Inclusive Excellence

UConn Builds Capacity for Diversity and Change

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For the past several years, the University of Connecticut has been carrying out an ambitious plan in pursuit of what the Association of American Colleges and Universities calls "inclusive excellence." The idea is that true excellence should be measured by how well campus systems, structures and processes meet the needs of *all* students, regardless of socioeconomic, racial, gender or other characteristics. At UConn, standard indicators of excellence such as SAT scores are at an all-time high across the entering class, and so is enrollment of historically underrepresented African-American and Latino students. UConn is also retaining and graduating minority students at rates that are among the nation's highest. The university has recorded a slight increase in the ethnic and racial diversity of the faculty.

There is no magic formula for achieving inclusive excellence. But the UConn experience offers a few lessons:

Diversity has to be a campuswide priority. At UConn, diversity is an integral part of academic and strategic planning efforts, and the subject is regularly discussed at meetings among senior leadership. For example, at a recent meeting of trustees, administration, faculty and students on future priorities for the university, a major aspect of the discussion focused on infusing diversity into research and scholarship. Unless diversity is included in discussions at the highest levels of governance, policy, and leadership, change will not occur.

A recent study by University of Maine higher education scholar Susan V. Iverson examining the diversity plans of more than 20 institutions found that many plans focus on the marginalized victim status of minorities rather than identifying the problem and developing solutions. Indeed, ill-conceived diversity plans may do more harm than good, creating a negative social discourse that hinders, rather than advances the diversity planning agenda.

UConn is working from a strategic diversity plan that was formally authorized by its board of trustees and focuses very clearly on identifying the problem and proposing several steps for success. Because the plan is authorized at the highest levels of the institution, it applies to the entire university and is designed to withstand changes in leadership, even at the presidential or provost levels. Working from the 2002 trustees' plan also gives individuals—whether they are supportive or critical of the effort—a stable benchmark for judging the success or failure of the institution as it moves forward.

Still, to ensure change, institutions need diversity plans at both the campuswide level and the unit or school/college level. Colleges and universities are decentralized environments, so diversity plans must burrow deep into the culture of the institution's different parts. High-profile campuswide plans may be quickly forgotten, shelved or abandoned unless academic deans, vice presidents, department chairs and others "own" the implementation process locally.

The UConn provost's office recently began requiring each school, college and division to develop its own plan addressing recruitment and retention, curricular diversity, campus climate and communication of diversity from its own unique perspective. Deans and vice presidents are evaluated, in part, on how well they implement these plans.

An empowered, formal diversity infrastructure is essential. The position of "chief diversity officer" is critical to inclusive excellence. By developing such a position, the university expresses a powerful commitment to diversity, which is often featured prominently on institutional web sites but rarely activated in the institution's offices, systems and strategic planning processes.

Chief diversity officers are the chief architects of campus diversity. They advise senior leadership on issues like how to protect the institution's diversity interests in a post-University of Michigan Supreme Court environment. When empowered, they play a key role in the administrative decision-making and participate in a plethora of projects like leading an academic senate committee to develop a new general education diversity distribution requirement; launching a new strategic faculty hiring initiative to recruit more minorities and women; or building international relationships and academic programs at sister institutions in other countries. Although chief diversity officers are not the only people responsible for campus diversity, they play a key role in catalyzing the diversity change process and act as the face and conscience of diversity issues for the institution.

At UConn, the chief diversity officer role is played by the Office of the Vice Provost for Multicultural & International Affairs (OMIA), which directs 19 units, including campus cultural centers, ethnic studies institutes, international affairs programs and affirmative action and equity efforts. The division extends the capabilities of the institution in many important ways. Faculty and staff teach cutting-edge courses and lead research that expands the canon of knowledge regarding issues of race, gender, identity, globalization and sexuality. They host conferences and symposia that enrich the

intellectual life of the institution and explore important current events like the Hurricane Katrina disaster, changing demographics and "the browning of America."

OMIA staff place special emphases on building relationships that support innovative mentoring initiatives for minority students, retention programs and research projects. One illustration of work in this area involves a five-year National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded project involving an OMIA collaboration with the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and several institutions throughout New England. The program aims to implement a leadership and academic success program that focuses on minority student success in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics—the so-called STEM fields. More than a standard retention program, this initiative leverages the best research on student identity, the academic peer group, campus climate and quantitative preparation, to enhance the academic success and leadership development of African-American, Latino, Native American and first-generation college students studying in these areas.

OMIA developed the conceptual model for the program, which requires students to: 1) participate in a first-year experience course focused on minorities in STEM fields; 2) engage in a rigorous quantitative tutorial program; 3) attend local and national leadership conferences; and 4) discuss important but rarely mentioned topics. These topics include developing successful techniques for joining and starting study groups, particularly valuable for students who may be the only people of color in the class and may not be asked to join another group. Or understanding how a Latina female student might approach a white male engineering professor about academic difficulties that she is experiencing, when she has never had a closed-door conversation with a white male, and believes that "she is made to feel stupid because she asks lots of questions in class."

There is an understanding that UConn is different socially from the inner-cities of Hartford, Willimantic, New Haven and Bridgeport that produce many of the university's minority students. So the program focuses on helping students overcome these differences and achieve success. Now in its fourth year, the program has enjoyed phenomenal success, with a 100 percent retention rate and achievement levels that are better than campus norms for similar groups of minority students. This project has been funded for an additional four-year period, and the university has captured a second NSF grant to apply the model and lessons learned. This additional support represents a $1.5 million-plus increase in available resources to increase ethnic and racial diversity in the STEM areas and greater institutionalization of a proven method of helping these students.

Bubble-up energy and entrepreneurial strategies are essential to change. With all these important accomplishments, UConn has yet to fully implement a formal program to encourage campuswide engagement.

One model program that UConn could emulate can be found at the University of Michigan, where the Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives provides grants to undergraduate students for academic diversity projects and student leadership development. For example, a grant could fund an undergraduate student interested in conducting a faculty-supervised research project that examines the relationship between student involvement in minority student organizations like the National Society of Black Engineering and academic achievement or research success. Or funding could go to a student organization to purchase the National Association of Student Personnel Association's new "Game of Oppression!" board game and to host game and discussion nights with members of the executive boards of student government and the campus newspaper to explore how issues of identity and privilege intersect with the experience of all students.

Similarly, Michigan State University recently developed an "inclusive excellence grant program" that encourages faculty and staff to develop curricular diversity innovations and programs designed to leverage the educational benefits of diversity for all students. The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education has recently implemented a broad diversity challenge grant process designed to encourage new diversity efforts throughout the system.

Entrepreneurial strategies like these create opportunities for campus community members to lead campus diversity efforts—even if they are not "diversity professionals" working in ethnic studies, the women's center or the chief diversity officer suite. This transforms students, faculty and staff from passive observers of the campus change process into creative initiators of diversity programs and activities. These programs may also serve as important conduits for empowering white men to find their voice in a process that does not often recognize their contributions to the diversity equation.

Shift administrative systems to accommodate the needs of historically underrepresented populations. UConn's vice provost for enrollment management and office of undergraduate admissions have implemented a series of new strategies that go beyond the standard fare of embedding diverse faces into websites and marketing collateral. For example, the university has begun hosting minority "yield" receptions specifically designed to spur interaction among prospective students of color and address questions and issues that ethnically and racially diverse students and their parents have about financing higher education, selecting a major and living in a nearly all-white, rural and isolated community like Storrs, Connecticut.

UConn's admissions office also works with campus cultural centers to hire diverse University of Connecticut students and have them call prospective minority students who have been admitted but have not yet decided

whether to enroll. This strategy personalizes the decision-making process by establishing a one-to-one relationship with prospective students. Division I athletic programs often use this strategy, enlisting current student athletes in the recruitment of blue-chip prospects, but such strategies are rarely used for prospective students who are not athletes.

Similar culturally aligned strategies are applied during "electronic admission days." On these days, UConn admissions staff visit urban, largely minority high schools to guide prospective students through the on-line application process. Like most institutions, UConn is moving towards a paperless admissions process to streamline systems, create financial efficiencies and deliver a higher quality of service to prospective students. Undergraduate admissions staff developed this program as a way of achieving administrative excellence without sacrificing potential students who may not have access to a personal computer in the home. Without this type of targeted intervention implemented directly in minority communities, UConn might have seen a dramatic reduction in the number of applicants coming from large urban feeder schools in Hartford and elsewhere throughout the state.

These strategies are important for a number of reasons. They allow UConn to validate the unique identities, experiences and needs that many students of color bring to campus. And they establish the "integration and belonging" process for entering students, before they even enroll and begin classes—a process that is widely touted as essential to retention. Finally, many students of color leave predominantly white institutions with enormous bitterness because they do not have a sense of connection and ownership with their alma mater. By entrusting current students with the recruitment role of selling UConn's "brand equity" to "prospective buyers," the university empowers them as agents of change who are not only important to the current reality of the institution but can leave a positive legacy for future students.

The journey to inclusive excellence is not easy, and though UConn has accomplished a great deal, more needs to be done. We should view the process as one of disturbance and alignment, always questioning the past and encouraging students, faculty and staff to stretch and find new ways to support, nurture and leverage diversity in the service of student learning and achievement.

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