Diversity Initiatives in Higher Education

Just How Important *Is* Diversity in Higher Education?

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Introduction

Diversity in educational settings is generally understood as the body of services and programs offered to students, faculty, and staff that seek to ensure compliance with non-discrimination and related policy and law, and to affirm social membership group differences (broadly considered) in curricular, co-curricular, and workplace contexts. Given the current state of the economy in general and education funding in particular, many higher education institutions are asking the question, "How important is diversity?" While this is framed as a resources question, at its core, it is far more a political one—do we value diversity enough to fund it at all? In tight fiscal times? And, if so, toward what end?

In Southern Nevada, many people will say that diversity is important enough to have gotten two presidents, at the same university, fired within a four-year period—the first in 2006, ostensibly for not supporting diversity enough to create a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) position, and the second in 2009, perhaps for appearing to support this position too much.

Indeed, the presence of, and the support given to, a CDO position is a key milestone in assessing the importance attributed to diversity on any given campus (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2008). But, in many ways, the CDO position is also superfluous to the basic question of importance because diversity—still in its developmental infancy in most college and university infrastructures—continues to be mired in the very elementary, yet exceedingly complex, numbers game: demographics and dollars.

Campuses will continue to debate (1) the level in the institutional hierarchy at which a CDO should function (and be paid), (2) the type and depth of educational preparation a CDO should have, (3) what guiding philosophy, interpersonal disposition, and administrative skill set a CDO should embody, (4) what areas of responsibility a CDO should oversee, and, accordingly, (5) how robustly staffed and funded a CDO office should be.

But CDO position or not, an institution that does not have the political will to change student, faculty, and staff demographics with necessarily well-funded and otherwise aggressive recruitment, admissions, and hiring, *and* retention programs will either fail at diversity altogether, or only move diversity forward in superficial ways. That is, an institution that fails to effectively address *equity* concerns relegates *diversity* work largely to celebratory event programming (often referred to as "heroes and holidays," "cultural tourism," or "identity month" approaches to diversity), and thus the CDO position to no more than a figurehead status.

An Unnatural Dichotomy

Perhaps well-meaning but ill-informed, and/or perhaps to intentionally undermine diversity in both PK-12 and higher education, the trend toward eliminating focused diversity efforts in favor of so-called "integration" diversity efforts—in curricular, co-curricular, and workplace arenas—has begun to take hold. While the thoughtful and comprehensive integration of diversity efforts has always been a long-term goal of the work, casting this work as *either* pull-out *or* infusion—when it should always be both—sets up an unnatural dichotomy.

Further, establishing this dichotomy at early stages in an institution's diversity development practically ensures that neither quality pull-out or quality infusion endeavors will take root. This is because pre-mature integration-only diversity efforts eliminate—by design—the focused diversity efforts that are necessary to adequately prepare staff and faculty to, in fact, realize infusion. James Banks (2004) describes this trend as "infusing diversity out of existence."

When viewed through the diversity-but-not-equity lens, it might be more accurate to say that if diversity had anything to do with the firing of either Southern Nevada university president, both were fired for their efforts to address the persistent inequity in diversity demographics and dollars that the funding formula for the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) represents. Southern Nevada institutions receive less funding per student, largely a function of the fact that the south has only been meaningfully populous for the last 50 years, whereas the north for as many as 100. But while the age argument may have held water for the first 30 years of development in the south, over the last 20 it does not.

More than 75% of the state's *entire* population lives in Clark County (in the south), and 70% of all public school students statewide attend schools in the Clark County district, the county that includes Las Vegas and surrounding areas. Further, Clark County also has the highest concentration of racial and ethnic minorities in the general population of the state and in the PK-12 public schools (more than 50% of both). The *most* diverse county in the northern part of the state is still almost 70% White.

Looking at the higher education funding formula with these numbers in mind, and based on University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) engineering professor William Culbreth's analysis (2009) of data available through February of 2009 that used the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) as the funding control group (100% funding), it is provocative to note the sort of "diversity penalty" correlation that emerges. For approximately every 1% in-

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crease in minority student enrollment, an NSHE institution loses an average of $124 in state funding per student per year ($143 per 1% increase for Community Colleges and $110 per 1% increase for Universities). Provocative, yes, but not that different from the rest of the country.

In the post-*Brown vs. Board of Education* re-segregating public education landscape, the funds allocated to PK-12 public education in high minority areas are commonly so much less than those allocated in predominantly White areas that we take the disparity for granted. In many instances, PK-12 district lines have been strategically drawn or redrawn in relationship to community racial and economic geography to preclude busing and funding across district lines.

In Clark County Nevada, while the district lines transect racial and economic community geography, its schools remain highly segregated by both. As Cornel West (2001) so succinctly put it, "race matters"— clearly, so too does class. And they should, but not in these ways—not in ways that perpetuate the proverbial achievement gap—rather in ways that seek to eradicate it; that seek to *realize* diversity through fierce fidelity to equity.

Penalty Versus Bonus

As an important first step here, the truth must finally be openly affirmed that not only have students in high minority, low income public schools incurred a diversity penalty, but students in low minority, middle-to-high income public schools have enjoyed an anti-diversity—or pro-White—bonus. While educational equity efforts geared for students in the former circumstances evoke cries of "reverse discrimination," the pre-existing and persisting cumulative educational advantages that have accrued and continue to accrue to students in the latter circumstances go unacknowledged. This phenomenon is what the growing body of research in Critical Whiteness Studies (1997) refers to as the "transparency" of Whiteness, and the unearned and (publically) unrecognized privileges that derive from it.

Despite the PK-12 funding disparities, most minority students entering public higher education only need the *same* level of educational services as their majority counterparts. With this in mind, it is reasonable to ask for and expect that all students, regardless of what higher educational institution they attend, receive *equal* per capita funds. On the other hand, precisely because of PK-12 resource imbalances, some minority students—but, again, not all—do need *additional* educational services. As a result, it is also reasonable to ask for and expect that colleges and universities with higher minority enrollments be *equitably* funded—that is, that they would not only not incur a diversity penalty, but that they would actually accrue a diversity bonus.

Even the perception of a diversity penalty could have the effect of encouraging White students to leave educational institutions with high minority student populations to attend those with higher White student populations—in essence, further encouraging institutional racial segregation. On the other hand, a diversity bonus could have the opposite effect on White students, at the same time providing an added incentive to institutions with lower minority populations to step up their minority recruitment and retention efforts. Borrowing from Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2006) seminal work on this topic, by reframing the achievement gap as the education debt, repaying the debt will help close the gap.

There Will Be Challenges

It would be derelict to suggest that closing this gap, even with unlimited resources, would be easy. To be sure, there would still be challenges. However, even with limited funding, the gap can be meaningfully lessened in the short term and even more so with staid attention. In the same, too-often-falsely-exasperated manner that we passively accept race- and class-based educational funding disparities as inevitable, we also absolve ourselves of responsibility for changing the academic outcomes for poor children of color by proclaiming it to be nothing short of impossible.

Indeed, a Northern NSHE institution president—on record as a strong proponent of the infusing diversity (out of existence) approach—articulated to the Board of Regents (none of whom at that time were themselves educators) words to the effect, "If you have *any* ideas for how we can address this *enormous* problem, *please* share them. We are simply beside ourselves as to how to improve minority student recruitment, retention, and graduation" (Board of Regents, 2007).

Again, closing the achievement gap is not child's play, but it is not rocket science either. But even if it was rocket science, we put a man on the moon in the 1960s so it stands to reason that *if we tried really hard* we could also have effectively educated all students by now. Through the Harlem Children's Zone, its Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Geoffrey Canada provides what is perhaps the clearest assessment of the challenges (beginning in the early childhood and elementary public educational arenas), and a cogent plan for meeting them with ample and sustained effort and funding (Tough, 2008). Unfortunately, his funding comes mostly from private sources—sources that have a choice about whether to fund, what to fund, when to fund, and how much to give—instead of from a dedicated source in the New York state public education budget.

Some past and current NSHE and state leaders will deny that the fired presidents' advocacy to "close the education funding gap by repaying the formula debt" had anything to do with their dismissal. These leaders will point to the fact that they themselves have repeatedly expressed concern about the formula and have pledged *for many years* to address it (Board of Regents, 2008). And herein lies the problem: the formula remains the same.

If the formula is finally reconciled—in part or completely—in the current or next biennial cycle, we will have both embattled presidents to thank for bringing about circumstances that made this happen—circumstances that illustrate a loyalty to educational equity that supersedes playing or not playing to the politics surrounding the CDO position. If the formula is not meaningfully addressed, both presidents can compellingly say, "I told you so." Of course, if it doesn't happen again this time, system and state leaders will surely say, "Well, we *would have* addressed it if the state budget had allowed for it."

How Important Is Diversity?

Which brings us back to the question, "How important is diversity?" If we truly value it, if closing the achievement gap is a real priority and not just lip service, then funding for diversity should be base budgeted—something we fund no matter the fluctuations in the economy, or the swing of the political pendulum on Capital Hill, in state legislatures, on higher education boards, or among system or campus leaders. In Southern Nevada, and undoubtedly elsewhere in the nation, we treat public education—even PK-12 public education—like a social welfare program, instead of as the most sound investment we can make in our states' and country's financial and

political futures. We nickel and dime it in general, and even more so when it comes to expenditures on "diversity," as if it were a socialist entitlement program instead of a very mainstream, workforce-focused, market driven imperative.

It's as if we have forgotten that it was the many *Fortune 500* companies that signed an *amicus* brief in support of the University of Michigan's recent bid to protect affirmative action practices in admissions that have driven the emergence of the CDO position in the private sector and public higher education alike—what leftists rightly point to as evidence of the increasing corporatization of public education (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). Business and industry supported the University of Michigan in this bid not because of altruism, but because of how crucial an available workforce that is both highly diverse in composition *and* highly culturally competent is to the United States' continued competitive participation in the world economy.

And yet, the newest president of the Southern NSHE institution where the two previous presidents were fired has been pushed into a corner by the ill-informed, right wing-driven backlash against diversity. This president wants to be perceived as supporting diversity at the same time that he wants to avoid attacks for funding it (supporting it "too much"). So what solution has he considered? Perhaps to require the CDO to fundraise to support her/his salary and/or programming efforts (Cook, 2009).

That is, not only not fund diversity, but require diversity personnel to fundraise in order to exist within the university. This places a burden on the CDO that is not typically placed on any other senior administrator in the academy. This also reinforces the already anemic—inequitable—attention paid (or rather not paid) to campus personnel and programs dedicated to low income, minority, and other marginalized students. How do we close the achievement gap if we widen the education debt?

Persistent Discomfort

At the crux of all of this is our persistent discomfort with the role that equity plays in diversity work. Treating everyone "the same" today, even if that were possible, still does not erase the cumulative effect—the continuing impact—of historical inequality. It is the role that equity plays in affirmative action that creates the controversies surrounding it in admissions, in hiring, in group-specific support and mentorship programs, in multicultural curriculum transformation efforts, in incentive-based supplier diversity initiatives, and, in bias incident-, hate crime-, sexual harassment-, and discrimination-prevention policies. And, it is the role that equity plays in the Nevada higher education funding formula that feeds the resistance to changing it. Whatever and wherever the challenge made to diversity work, there is an equity dimension underlying it.

For everyone to, in fact, be equal, or at least become *more* equal, we must treat people equitably—in a manner crafted to accurately assess the differential impact of the education debt in order to summarily eradicate the corresponding achievement gap. Treating, or even attempting to treat, everyone equally ("the same") only guarantees that existing inequities will be persistently reproduced, or, worse, exacerbated.

I treat my students *equally* when I tell them all that formal American Psychological Association (APA) formatting is required for all written assignments. I treat my students *equitably* when I provide ample scaffolding to ensure: (1) every student, regardless of her or his prior knowledge of or skill with APA formatting style, develops mastery in it over the semester; and (2) that my grading rubric does not privilege those who came into the course already knowing the style, nor disadvantage those who for whom it is new learning.

While true equality remains the goal, unless we can come to terms with equity as the only vehicle through which such equality can come to fruition, diversity will remain important to tout—more often than not in relationship to an all-glitz, no substance CDO position—but never to meaningfully bring about.

Note

The theme of this article is being developed into a co-edited (with Mark Brimhall-Vargas & Kenneth Fasching-Varner) volume to be titled *Just How Important Is Diversity in Higher Education: Stories from the Frontline* (2012). The volume will present richly varied first-person case studies from college and university "diversity workers" across the United States who confront and contend with the title question from myriad locations within the academy.

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