Diversity in Higher Education

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Edie Hering

Indiana University Bloomington

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What is diversity and why is it important in higher education?

Defining Diversity

Diversity has become a popular topic within higher education. Even so, there are varying ideas amongst student affairs professionals, administrators, faculty, staff, and students as to what diversity truly encompasses in higher education. Diversity is used to "address race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, disability, sexual orientation, citizenship, and religion" (Ng et al., 2013, pp. 29-30). Diversity within a higher educational setting is typically "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 in curricular, co-curricular, and workplace contexts" (Clark, 2011, p. 57). For the purposes of this paper, diversity will be defined as the "efforts to promote harmony across diverse ideas and pay particular attention to the legal principles of fair treatment and the historic struggles for equal opportunity pertinent to certain groups" (Ng et al., 2013, p. 30).

Importance of Diversity

Astin (2015) mentions that, in a comparison of various mission statements, that many colleges aim to have primary student outcomes related to "contributing to the community, leadership skills, social responsibility" (p. 69). These are closely followed by "critical analysis, logical thinking, appreciating diversity, imagination and creativity, personal perspectives and values, and moral character" (p.69). The key to the success of each institution's mission statement lies within having a diverse environment. Strachan and Owens (2011) report that research indicates that interacting with a diverse group of people can lead to "a willingness to

challenge one's own beliefs, active thinking, intellectual engagement, motivation, and an array of academic sills" (p. 466). Ensign and Woods (2014) support Strachan and Owens' research by confirming that "campuses that are more racially diverse can promote a wider variety of educational experiences, and this diversity shapes life experiences" (p. 19). Not only is diversity important to support equal educational opportunities for all groups of people, it becomes an educational tool that creates a dynamic learning environment both in and out of the classroom. A diverse learning environment will, ultimately, prepare students to live and work in an equally diverse "country and global society" (Chen, 2017, p. 17).

Diversity: Past, Present, and Future

Historical Overview of Diversity

Diversity in higher education is closely connected with American history. The 14th Amendment passed in 1868 and it "guaranteed citizens equal protection of the laws" (Astin, 2015, p. 46). Despite the passing of the amendment, education was still separated by race all the while still being considered equal (Astin, 2015, p. 46). It was not until 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court voted to end legal segregation based on the fact that "racially segregated schools were inherently unequal" (Astin, 2015, p. 46). Despite the Supreme Court ruling against racially segregated schools, additional policy was still needed to encourage higher education institutions to recruit minority students. To advocate diversity and "equal representation of students, faculty, and staff in higher education," legislators adopted the affirmative action policy in the 1960s (Karkouti, 2016, p. 406).

Even with affirmative action in place, the relationship between students and higher education on the topic of diversity has been complicated. There have been numerous court cases over the years that reflect the efforts of trying to promote diversity in higher education while

treading the thin line of not discriminating against any group of students. The 1978 *University of California v. Bakke* ruling "disallowed the use of separate admissions systems for minority applicants and limited universities to use race as only one factor when comparing applicants" (Long, 2014, p. 162). Then in 1996, *Hopwood v. Texas*, the Attorney General of Texas "interpreted the court ruling as a ban on race-based admissions, financial aid, and recruiting policies at both public and private institutions in the state" (Long, 2014, p. 163). Next in 2003 there were two cases *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* that ended up allowing "race and ethnicity to be taken into account for admissions as long as it was a part of a full review of the applicants file" (Long, 2014, p. 163). Lastly, and most recently, there was Fisher v. the University of Texas at Austin in 2013. This case basically stated that the "University had to prove to the courts that the means it chose to attain diversity are narrowly tailored to its goal" but the courts also must be satisfied that "no workable race-neutral alternatives would produce the educational benefits of diversity" (Long, 2014, p. 164). Due to the complications with the interpretation of how universities can utilize affirmative action and concerns of reverse racism, many higher education institutions "have been reluctant to develop institutional policies and instructional practices that promote diversity" (Karktoui, 2016, p. 407).

Current Status of Diversity

Karktoui (2016) makes the bold statement that "higher education institutions still fail to embrace diversity and multiculturalism due to their conservative natures and students of all races are not attaining the educational benefits of diverse learning environments" (p. 405). Karktoui's statement can be seen when comparing enrollment numbers from years ago to recent data. According to Michaels (2011), the entering university student body in 1971 consisted of "90.0 % white, 7.5% black, and 0.6% Asians and Latino/as" (p. 14). Then compare those numbers to the

freshmen class of 2011, "73.1% white, 11% black, 8.9% Asian, and 9.7% Latino" (p. 14). While there was an increase in minority students, the overall student population is lacking in diversity, thus supporting Karktoui's statement that colleges and universities are not providing a diverse learning environment as they could. In addition to a minimally diverse student body, Angela Chen (2017) points out that a lack of faculty diversity. She points out that, according to research, "nearly 83% of lectures in public higher education institutions are white" (p. 17). Originally, institutions sought to increase diversity by "primarily increasing minority student enrollment" (Chen, 2017, p. 18) but this approach could lead to "self-segregation on campus and would breed ethnocentricism and perceptions of victimization rather than racial tolerance" (Strachan & Owens, 2011, p. 467). Basically, "throwing students together and hoping for the best will not work" (Strachan & Owens, 2011, p. 468).

Based on the previous statements, it may seem that the issue of diversity in higher education is in a dire situation. Fortunately, that is not true. While more progress on the diversity front would be preferred, higher education institutions are attempting to move forward. One example of the potential progress in diversifying higher education is the addition of the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) position. The creation of the CDO position is important because it is an "important administrative position that provides an opportunity to direct institutional action toward the diminution of patterns of privilege that have part of the academy from its inception" (Harvey, 2014, p. 93). A dedicated administrative position that focuses on diversity in the institution is a step in the right direction; however, it is imperative that the "burden of institutional change cannot be put on the shoulders of one person alone" (Harvey, 2014, p. 93).

Moving forward toward Diversity

Even though progress is slow, there are many suggestions on how to increase diversity in higher education. One of the most reassuring ideas is that many recognize that "true diversity involves an institution-wide focus that considers students, faculty, administrators, and staff" (Chen, 2017, p. 17). The definition of diversity encompasses a wide variety of issues so it is logical that increasing diversity in higher education institutions would "involve every individual and department associated with the institution" (Chen, 2017, p. 17). Alger (2013) makes a similar statement when he says that the "best long-term strategy is a multifaceted approach by trying to achieve the best educational benefits for today's students while searching for new and creative race-neutral ways to get there" (pp.152-153).

Since students and administrators (including faculty and staff) need to be involved in the efforts to increase diversity on campus it is important to consider specific suggestions for each group. One of the ideas to help students increase their diversity interactions is to "provide a complete and critical education for all students in relation to the nation's racial history, including historical and contemporary realities of racial prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination" (Harvey, 2014, p. 97). For faculty and staff, Chen (2017) suggests that they should be required to "undergo training in cultural competence because they should serve as role models of tolerance, cultural awareness, and inclusive education for both students and colleagues" (p. 19).

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Diversity in higher education has come a long way since the adoption of the 14th Amendment and then affirmative action. Though even with many efforts to ensure equal opportunities for education, higher education institutions are still struggling with how to increase diversity without discriminating against certain groups. While there may be no perfect answer

from an administrative standpoint, higher education institutions can increase diverse interactions between students, faculty, and staff to ensure the most is gained from the various instructional environments found around campus.

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