure, results of research on their effectiveness have been mixed. Some researchers have found support for the aforementioned positive outcomes, however some report that true effects are found only when students complete multiple diversity courses (Bowman, 2010), while others question the likelihood that diversity awareness can be increased through traditional courses with little experiential involvement (Avery & Thomas, 2004). Further, all students are not receptive to such courses or experiences as they can invoke negative or intensely personal emotions such as anger, resistance, and/or guilt, nor are all faculty members prepared to address these issues (Spelman, 2010; Marbley, Burley, Bonner, & Ross, 2010; Martinez, 2014). Given these challenges, pedagogical approaches outside of or in addition to the classroom have been introduced that

offer alternatives to the traditional classroom for diversity-related education.

Approaches to Diversity Education

Various approaches to diversity education have been proposed including quantitative approaches (Martinez, 2014), conversational learning (Dawson, 2013) and teaching cases (Gunn et al., 2015). Martinez (2014) reports results of teaching a course focused on diversity issues that was "advertised as a non-traditional statistics course meeting natural and mathematical distribution credits" (p.76). The course utilized a series of simple statistics to examine the experiences of the Latino/a population relative to other groups. Students focused on interpreting statistical trends for the first half of the course and delved into why those trends existed for the second half. When examining issues of inequity through the lens of statistical analysis, students appeared more open to such discussions and reported more positive experiences than those articulated in a more traditional diversity course (Martinez, 2014).

Dawson (2013) proposed conversational learning as a means to overcome some of the challenges associated with the traditional classroom approach to diversity education where students converse with one another around topics of diversity. Conversational learning is defined as a "process whereby learners construct new meaning and transform their collective experiences into knowledge through their conversations" (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005 p.412). Different from a traditional classroom setting where students often rely on the instructor for the "right answer," participants in these conversations bring their experience and knowledge to be shared with the conversing party, exchanging information which enables them to talk and listen in order to find meaning and make sense of the information (Dawson, 2013). Hearing the experiences of others is believed to help students be more informed in decision-making relative to issues of diversity as well as to enhance their interpersonal and critical thinking skills (Dawson, 2013).

as a means to improve the cultural competence of educators, Gunn et al. (2015) examined the use of teaching cases as an approach to bridge the gap between the importance of teachers embracing a "culturally responsible pedagogy" and the criticism of current programs being overly theoretical. Teaching cases are used to expose students to the types of problems they will experience in professional practice, often taking the form of short vignettes based on real life events (Gunn et al., 2015). Gunn et al. (2015) incorporated five teaching cases into a course for preservice teachers. The researchers reported significant increases in the participants' cultural awareness and an increase in the number of participants who were able to recognize the cultural issues presented in the cases, providing support for their position that teaching cases are an effective pedagogical tool to teach content related to diversity.

Cases and Case Competitions

Consistent with Gunn et al. (2015), cases are considered an important instructional tool for developing professional knowledge as they help to forge connections between academic knowledge and practice (Kinzie, Hrabe, & Larsen, 1997). Cases can involve real events or be based on a set of key issues grounded in problems often experienced in the workplace (Ertmer & Russell, 1995). They can also help students understand the issues presented and improve their ability to recognize alternative courses of action (Kinzie et al., 1997). The case approach has also been utilized in a competitive environment through formal case competitions.

The purpose of this paper is to share the process and outcomes of utilizing case competitions as an approach to diversity education. Case competitions allow students to engage with complex problems beyond the classroom setting, resulting in exposure to job opportunities, peer bonding, and social capital development—while representing themselves, their teammates, and their institutions (Gamble & Jelley, 2014). For example, case competitions are often very competitive with teams participating from various locations. Teams are required to provide high-quality solutions to real-world problems in a very short time period, typically ranging from one day to one week (Gamble & Jelley, 2014). Such constraints require students to work strategically and quickly, build upon the strengths and knowledge of all members of their team, and prepare a presentation showcasing their findings to business leaders or experts. Students participating in case competitions report being motivated and proud at the opportunity to represent their schools, the importance of collaboration, and expressed positive reactions to being judged (Kinzie et al., 1997). These competitions are also attractive sources of talent for businesses as recruiters perceive them as opportunities to observe and assess the level of tacit knowledge that will be required in the workforce, beyond the typical assessment of declarative knowledge (Armstrong & Fukami, 2010). Such exposure and experience, coupled with high levels of excitement are likely to motivate students to succeed. Bragging rights and the monetary awards often associated with case competitions are also likely to inspire students to work towards a winning analysis, thus expanding their approaches and openness to diversity-related topics.

In the sections to follow, we will detail the procedure for facilitating the competition, the role of internal and external stakeholders, and student performance and feedback.

DIVERSITY CASE COMPETITION

The following description details the process for facilitating the diversity case competition at our university—from inception to student response. The scope is limited to the procedures used during the initial two years of the case competition.

Impetus

Though this paper details the process and outcomes of using case competitions to enhance diversity and awareness at a large mid-Atlantic predominantly white public university, the authors acknowledge that the initial idea was the brainchild of diversity leaders at another institution.1 They shared the concept as a best practice at a diversity roundtable meeting for business school faculty and administrators from around the country. It was immediately evident to one of the authors who was a participant at the event that a diversity case competition had great promise as a high-impact educational tool.

The university where we taught had a dearth of minority students. Therefore, recommendations in response to diversity case questions had the potential to benefit both students and university administration.

Buy-In from University Stakeholders

Initially, the diversity case competition concept was broached with the business school dean who ultimately approved exploring the feasibility of creating this opportunity for our students. Subsequently, discussions were held with key university stakeholders including the business school diversity committee and business diversity center, the university's Office of Equity and Inclusion, and the MBA program director. The immediate enthusiastic response and commitments of substantive support propelled the project forward.

Corporate Partnership

The business community's interest in developing students' diversity skills and awareness gave life to the new initiative. We conveyed to prospective supporters how important it was for this event to capture the interest of students. They concurred. Our requests for their financial sponsorship and participation as judges typically received positive responses.

Monetary Awards

Student teams competed for sizeable cash prizes, paid directly to them by a corporate sponsor. (One firm contributed $3,500 to cover all the prizes.) The winning team received $2,000; second place, $1,000; and third place $500. We thought that it was very important that the monetary awards be large enough to generate significant student interest in forming teams and participating in the competition.

The decision to provide cash prizes instead of scholarship funds was based, to a large extent, on preliminary conversations with students who indicated that spendable money would be perceived far more positively than scholarship funds.

Case Topics

The first year's case topic addressed the underrepresentation of racial minorities at the university relative to their representation in the state. Students were provided with demographic information and asked to offer reasons for the lack of representation and to offer recommendations believed to increase attractiveness and ultimately enrollment of underrepresented groups at the university.

The second year's topic was related. Students recommended methods and strategies that could be used to create a more welcoming environment for underrepresented students.

Operation of the Competition

Process Overview

To alert students to the case competition, there was university-wide promotion explaining the purpose and details of the competition. Students were invited to form teams of 3-4 members. They were told that the case would be related to diversity; however, they were not informed of the specific facets of diversity to be analyzed.

While participation was voluntary, the opportunity for large financial gain for (what was expected to be) a relatively small time investment, resulted in widespread student response. The interdisciplinary, self-selected teams had six days to complete and submit the presentation of their findings and recommendations.

There were two rounds of judging. Knowing that the final round judges consisted of a panel of business executives

1 Indiana University's Kelley School of Business was the originator of this best practice, which they shared with other business programs. Subsequently Kelley began hosting an annual National Diversity Case Competition.

heightened the importance of the learning experience to the students.

Timeline

Held in the spring semester, the competition was announced at the end of February. The event itself was scheduled for the end of March, with the registration deadline soon after spring break. Following is a timeline that represents typical intervals between key dates in the competition.

- Team Signup Begins–Tuesday, February 24
- Competition Information Session (before Spring Break)–Wednesday, March 4, 4:00-5:00 p.m.
- Team Registration Deadline (after Spring Break)–Tuesday, March 17, 4:00 p.m.
- Case Distributed–Tuesday, March 24, 4:00 p.m.
- PowerPoint Presentation Deadline–Monday, March 30, noon
- Competition Preliminary Round – Monday, March 30, 4:00 p.m.
- Competition Final Round–Tuesday, March 31, 4:00 p.m.

Promotion

An attractive professionally-designed poster, summarizing the purpose, timeline, prize amounts, and key guidelines of the case competition, was displayed in high-visibility locations around campus. The university and corporate sponsors also were prominently displayed on the poster—signaling the importance of the event and also providing an opportunity for publicizing the stakeholders' brands.

In addition, a visual promotion was emailed to faculty, along with a request that they show it to their students and encourage participation. Emails also were sent to students.

Teams

Teams were self-selected, and participation was voluntary. Students were instructed to form three or four member teams (though the maximum team size allowed for the first year was five students). In the competition's first year, all team members had to be currently enrolled business school students, and there was no explicit requirement regarding being a mixture of classifications. The next year, the opportunity was extended to all undergraduate students at the university. Every team was required to include at least one junior or senior student. In addition, the teams each had to appoint a team captain who would serve as the key point of contact between the team and the competition coordinators.

A competition information session was held in the period between the event announcement and the registration deadline. This was open to all and permitted students who were considering participation to ask questions of the coordinators before making a final determination.

Fourteen interdisciplinary teams competed in the first year. In the second year, the strong interest level was sustained, and the number of teams grew to 15 (with an announced limit of the first 20 teams to register). Since the topic was not repeated, students were permitted to participate more than one year.

Following is a description of the teams.

Table 1
Profile of Teams

	Year 1	Year 2
Average Age	20	21
Gender		
Female	43%	32%
Male	57%	68%
National Origin		
U.S. Citizen	89%	95%
Non-citizen	11%	5%
Ethnicity		
Asian	20%	16%
Black	22%	14%
Hispanic	4%	3%
White	41%	51%
Mixed	4%	14%
Other	9%	3%
Classification		
Freshman	13%	3%
Sophomore	20%	22%
Junior	24%	47%
Senior	43%	28%

Both years, the teams consisted of a mixture of finance, accounting, marketing, business information technology, management, and economics majors. Since the students selected their own teams, diversity of majors and ethnicity was not guaranteed. However, only one team in the first year had students from only one major—finance, and the

teams were far more racially diverse than the university population. There was no attribution the first year, but in the second year four teams did not submit a presentation by the deadline (explanations were not submitted to the competition coordinators).

Case Distribution

Copies of the competition case were distributed electronically to all team members one week following the team registration deadline. The students knew in advance the exact time to expect the email and also had been informed that the competition coordinators would be available at a preannounced location to answer questions on the guidelines from any team member. In addition, the students were told in the competition written guidelines that any attempt to obtain a copy of the case in advance of the scheduled distribution could result in their team's disqualification.

Guidelines for Case Presentation

The students were instructed that all analysis had to be done by members of their team only. Once the case was distributed, coaching by university faculty and staff was prohibited.

The teams were permitted to use any reference sources/materials in the public domain (i.e. the university library, the internet). However, they were instructed to copy, rather than check out, library materials—so that all participants would have access to the information.

The team members also were told that they should not attempt to gain information on the content of the presentations made by other competing teams. If they were uncertain about a rule or its interpretation, they were to contact the competition coordinators.

Judging

There were two days of judging. On the first day, all submissions were evaluated in a preliminary round by judges selected from the academic community. On the second day, the six highest rated preliminary round teams presented their solutions to business executives who served as the panel of judges for the final round presentations.

In the preliminary round, each team had 10-12 minutes to present its analysis of the case. In the final round, teams had 10-12 minutes to present and a 3-5 minute question and answer period. During the presentations, teams were to address (1) key aspects of the business situation faced by the case's focal organization, (2) strategic recommendations for responding to the business situation, (3) a convincing rationale for those recommended actions, (4) a plan for implementing recommendations, and (5) a projection of the costs and benefits associated with implementing the recommended actions and the measures that would be used to determine the extent to which the actions result in success/failure. Teams could spend as much or as little time discussing each of these components as they wished.

Each team was scored in five categories:

1. Presentation Skills
2. Presentation Flow and Organization
3. Depth of Recommendation (through implementation)
4. Creativity
5. Q&A (final round only)

In the final round, in addition to providing one composite score per team, the judges were encouraged to prepare written comments about each presentation so that constructive feedback could be provided to participants following the case competition.

The winning team was the one earning the highest composite scores. The first-place team and the other finalist teams received recognition at an awards reception held immediately following the final competition. During this reception, external and internal stakeholders were formally acknowledged, the winners were announced, and a myriad of photos were taken—including many with the first-place team and the symbolic "big check."

Student-reported Outcomes

Student feedback on the experience was overwhelmingly positive. While enhancing their knowledge of diversity, they also had fun, developed their research and presentation skills, and learned how to work under pressure as a team. Because a high-profile university event focused on the topic, the students gained an appreciation for the importance of diversity.

Team members reported devoting considerable time to this activity. Motivated by the large potential payoff (and the relatively high probability of being among the winners), their level of engagement far exceeded the normal level for their other academic assignments.

The leader of the first year's winning team provided feedback that speaks volumes for the benefits of this learning experience: "For me this case was more than a competition; it was inspiration. I could learn more from [my two teammates] about diversity than I could in a classroom, and I did. They opened my eyes to the disparities between

Blacks and Whites. Not only did the two of them bring me into their world, they showed to me the strength associated with diversity. We all had different ideas, and we embraced that. As the team leader I felt the two of them looked to me for support, and I offered it as much as I could. It was an odd feeling because in fact, I was the minority in our group, yet I was still the leader. I don't think they realize, though, how much my strength came from them. They were outstanding teammates, and I have a great deal of respect for both of them. It was an honor and a privilege to work with them and participate in the competition." Other participants also expressed the benefit they gleaned from the process. They were enthusiastic that their awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusion had grown.

Benefits to Higher Education

Case competitions represent an alternative approach to incorporating diversity into the learning experience. By design, case competitions present an opportunity where students apply subject-related knowledge to a real world situation. Focusing on the situation presents a unique opportunity for students to explore various solutions without the uncertainty and discomfort that may come from a traditional classroom environment when addressing topics of diversity.

Developing solutions to case situations provide students with an opportunity to network and gain access to stakeholders they may not encounter through a traditional classroom experience. For example, a winning team in one business case competition was invited to present its recommendations to the judging organization's senior executives and board of directors, indicating a desire of the organization to incorporate the results of the students' analysis into their operations (Gamble & Jelley, 2014). Such results represent the quality of output that is likely to result from students engaged in competitive case analyses around topics of diversity, as well as the networking and employment opportunities that may result for students and the judging or sponsoring organizations.

CONCLUSION

As a teaching tool, the diversity case competition gives undergraduate students an opportunity to develop important professional skills. They are presented with an unstructured problem which they must analyze and respond to as a team. Because there are no easy or simple answers to the complex business issues presented in the case, the students must employ their critical thinking and research skills. They also are forced to multitask as they operate in an environment with real time constraints and significant incentives for superior performance. Most importantly, they are highly motivated to increase their knowledge of diversity during this experiential activity. Case competitions are a feasible, motivating, and enjoyable way for students to immerse themselves in the topic of diversity. Based on the success that the university experienced with this competition, we are hopeful that this pedagogical approach can be used in other higher educational contexts to advance knowledge around issues of diversity and multicultural competence.

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