

Workplace Diversity

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As a graduate assistant at my University Speaking Center (USC), I investigated the ways our diverse staff works together cohesively to be both fascinating and effective. I conducted two different focus groups at the USC during downtime to create an open dialogue for learning about what makes us diverse. I found that diversity is more than just race, gender, or sexual orientation, and that the word diversity is frequently associated with only demographic characteristics. This definition, though, excludes differences in personalities, experiences, and backgrounds. These dynamics actually play a unique role in how consultants interact with one another and how they work with speakers. My research led to a distinction between internal and external diversity. Internal diversity is the interaction between co-workers and the leadership team. External diversity refers to communication between speakers and consultants. These concepts are interwoven throughout my research on diversity within the USC. Internal and external diversity both have their unique challenges and rewards. They can unpack those layers of identity to help consultants and speakers know the best ways to interact with one another. This article will explore the challenges and rewards of internal and external diversity, identify important characteristics such as trust and tact that promote diversity, and discuss how to best implement a positive, diverse workplace.

First, it is important to define what diversity looks like at the center. Although diversity spans beyond demographic descriptors, knowing how a person identifies

themselves can help in the process of creating a space of mutual respect in the center. A brief survey was sent to fifty-three members of the USC staff. 39 out of 53 staff members responded to self-identify what makes them diverse. The results showed that the USC has five different types of races and sexual identities. The staff also comes from various fields of study; not everyone has a Communication Studies background. The center also has nine science majors, which is helpful when serving students from scientific backgrounds. One way the USC is accommodating of diversity can be seen in the large percentage of staff with a disability. 79.5 % of staff identified that he/she has a disability. Also, 82.1% of the staff are female and 17.9 % are male. This could be due to campus demographics because UNC-Greensboro has 66.6% females and 33.4% males enrolled as of fall 2018 (Campus Profile and Comparisons, 2018). Data on demographics helps to lay a foundation for identifying who a person is. However, there are important layers of a person's identity that are more complex than checking a box on a survey based merely on race, ethnicity, and gender. A focus on internal and external diversity can help emphasize those other elements of diversity that are vital to the Speaking Center.

One of the biggest challenges at the USC in terms of external diversity is culture and language barriers with international students who come in to practice conversational English. Consultants express an interest in working with international students. A consultant working with Interlink students must be cognizant of

speech rate, vocabulary usage, and gestures. During the focus group, respondents expressed that they have to be consciously aware of how they are communicating to meet these students where they are. While opening a dialogue about external diversity, those included in the conversation said they loved working with different types of appointments and speakers because it challenged them. External diversity helped many consultants discover their own strengths and weaknesses. Many respondents felt accomplished at the end of a session in which they were able to meet the speaker's expectations even though they originally may not have been confident going into the consultation. Situations like these are why training junior consultants on the dynamics of external diversity is vital. These training initiatives create a more open environment for both the consultants and the speakers to learn.

Internal diversity, on the other hand, elaborates on the family culture the center has. An interesting theme related to internal diversity is the idea of "shift cultures." Speaking Center staff did not indicate that they feel they always congregate towards people of the same race or background as them, but they do feel naturally closer to those they have repeated shifts with. Relationships are built during these shared shifts and at times newcomers may feel like outsiders until they learn more about people's stories. Rice (2010) writes, "inclusion as a newcomer should extend beyond the notion of simple access." (p. 142). Therefore, working to integrate new people into a workplace should go beyond letting them in the room or in the conversation; it should involve getting them to participate. The Speaking Center has students called junior consultants, who are training in a course called Communication Studies 390 to be consultants. Making them feel included is highly important in

accomplishing the mission and continuing the USC's work. Junior consultants train by watching senior consultants lead a consultation. This experience allows them to develop a sense of how the consultation should be run and starts the internal dialogue of how junior consultants want to lead. This observation process is key to knowing how to be tactful in various situations even when something goes wrong in a consultation. Through observation, the junior consultants know how to take corrective action or improve if they experience a similar situation in the future. Also, trainees often feel overwhelmed because, "colleague pressure involves judging whether workers' job performance are acceptable to their colleagues" (Rice, 2010, p. 146). Consultants and junior consultants, therefore, must focus on growth and relational building in the training process. Relationships are inevitably established between junior consultants and other speaker center staff as well as with speakers, because many of the individuals who have a positive experience at the center return to see their consultant throughout the semester. This helps junior consultants feel a sense of pride and growth by getting to take part in helping their peers on campus. The ultimate goal is to acclimate junior consultants to this diverse, dynamic environment so that by the end of the semester they can become confident in the role of peer tutor.

Trust and tact are also significant factors that impact our diverse SC culture. Trust and tact play a role in every interaction at the center, but trust has to be earned. USC staff did not instantly trust everyone they worked with, but there was a certain level of confidence they had to have in themselves to perform the tasks they were given. Another idea that was reiterated is a need for those in leadership to trust consultants are doing their job, and in turn a need for consultants to trust that they would be properly prepared to

excel as peer tutors. Tact also involves knowing the right way to deal with various complex situations. This is especially important in dealing with speakers or co-workers because problems will inevitably arise especially with various personalities and leadership styles working together simultaneously. Strategies for being tactful in the center include knowing when to make a conversation with someone private, discreetly asking a manager for help when one feels overwhelmed about a situation, and knowing when to refer speakers to another resource on campus. There are other techniques for various situations, but these are the most commonly used at my center.

The USC has positive connotations in relation to diversity, but there are also areas of improvement that have been established after talking with staff during focus groups. USC staff would like to see specific training pertaining to diversity integrated into the trainings held at the beginning of the semester. The focus should be on not only recruiting diverse individuals to work at the USC, but also learning how to be better communicators with people who have differing opinions and cultures. Many staff members, all of whom come from different races and backgrounds, described how the Speaking Center is one of the places they feel most comfortable communicating diverse perspectives. The biggest takeaway from this research is that the lessons learned here can translate into the real world, such as an appreciation of diversity, ability to work amongst various individuals, and a sense of respect for the positive outcomes that arise from working with diverse people.

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