Institutional Barriers to Diversity Change Work in Higher Education

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Abstract

While the concepts related to diversity and inclusion are commonly found as part of universities’ mission and vision, implementing these concepts into practice can present a challenge. This study identified discrepancies between concepts and practice of diversity and inclusion at a multidisciplinary health sciences university. The results indicated that participants experienced inclusion along a range of engagement. Hispanic/Latino students, faculty, and staff as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students and staff experienced disparaging behavior on a regular basis at the University, which contributed to fear. The results demonstrate barriers to the inclusion efforts and indicate that the university must bridge the gap between diversity concepts and practice.

Keywords

diversity and multiculturalism, higher education, disparities, educational theory and practice, cultural studies

Introduction

The notion of diversity at institutions of higher education is not new, yet, until relatively recently, diversity was not included in strategic or organizational change efforts (Jackson, 2006). Institutions often responded by increasing the number of students from diverse backgrounds, an approach known as structural diversity (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). While the structural diversity at campuses has increased in the last 20 years, institutions have not transformed into truly multicultural organizations (Manning & Muñoz, 2011), and a number of issues persist. Racial conflict continues to occur on college and university campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), and it has broadened to concerns around gender, sexual orientation, religion, and the vast intersections of these and other identities. In fact, issues of inclusion on colleges and universities are “far more complex and fluid than in past decades” (Obear, 2012, p. 49). Institutions need to broaden their approach beyond race and beyond quotas for institutional shifts to be realized.

It is common to find the concepts of diversity and inclusion outlined in mission, vision, and values (MVV) statements of higher education institutions. This is indicative of their influence, as institutional leaders develop these MVV statements to shape the institution’s future development (Brown, 2004; Hanassab, 2006). To support the educational goals within an institution of higher learning, the statement of institutional diversity and inclusion must be clearly defined for students, faculty, and staff to conceptualize and practice these principles (McHatton, Keller, Shircliffe, & Zalaquett, 2009). Defining diversity and inclusion is difficult and time-consuming because, for them to have meaning and relevance, the institutions’ community must engage in dialogue about the meaning and the structure of the terminology. The challenge of diversity is in the approach and consensus of its meaning (Banks, 2009).

For the sake of this article, the authors will define the terms here. Diversity is often defined as demographic “differences among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation and geographical area” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008, p. 86), although it is often limited to race. Inclusion has been described as a process (Williams, Berger, & McClendon, 2005) that speaks to environmental experiences that either contribute to or detract from the “full and equal participation” of all community members (Bell, 2006, p. 3).

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Banks (2009) describes four ways that inclusive excellence can be achieved: (a) by the acceptance of students, faculty, and staff of diverse backgrounds, (b) by incorporating diversity in educational materials while also creating events where students can come together, (c) by creating an environment where everyone is welcome, and (d) by enhancing the entire institutional community’s knowledge of diversity. Hu and Kuh (2003) noted that gathering individuals from different backgrounds in settings where they can engage in dialogue positively affected all students, in particular White students. Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, and Pierson (2001) found that these positive outcomes included openness to diversity and critical thinking.

To study the effectiveness of institutional diversity efforts, the authors selected a multidisciplinary health sciences institution in the San Francisco Bay Area in Northern California. This research aimed to identify two parameters: (a) the breadth and depth of the diversity efforts at the institution and (b) the extent to which the university community was experiencing the inclusive change that was stated by institution’s MVV.

Method

A mixed-methods survey was created using the Survey Monkey™ online software and questionnaire tool (http://www.surveymonkey.com/), which was distributed for anonymous response via the Internet. The link was sent via email to all full-time faculty, staff, and students at the institution. The survey link was opened to invited participants starting October 26, 2009, and closed on December 24, 2009. Four separate reminders were distributed over the 4-week period.

The survey was divided into five broad sections. The first section of the survey assessed demographics, including categories of race, age, health care program, campus location, annual income level (both current and income while being raised), religious identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, self-described political views (conservative, moderate, liberal), parent’s education, and disability status. The second section of the survey listed seven statements using language from the institution’s MVV statement related to diversity and inclusion to be ranked using a five-point Likert-type scale. The third section of the survey contained three open-ended questions asking participants to define, from their own perspective, the terms of inclusion and diversity, how they relate, and whether they believed an inclusive environment exists at the University. The fourth section focused on the direct experience of the participant in issues related to inclusion. Participants were asked “how” they experienced inclusion at the institution. They were also asked whether they had witnessed or experienced insensitive or disparaging behavior or comments in the past 5 years. In such cases, they were asked to fully describe the experience. In the fifth and final section of the survey, participants were provided with a list of 18 University leaders or groups, and were asked to select and then rank who at the University they considered most responsible for creating and sustaining an inclusive learning environment.

When the survey closed, responses were collected and exported into Microsoft Excel. The data were recorded and verified for accuracy and missing values. Counts, percentages, and means were tabulated for each of the respondent-type variables, as listed under demographics above. Counts and percentages were also tabulated for non-Likert-type scale items. Answers to the open-ended questions were grouped by theme and by respondent type.

Qualitative analysis was conducted using the Auerbach and Silverstein model (2003). Three researchers separately and individually reviewed the responses from the open-ended questions sections and coded the data into meaningful themes as described by Merriam (2009) and Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). The three independent researchers compared findings, possible themes, and revealed any subjective perspectives that framed the theme process. This process allowed for the triangulation of data. The participants’ own words were used as initial titles for the themes. The themes were then grouped into larger thematic constructs.

The responses to the second section of the survey asking participants to rank seven statements using a five-point Likert-type scale were cross-tabulated and analyzed for each demographic group. Responses were analyzed separately for students, faculty, or staff, which represent the three constituent groups at the University. The quantity of cross-tabbed groups suggested that additional levels of stringency were needed to discern significant patterns; thus, the standard deviation was used to define the parameters for response analysis. Any subgroup (e.g., Hispanic/Latino faculty) with an average response to a statement equal to or below one standard deviation below the overall mean on at least five of the seven statements was classified as a “Group Within Satisfactory Range.” Any subgroup with an average response to a statement equal to or above one standard deviation above the mean on at least five of the seven statements was classified as a “Group of Concern.” The second level of stringency required a Group of Concern to be observed in at least two of the three constituents at the University (e.g., student, staff, faculty).

Results

The survey was electronically distributed via email to 1,607 students, faculty, and staff, out of which 493 chose to participate (31%). Of the 1,384 students attending the University, 315 participated (23%). Of the 223 full-time faculty and staff at the University, 178 participated (80%). Of the total participants, 253 (53%) identified as White, 110 (23%) identified as Asian, 43 (9%) identified as Two or More Races, 36 (8%) identified as Black or African American, 32 (7%) identified as Hispanic or Latino, 2 (0%) identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 2 (0%) identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.
Table 1 summarizes the demographics of participants and compares these with the University-wide numbers.

The gender identity distribution in the study involved 356 (79%) individuals who identified as female, 93 (21%) who identified as male, and 4 (1%) who identified as transgender or intersex. The sexual orientation of these individuals included 396 (87%) individuals who identified as straight/heterosexual, 17 (4%) as bisexual, 12 (3%) as gay, 11 (2%) as lesbian, and 17 (4%) as queer, questioning, or other. For religious identity, 226 (48%) identified as Christian, 116 (25%) as none, 25 (5%) as Jewish, 23 (5%) as Buddhist, and 11 (2%) as Hindu. The remaining 15% identified as other religions or spiritualities.

The average ranking response using the Likert-type scale (5-1), including all participants and all seven statements, was 3.75 ± 0.2. A value of 3.55 or below (one standard deviation below the mean) was used as the initial stringency to classify any subgroup as a Group of Concern. The second level of stringency to be classified as a Group of Concern required meeting this criterion in at least two of the three constituents at the University (student, staff, and faculty). When the rankings on key statements were cross-tabulated between the three constituencies and demographics, a total of 191 overall subgroups were obtained. Of these 191 subgroups, 40 were considered Group of Concern based on meeting the initial stringency criteria of one standard deviation below the mean.

Table 1. Demographic Results From the Survey and Ethnicity Data for the Entire University As a Comparison to Survey Respondent Demographic Versus the University’s Demographics.

| Demographic subcategories | Survey data | University data |
|---------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
|                           | Student     | Faculty | Staff | Student | Faculty | Staff |
| Total respondents         | 315 (23%)   | 82      | 96    | 1,384   | 119     | 104   |
| Location                  |             |         |       |         |         |       |
| Oakland                   | 236         | 57      | 78    |          |         |       |
| Sacramento                | 24          | 8       | 2     |          |         |       |
| San Mateo                 | 18          | 6       | 4     |          |         |       |
| San Francisco             | 24          | 9       | 2     |          |         |       |
| Clinic                    | 2           | 2       | 0     |          |         |       |
| Race                      |             |         |       |         |         |       |
| Hispanic/Latino           | 17 (5%)     | 5 (6%)  | 10 (10%) | 6%     | 3%     | 8%    |
| Asian                     | 88 (28%)    | 6 (7%)  | 16 (17%) | 25%    | 9%     | 15%   |
| Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 2 (0%)     | 0 (0%)  | 0 (0%) |          | 0%     | 0%    |
| African American          | 17 (5%)     | 7 (9%)  | 12 (13%) | 3%     | 5%     | 20%   |
| White                     | 154 (49%)   | 57 (70%) | 42 (44%) | 43%    | 74%    | 56%   |
| Two or more races         | 30 (10%)    | 7 (9%)  | 6 (6%) |          | 1%     | 1%    |
| Alaskan Native/American Indian | 2 (0%)     | 0 (0%)  | 0 (0%) |          | 0%     | 0%    |
| Sexual orientation        |             |         |       |         |         |       |
| Straight/heterosexual     | 266         | 62      | 68    |          |         |       |
| Gay                       | 1           | 6       | 5     |          |         |       |
| Lesbian                   | 8           | 3       | 0     |          |         |       |
| Bisexual                  | 11          | 3       | 3     |          |         |       |
| Queer                     | 6           | 0       | 0     |          |         |       |
| Questioning               | 5           | 0       | 0     |          |         |       |
| Other                     | 5           | 0       | 1     |          |         |       |
| Religion                  |             |         |       |         |         |       |
| Baha’i                    | 3           | 0       | 0     |          |         |       |
| Buddhist                  | 15          | 2       | 6     |          |         |       |
| Christian                 | 136         | 45      | 45    |          |         |       |
| Hindu                     | 9           | 1       | 1     |          |         |       |
| Jewish                    | 15          | 5       | 5     |          |         |       |
| Muslim                    | 4           | 0       | 1     |          |         |       |
| Pagan                     | 2           | 0       | 2     |          |         |       |
| None                      | 86          | 17      | 13    |          |         |       |
| Taoist                    | 0           | 0       | 1     |          |         |       |
| Unitarian                 | 2           | 1       | 2     |          |         |       |
| Other                     | 33          | 8       | 8     |          |         |       |
Of these 40 subgroups, only five had average scores below 3.55 in two out of three University constituencies (student, staff, or faculty). These groups included faculty of color with an average of 3.13; staff identifying as bisexual, with an average of 3.36; students identifying as lesbian, queer, or questioning, with an average of 3.16. The Hispanic/Latino demographic was the only group identified as a Group of Concern in all three University constituencies: students (3.51), faculty (3.00), and staff (3.45).

The five groups considered a Group of Concern are shown in Figure 1. The group “faculty of color” consists of faculty who self-identified as Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, and Two or More Races combined. This group was combined to protect the identity of the individuals because of the small sample size of the overall faculty at the University within these racial demographics.

A value of 3.95 or above (one standard deviation above the mean) was used to classify any subgroups as a Group Within Satisfactory Range. The Group Within Satisfactory Range primarily included those faculty, staff, and students with post-high-school degrees and/or parents with post-high-school degrees: staff (average of 4.18), faculty (average of 4.16), and students (average of 3.98). In addition, faculty who were raised in families with a household income greater than US$100,000 also met the criteria as Group Within Satisfactory Range (average of 4.65).

Statement 2 had the lowest average response of the seven statements with a mean of 3.48—“The University has defined and developed structures, programs, and support to create a culture of inclusivity, with the intent of increasing diversity of the students, faculty, and leadership.” Statement 4 had the highest average response of the seven statements with a mean of 3.94—“I feel welcomed and celebrated at the University by the staff.”

In Section 4 of the survey, participants were asked the following question: “In your experience, have you witnessed or experienced insensitive or disparaging behavior or comments in the past 5 years or less SPECIFICALLY RELATED TO INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY AT SMU?” The question had a yes/no choice as a response, and those who responded “yes” were asked to share the experience. The overall “yes” response to this question included 141 out of 424 respondents (33%), which included 34 (49%) staff, 29 (43%) faculty, and 78 (27%) students.

In response to the question, “What would indicate to you that SMU is an inclusive environment?” three major thematic constructs were identified across a range of engagement. At the lowest level of engagement was “Proximity to Difference,” “Demonstrated Action” represented the mid-range, and the highest level of engagement was “Appreciation.” (There was a small group who indicated that the University is an exclusive environment.)
Proximity to Difference was defined as the physical presence of, but little engagement with, diverse individuals, different cultures, or different beliefs in one’s vicinity. This level included individuals being informed of diversity (or diversity surrounding them) without being engaged. An example within this theme included the following response: “The presence of different cultural backgrounds, hearing different languages while walking on campus” contributed to feeling that the University is inclusive and diverse.

Demonstrated Action was defined as interacting with or learning about people from different backgrounds; a willingness to engage in discussion, programs, and activities; and commitment to acting according to one’s values. For example, one student wrote, “celebratory festivals, awareness about holidays and tradition, comradeship and blending of students and faculty from different backgrounds” contributed to feelings of inclusiveness and diversity at the University.

Appreciation was defined as truly celebrating, encouraging, and welcoming diversity. It was the most active of all three constructs with participants seeking their own opportunities for engagement. The data described engagement with others, an appreciation of the contribution to growth that difference brings, and a recognition that the celebration of individuals contributes to a sense of positive belonging, which aligns with the attributes for a meaningful community (McDonald & Associates, 2002). The outward display of celebration on campus through programs and educational emails, and the opportunities to engage across differences contributed to feeling that the University was inclusive and diverse. One example of a response that showed Appreciation stated, “a safe place where individuals are accepted and where people learn to live and work together.”

Respondents who answered “yes” to the question, “In your experience, have you witnessed or experienced insensitive or disparaging behavior or comments in the past 5 years or less SPECIFICALLY RELATED TO INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY AT SMU?” were asked to share their experiences. When grouped into categories by social group identity, the largest number of discriminatory actions at the University were based on (a) race, (b) sexual orientation, (c) religion, and (d) xenophobia (see Figure 2). Additional responses included discrimination based on political affiliation, body weight, education level, and disability.

Last, the level of empowerment the students, faculty, and staff felt they had in addressing discriminatory experiences when they occurred was assessed. In reply to the question, “What did you do? (to address insensitive or disparaging behavior or comments),” half of the respondents addressed the issue with some sort of direct action (speaking with the initiator, speaking with a superior or professor, or making a complaint), and half of the respondents either avoided the issue or were afraid to take action for fear of reprisal. A significant number of participants were afraid to comment for fear of retribution or adverse consequences.

Participants ranked the top three leaders or groups at the University who were most responsible for creating and sustaining an inclusive learning environment. Both students and faculty selected “individual faculty members” as most responsible and “individual students” as secondarily responsible for this role. Students identified “individual faculty members” as the top choice (195 entries, 78%) and “individual students” as the second group responsible (193 entries, 77%). Faculty also identified “individual faculty members” as the top choice (55 entries, 90%) and “individual students” as the second group responsible (51 entries, 84%). The staff believed that “individual staff members” bore the most responsibility (46 entries, 73%) and that “individual faculty members” held secondary responsibility (42 entries, 67%).

Discussion
Assessing how the educational community interprets diversity and inclusion through quantitative and qualitative measures can help “expose deeply politicized tensions and differences related to democracy, school reform, and social justice” (Leo & Barton, 2006, p. 171). In looking at the population demographics of the institution, the educational curriculum established, and the interrelationships between students from different backgrounds, measurements can be taken to evaluate student experiences (Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parente, 2001). Hu and Kuh (2003) reported that diversity is often addressed structurally by changing demographics and implementing curriculum
changes, which can be effective, but these are often top–down measures that do little to affect climate change. They recommended for institutions to enhance opportunities for interaction between students of diverse backgrounds in “educationally purposeful ways” (Hu and Kuh, 2003, p. 321) to expand the learning and development of all. Communication and interactions between persons from diverse backgrounds support diverse relationships and receptiveness to diverse ideas (Hurtado et al., 1999), encourage dialogue, and can develop a sense of shared responsibility at an institution. Warren (in Tomalin, 2007) agreed with Hurtado et al. as he described critical multiculturalism as an approach to diversity and inclusion in which individuals from different backgrounds communicate issues of social injustice to increase awareness. Creating meaningful opportunities for interaction, as well as communicating these injustices, can highlight the gap of misunderstanding among diverse groups and support the development of policies that can narrow the gap. Striving for excellence at institutions of higher education is the goal, and infusing diversity and inclusion concepts into its framework will support an atmosphere where individuals of all backgrounds can experience school as a safe environment (Dessel, 2010).

The overall response rate of the faculty and staff (80%) exceeded expectations, and the authors are confident that the data offer an accurate understanding of the experiences of diversity and inclusion at the University. It demonstrates the willingness of faculty and staff to be engaged, and their investment in improving the learning and working environment. The participation rate of enrolled students, however, at 23%, was lower than expected. The authors believe that the timing of the survey might have affected participation as the survey was distributed late into the fall semester when students were focusing on final exams. Nonetheless, the data supplied by students provided a critical insight into students’ experiences.

This survey was designed to collect comprehensive demographic data to gain insight into the social group identities (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2006) that exist on campus. For race and ethnicity, this meant that while the federal classification system (externally defined) was used for consistency, a more comprehensive level of inquiry was needed to allow participants to further define themselves (internally defined) by region and/or particular country. The formal grouping system (or naming convention) for social groups can be seen as oppressive, and while it was important to use this convention, the authors desired a more empowering and inclusive naming convention.

Similarly, for gender and sexual orientation, the options were expanded to include other terms for gender identity and a more complete understanding of sexual affectations. While University data are not available for sexual orientation, approximately 13% of the respondents identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or questioning. For religion and spirituality, the major faiths were included as were expanded Christian denominations practiced in the United States. The breakdowns of participants as it relates to race were consistent with the demographics in the total University population.

In terms of participants’ assessment of the climate at the University, 34 (49%) staff, 29 (43%) faculty, and 78 (27%) students witnessed or experienced insensitive or disparaging behavior or comments in the past 5 years. Almost half of faculty and staff experienced exclusive or demeaning behavior, and this indicates the prevalence of the issues at the University and the urgency needed to meaningfully address the climate. Given the percentages of the employees who took the survey, and that employees tend to drive the culture of any college or university, it is possible to surmise the negative impact these events have on the employees of the institution as well. Although the student percentage level is lower, one third of the students who participated may signify an important issue for the student body as well. It appears, in the main, that there is a gap between the lived experiences of the University community and the stated goals related to diversity and inclusion in the MVV statement.

The principal categories of disparaging or insensitive behaviors or comments at the University noted were race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, xenophobia, and religious intolerance. Many of the disparaging behaviors were reported as comments from classmates, colleagues, or faculty during class times and reflect deep biases or intolerance: disgust directed at a lesbian student and her partner in the library, a student told to “act the ‘American’ way” in class, faculty who treat students who look like they are from other countries with “the assumption that they are weaker and more likely to cheat,” a faculty member reported that another faculty member commented in a meeting that “people need to get over slavery like the Japanese.”

A few disparaging behaviors were more overt, and a number of students, faculty, and staff reported threatening behavior: a student threatening to “slit the throats of the ungodly,” referring to gay, lesbian, and bisexuals, and a couple of African American students reported being singled-out in class, apparently because of their race, and left with the strong likelihood that their grades in clinical or didactic courses were lowered because of their race.

While the comments of the participants reflected these four categories, they also reported that most of the University’s efforts focused on race. Intolerance regarding sexual orientation, xenophobia, and religion rose to similar prominence in the data. It is clear that the University needs to broaden its focus to the other three areas of intolerance in addition to race/ethnicity if it wishes to better align its observable actions with the MVV statement and create a more inclusive environment.

In reviewing the comments regarding University climate, a sense of fear was a palpable and salient feeling in the findings. A number of faculty, staff, and students expressed fear of reprisal in answering questions about...
their experiences, even though the survey was conducted anonymously. Fear was expressed in the data, and in concerned emails to the Institutional Review Board administrator, who shared the comments received from students, faculty, and staff with the identifying information removed. Examples include, “Since I am close to graduation, I just want to get [school] done and never look back”; a “fear of retaliation”; and “you never know what consequences one might face.” Of those who experienced exclusive or disparaging remarks, 82 (62%) were fearful and believed they were not empowered to address the offending behavior or circumstance. One student wrote, “I did not feel I had a voice in the situation. I have no choice but to take a class offered by this same professor next semester and I have been warned by previous students not to upset the “higher-ups.”

One faculty member commented that she was “too drained to fight,” another student summed up what seemed to be the student perspective—“I wanted to get through school. Negative action seemed to be taken against individual(s) when someone spoke up”—and another student said, “It is a very hostile environment and there are multiple ramifications for expressing one’s feelings of discontent.” The pervasiveness of this fear is a concern and an indication of an undercurrent that can undermine the University’s efforts to transform itself into a diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning environment. The persistence of the biased behaviors, the lack of empowerment, and the sense of fear are all barriers to the University’s diversity and inclusion efforts.

The three thematic constructs (Proximity to Difference, Demonstrated Action, and Appreciation) were chosen because they best described the range of engagement, from passive to active, of students, faculty, and staff (see Figure 3). For Proximity to Difference, respondents wanted a passive relationship to diversity and inclusion, choosing to appreciate from a distance rather than actively engage. For Demonstrated Action, the participants wanted to see outward and visible signs that the University was committed to demonstrating diversity and inclusion. For Appreciation, respondents felt that a learning environment that welcomed them, encouraged them, and provided learning opportunities that expanded their awareness was a diverse and inclusive University.

One participant suggested that we all “closely examine our own perceptions/assumptions/prejudices [and that] is the first step of successfully implementing any climate around inclusion and diversity.” Manning (1994) agrees with that approach: “Institutional transformation begins with individual critical consciousness” (p. 95). The data suggest that as more students, faculty, and staff develop their consciousness around diversity and inclusion, the institutional environment will shift toward a more active engagement with diversity and inclusion, toward Hu and Kuh’s (2003) interactional diversity that contributes to learning in educationally meaningful ways. The data showed that most participants understood the definition of inclusion as “an attitude” or that “all people are celebrated, taught or educated the same way.” One student added, “A big part of inclusion is respect.” One faculty member eloquently summed up what inclusion means: “treated with respect, dignity, value, and kindness simply as a human being no matter who you are, what position you hold, or your physical appearance.” The participants also understood that diversity and inclusion relate to each other. One faculty member said, “Inclusion allows individuals to feel their cultural experiences and ethnicity are of importance to the greater community,” and one student shared that “it allows people, regardless of background, to fully participate.” In other words, inclusion creates a sense of “mattering” and values the “wholeness” of people who participate in the University.

When asked to evaluate the University’s diversity and inclusion, most participants recognized the various programs and events, community service activities, and diverse examples in case studies as positive efforts on behalf of the University. Faculty and staff who had a broader view on some additional activities added proof in various committees or administrative work. However, most of the efforts do not seem to be visible to students, and it appears that the University needs to make its efforts to create and sustain an inclusive and diverse learning environment more visible, especially to students. Ultimately, there seems to be some positive impact of all the efforts on campus, as one participant indicated: “People’s attitudes are slowly changing—more awareness of inclusion and diversity issues on campus.”

While it is clear that there is a positive impact on the University, it is important that deeper analysis and exploration continue so these efforts are understood in terms of the historical oppressions both at the University and in the country. Manning (1994) states, “Acts of campus unrest cannot be oversimplified as isolated, arbitrary, and unprovoked, but
rather, must be understood in the context of historical circumstances” (p. 96). The data support the need to understand the experiences at the institution with regard to historical oppressions. To further highlight this point, those participants who experienced an insensitive or disparaging comment or action related to diversity within the last 5 years felt that good efforts do not erase or offset the impact of the negative experiences.

One of the key inquiries was to discover whom the participants perceived or desired to lead the institutional diversity efforts. To understand who the participants viewed should take the lead in institutional efforts, the participants were asked to choose all the groups responsible for creating and sustaining an inclusive learning environment. Although the entire University community believes that it shares the responsibility to create an inclusive learning environment, results identified faculty and students as the groups responsible for making this change. This is supported by this comment made by a respondent: “Every individual and group is responsible for creating and sustaining an inclusive learning environment.”

When asked, however, to choose the one individual or group that they felt should lead the University’s efforts in shaping an inclusive and diverse environment, participants indicated that the faculty had the greatest degree of responsibility for creating this environment (127 entries, 33%). Given that a majority of the institutional efforts on diversity and inclusion are generated outside of the faculty, a shift may be needed to empower faculty with the knowledge and authority to initiate this change. The data support Boysen et al.’s (2009) findings that instructors have a significant role in creating inclusive and respectful environments, specifically in managing incidents of bias in the classroom.

In general, it was clear that the majority viewed the faculty as a whole as responsible for leading diversity efforts; however, faculty acknowledged having little training, comfort, experience, or the perceived sense of political power to lead effectively. This is consistent with Boysen, Vogel, Cope, and Hubbard’s (2009) findings as well as Bierema’s (2010); given this, the lack of training and empowerment of faculty to lead will be a barrier for the University’s efforts as well.

The survey was designed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the diversity and inclusion efforts at the University, and yet, little data collection was conducted related to areas for improvement. As such, the authors designed a survey that would explore the status quo in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

In addition, the data represent a moment-in-time, and many variables affect the data collected. The instrument will gain meaning if this survey is conducted over multiple years, giving researchers longitudinal data from which to refine the analysis and understanding.

This research also focused on one multidisciplinary health sciences university, and while the data are consistent with other research that exists, the results are not likely to be generalized for other institutions. While this was not a concern, the authors offer this process as a model for institutions looking to better understand the experiences of their community in relationship to their MVV statements.

Last, this survey asked about the participants’ subjective experiences, both in the qualitative and quantitative questions. Subjective experiences reflect the various biases of the participants, and while there was a great consistency of the experiences shared, the data were limited to what people chose to share and who chose to participate.

Conclusion

Overall, the data indicate that the participants appreciate the overall efforts of the University regarding diversity and inclusion, but it also identified a number of barriers to creating an inclusive learning environment; they further indicate that these efforts need to be more focused to address the insensitive and intolerant behaviors. Efforts need to be broadened to include sexual orientation, xenophobia, and religious intolerance in addition to race and ethnicity.

The expression of fear by many of the participants, and the depth of that fear that includes retaliation, is concerning. Fear, expressed at this level, is a barrier to better aligning the experiences of faculty, staff, and students with the concepts of diversity and inclusion as stated in the MVV statement. Fear also undermines an accurate and effective reporting process that could address these behaviors when they happen. It would be important to address these concurrently to increase attention and focus on diversity and inclusion.

Faculty also need to engage in conversations on how to best and most effectively lead the diversity and inclusion efforts at the University. These conversations should be both within the faculty leadership and outside of it with University administrators and students. It is important to honor the sense of unpreparedness of the faculty to lead these efforts as well, and training and development in this area could be quickly effective.

In addition, faculty, staff, and students should collaborate on how best to infuse the curricula with diversity and inclusion so that it is consistent, apparent, and relevant, and it contributes to the learning outcomes for each course. It was clear that these efforts thus far are ad hoc, and need specific attention.

Although it is clear that there is a gap, the level of participation by faculty and staff in this study and their level of engagement indicated a strong foundation on which to lay more comprehensive diversity and inclusion efforts. In addition, each constituent group identified itself as responsible in some part for leadership in diversity and inclusion efforts, which is important to note. On the whole, the participants in the study felt welcomed by the University in spite of the named experiences, which is positive. Coupled with the deep level of engagement in diversity and inclusion by faculty and staff, reflected both in the data and the participation in this
research, the University has a good start toward Banks’s (2009) path toward inclusive excellence.

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