



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

DIVERSITY-CONSCIOUS GRADUATES

An increasing amount of attention is being directed at diversity and its impact on higher education. As the cultural landscape in the United States continues to change dramatically, new concerns have emerged. One key concern that has received surprisingly little attention is the competencies college graduates need to succeed in an increasingly diverse, global workplace. Diversity consciousness—i.e., awareness, understanding, and skills in the area of diversity—should be defining features of a quality education for all college students. While we are concerned justifiably with students' expertise in their chosen fields, their level of diversity consciousness is often ignored or viewed as relatively unimportant.

Recently, an upper-level manager of a national hotel chain expressed his concern that college graduates typically are not ready to deal with the complexities of diversity in the workplace. Numerous studies point to the increasing gap between the diversity skills valued by employers—such as one's ability to communicate, team, and network with individuals from diverse backgrounds—and those that college graduates possess when they enter the workplace. According to employers, a lack of diversity consciousness is costly for a number of reasons. It interferes with teamwork and communication among employees, results in costly lawsuits, restricts markets, makes problem solving more difficult, and interferes with employees' ability to provide quality service to consumers.

Many employers assume an inclusive view of diversity and aggressively market their position. For example, Pillsbury Corporation defines diversity as all of the ways in which we are different. This includes a myriad of such differences as race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, learning and communication style, decision-making style, job function and position, leadership style, and motivational style. Instead of viewing diversity as the right or moral thing

to do, employers increasingly have taken the approach that diversity is good business. For example, a recent cover story in *Fortune* indicates that the top-performing companies are also those who are "minority-friendly" and pursue diversity. Diversity can increase the talent pool, expand sales, make teamwork more productive and creative, and increase profits. However, these employers also know that diversity, by itself, is untapped potential. It needs to be coupled with the skills and commitment to make diversity work. Similarly, students looking for jobs have discovered that diversity consciousness can provide them with a competitive edge.

A number of factors help explain why colleges and universities have been so slow to respond to a changing workplace that places a premium on diversity-conscious employees. Traditionally, there has been a tendency to view the whole area of diversity education as a frill that lacks academic integrity. An underlying, mistaken assumption is that if students "like people" and have good intentions, the rest will take care of itself. Additionally, initiatives in this area may be seen as positive public relations, but not an absolutely essential component of a quality education, or as important as students' technical expertise.

Also, there is an underlying assumption that students will develop their diversity consciousness by taking general education courses or specific courses dealing with some facet of diversity. Unfortunately, for many students, their exposure to diversity lacks both breadth and depth. Rather than being discussed and analyzed throughout courses, diversity is often confined to a module in a particular course, a boxed insert in a book, or perhaps a single activity outside of class. This kind of learning makes it appear that diversity is an add-on, and there is little opportunity for continuous intellectual and emotional growth.

The level of educators' diversity consciousness may be another contributing factor. Teachers and administrators, whose life experiences or education have not made them aware of the relationship between diversity consciousness and student success in college and beyond, may be less apt to see this as an educational



priority. Moreover, there is the fear factor that leads some educators to keep diversity at a distance. For example, infusing diversity into the curriculum may be seen as inherently divisive and problematic.

Given the need to develop students' knowledge and skills in the area of diversity, where do we go from here? A comprehensive diversity education initiative should consider the following suggestions.

Diversity needs to be defined broadly and inclusively.

Diversity refers to all people, rather than simply those we label as minorities. Race and gender, however important, are not the all-important variables we make them out to be. I have asked students to list, on paper, five descriptors that describe who they are. Once all of these descriptors are transferred to a blackboard or an overhead transparency, diversity in all its many shapes, forms, and sizes comes to life. Students begin to appreciate the myriad ways in which they conceive of themselves, how much they have in common, and how they are different. The descriptors illustrate the varied, fluid, and hidden dimensions of diversity, ranging from personal characteristics, such as "strong-willed" and "warmhearted," to multifaceted social classifications such as "middle-aged menopausal," "mother of a special child," "recovering alcoholic," and "half Black, half Jewish."

Students need to develop interconnected competencies.

Learning about differences is not sufficient. Research indicates that students must be able to wrestle with their own diversity, develop a more global perspective, learn to think flexibly, understand the implications of power for human relationships, step outside of themselves and evaluate their own thinking and behavior, and practice these skills. Education must be viewed as a continuous process that requires refinement, practice, and the development of an ever-larger knowledge base.

Specific educational strategies for promoting diversity need to target all students.

This can only be accomplished by identifying a sequence of courses that is required of all students. These courses might include freshman orientation programs and seminars, so-called college success courses, general education offerings, and courses in one's major field of study. Once these courses are identified, diversity consciousness needs to be incorporated as a central learning objective. Furthermore, the

connections between the workplace, opportunities for success, and diversity consciousness need to be included across the curriculum. When students develop a better understanding of these connections, diversity will take on added personal and educational relevance.

Faculty and staff also need to do the personal growth work that is necessary to enhance their diversity consciousness.

Training and workshops can help, but they are not sufficient. Diversity consciousness is more deep-seated than using a certain vocabulary at certain times of the day. Indeed, change comes with a strong personal commitment to educate ourselves by moving beyond our personal and cultural comfort zones and opening our minds to new and different experiences and perspectives. Constant self-evaluation and a willingness to learn will enable us to take advantage of all learning opportunities.

Leadership—a strong commitment from faculty and upper-level administrators—is crucial.

Without leadership, the burden for diversity education will continue to fall on the shoulders of a few. Without collegewide buy-in from students, faculty, staff, and administrators, diversity education initiatives are likely to be short-lived, disjointed, and appear to be public relations gimmicks.

An executive vice-president of a Fortune 500 company shared his thoughts about a meeting that he recently attended at corporate headquarters. As he looked around, he saw a female information technology specialist, an executive vice-president from India, a division head from Italy, and a marketing manager from Ohio. He observed, "It's people who are comfortable in this type of environment who will be successful. The stars of this new workforce will be those who can mediate these widely different working styles and get the most out of a broadly diverse group of people." Clearly, it is incumbent on colleges and universities to ensure that graduates have developed their diversity consciousness to the extent that they can excel in a workplace that requires them not only to tolerate diversity, but also respect it, use it, and capitalize on it.

Richard Bucher, *Professor, Sociology*

For further information, contact the author at Baltimore City Community College, 2901 Liberty Heights Ave., Baltimore, MD 21215.
e-mail: RBucher@bcc.state.md.us