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University Diversity Committee: Where Diversity and Dedication Meet

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Civilized men have gained notable mastery over energy, matter, and inanimate nature generally, and are rapidly learning to control physical suffering and premature death. But, by contrast, we appear to be living in the Stone Age so far as our handling of human relationships is concerned (Allport 1954). Perhaps we in contemporary U.S. society have moved further from Allport’s “handling of human relationships” than when he made his dismal assessment in 1954. However, many would agree that there is still much work to do in regard to how we still treat each other and respond to human need. On the one hand, colleges and universities across the U.S. have taken up Allport’s challenge and attempted to move to a more equitable environment. Harvard University’s recent decision to waive the costs of college for students whose incomes fall below those of traditional Harvard students speaks to an issue that most colleges and universities across the country find important. That issue is diversity. In Harvard’s case, the diversity in question is class, which is highly correlated and intersects with race and ethnicity (Maruyama, 2003). So by addressing class, Harvard will admit and fund many students of color in its newest diversity program. In another closely watched move, Johns Hopkins University is committing millions of dollars to departments that hire and retain women and members of underrepresented groups (The Daily Record, 2008).

The Rutgers University president’s immediate response when radio personality Don Imus called women’s basketball players “nappy headed hos” in 2007 was commendable. President McCormick wrote, “Racism and sexism have no place in our society and are completely at odds with our values as a university that celebrates diversity and civility” (Wright-Piersanti, 2007). President McCormick’s immediate and unequivocal response speaks to the fact that some colleges and universities are becoming much more sensitive to these issues than in the past and are proactive in their approach to equity and respect of its students and personnel.

On the other hand, negative examples that tell us there is still work to be done abound. A Washington University physics professor proudly proclaims his homophobia on his official university website (Kumar, 2005), which may be one of the reasons GLBT students on some campuses report a “chilly atmosphere.” Greek organizations on campus still remain highly racially and ethnically segregated. Students of color remain underrepresented at most colleges and universities and their retention rates still do not match the retention rates of majority students. Their retention is affected by the under representation of faculty and staff of color (Maruyama 2003). These examples and the hundreds of other incidents on campuses across the country each year underscore the need to pay attention to equity in institutions of higher learning.
There are diversity concerns at California State University, San Bernardino that our community deems important, too. Broadly speaking, those issues include a consideration of race and ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, levels of ability, and other markers of difference in the recruiting and retention of students, faculty and staff. What follows is a description of the history and goals of the CSUSB University Diversity Committee. First, it is necessary to briefly address the general issue of diversity in higher education. It is all about inclusion.

Issues of Diversity in Higher Education

A cursory examination of the websites of colleges and universities across the U.S. reveals that most of them—in some way—address issues of diversity, whether that attention is addressed in their mission statements or by appointing Deans of Diversity or by appointing committees that work to affect diversity issues and climate on campus. Some of this notice concerning diversity came as early as the 1960s—a time of many changes in university settings (Barcelo, 2007). Further, Diversity Committees have become well established within college and university culture. The goals and missions of diversity committees range from highlighting diversity on campus to being proactive in the recruiting and retention of underrepresented students, staff and faculty at these institutions; including diversity and social justice infusion in the curriculum; and to the training of staff and faculty.

CSUSB University Diversity Committee

In the case of CSUSB it is worth quoting the university’s “Statement of Commitment to Diversity” in its entirety.

In our commitment to the furthering of knowledge and fulfilling our educational mission, California State University, San Bernardino seeks a campus climate that welcomes, celebrates, and promotes respect for the entire variety of human experience. In our commitment to diversity, we welcome people from all backgrounds and we seek to include knowledge and values from many cultures in the curriculum and extra-curricular life of the campus community. Our commitment to work toward an environment that values diversity requires that we create, promote, and maintain activities and programs which further our understanding of individual and group diversity. We will also develop and communicate policies and promote values which discourage intolerance and discrimination.
The concept and dimensions of diversity are to be advanced and incorporated into every aspect of university activity, including student life, the curriculum, teaching, programs, staffing, personnel training practices, research, community services, events, and all other areas of university endeavor (CSUSB UDC 2008).

The University Diversity Committee (UDC) has, throughout its fifteen-year history, addressed these issues, joining other campus entities in a multi-pronged approach to the recruiting and retention of underrepresented groups. Beginning in 1993, President Evans sought to create a committee that would provide “education programs to prepare teachers to serve a multicultural society; and recognizes that one of its strengths is the diversity of the university community. As a result, the university has developed curricula and services that affirm the multiculturalism of this region and show the dignity and values that unite all people” (CSUSB Office of the President 1993).

The following year the new committee, under the direction of several faculty members, initiated a “Report on Campus Diversity Issues,” in which they surveyed students, staff and faculty to determine campus attitudes and climate regarding various dimensions of diversity. Responses were, according to the report, both “disturbing and hopeful.” The researchers concluded that CSUSB needed to “promote a more positive campus climate for diversity” (CSUSB 1995: 55). To that end, the UDC at CSUSB has worked diligently throughout its history to promote those principles.

Who We Are and What We Do

Numbering around sixteen staff, students and faculty and under the leadership of Dean Milton Clark, the committee meets semimonthly in an effort to accomplish the goals noted above. (We like to think of ourselves as one of the hardest working committees on campus!) Dean Clark’s dedication to the committee is one of the reasons we have been so successful in our efforts to effect change at the University. He speaks of how his UDC work complements his goals as Undergraduate Dean. That is, “it is all about student retention” (Clark, n2008). Reflecting my own beliefs, he asserts that if we make the University a more inclusive atmosphere, students will not only remain, but will thrive at CSUSB. There are a number of ways that we on the UDC attempt to accomplish our goals. What follows are highlights of some of our activities.

Conversations on Diversity
Each quarter the committee invites a speaker to campus whose voice we hope the students, faculty, staff and larger community will want to hear. Members of the sub-committee bring suggestions to the larger body who approves a particular guest, after which the research and work to bring in the guest, working with agents, booking airline and hotel reservations, etc., begins in earnest. These “conversations” are sometimes co-sponsored by other campus organizations such as the Intellectual Life Committee, the Women’s Resource Center, and the Cross Cultural Center. Most of the conversations have been before standing room only crowds and have been well received by the audiences.

Some of our more compelling guests have included B. D. Wong, television and film actor, who spoke about his career in Hollywood and on the stage as a gay Asian American who had recently adopted a child with his partner. Educator Mrs. Dorothy Inghram, a centenarian and long-time resident of San Bernardino, shared much of her history, including her tenure as the first African American superintendent of schools in California. Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, a former member of and creative force behind the a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, demonstrated with her amazing voice some of the sacred songs and culture of the Civil Rights Movement. CSU alumnna and CBS anchor Laura Diaz enthusiastically and animatedly chronicled her rise to the top of her field. Liz Murray, author of Homeless to Harvard, told her story of triumph over adversity. And we were delighted with the spirit and courage of Mark Zupan, captain of the U.S. wheelchair quadriplegic rugby team and featured in the film “Murderball.”

Event Funding

The committee, in addition to bringing in speakers on its own, sponsors events initiated by other student groups and organizations on campus. The event funding subcommittee evaluates all applications and funds up to $1000 toward the event that must take place on campus. Another criteria is that the event must be open to the larger Inland Empire community. The events we have funded include: the Latino, African American, and Asian American annual graduation recognition ceremonies, authors, and cultural events such as the Multicultural Family Festival sponsored by the Palestine Culture Club.

Diversity Awards

Since its inception the committee has recognized five individuals each year who embody the spirit of diversity, making contributions that reflect our goals either on campus or in the community.
Anyone on campus may nominate an individual for this honor. Past recipients have included James Ramos, Chair of the San Manuel Band of Serrano Indians; Edward Gomez, community activist and chair of the History Department of San Bernardino Valley College; Xiwen Zhang, CSUSB librarian; and John Futch, former director of the CSUSB Cross Cultural Center.

Diversity Training

Staff diversity training is mandatory at the University. To that end and in cooperation with CSUSB Human Resources, the committee chooses approximately fifteen individuals each year who are themselves trained by certified diversity trainers to learn every aspect of diversity in order to train CSUSB staff. Although the work of diversity training is extremely difficult and emotional, trainers often speak of how gratifying it is.

Diversity Research Initiative Grants

The committee funds research by faculty and students on the development of new courses, or an activity that will have campus-wide impact, or that will increase activity among faculty and students that aim at diversity and making CSUSB a productive environment in which all players will thrive. We are interested in not mere words, but action. The subcommittee reads all proposals and brings its recommendations before the entire body. We are always gratified at how the level of sophistication of the proposals and the commitment of faculty, staff and students to this area of campus life.

Advisement

In addition to our specific work in the areas noted above, there is a more ad hoc function that we serve in which we advise groups and individuals on campus on issues related to diversity. For example, seeing that there were student and personnel issues and problems that “fell between the cracks,” we were involved with the Office of the President in the revamping and redefining of The Office of Ombuds Services that provides “independent, impartial and confidential resource for those seeking to address University-related problems, complaints or concerns” (Office of Ombuds Services, 2008).

My Commitment
My involvement with the committee comes as a result of my experiences both as a student and educator. I grew up in segregated schools in Louisiana and Los Angeles, but was more or less protected from the ravages of that “separate but equal” system because of my Catholic School (K-12) experience with teachers who were dedicated and no-nonsense African American nuns. After high school, I received an academic scholarship to an upper-middle class Catholic college whose students were the daughters of the Hollywood elite. My trek each day from Watts (I refused to live on campus) to the far west side of Los Angeles felt like I was entering a foreign land. I did not fit in. I did not feel at home as I had in my Catholic girls’ high school, and there was no one on campus who could help me sift through my dilemma. I dropped out after only one semester.

As I matured I realized that my experience at the women’s college was not unusual. Tinto (1995) asserts that students leave the “social system” of the university because of lack of social integration more than any other motivating force. That is, if students do not feel they are a part of the system they will, as I did, opt to drop out. This is especially true of nontraditional students. So, when I realized that there were groups on campus whose mission was to change how students feel about the university and their place in it, I was eager to be a part of that process.

My diversity work has led me to “settle in” with the UDC. For the last eight years my goal has been to make this campus a more open place for students who, like I did so long ago, do not feel that they belong. This involves not only my sociological research and teaching, but also my service on the UDC. This work (and it is hard work!) has been both meaningful and fulfilling.

Conclusion

Diversity in nature, biologists will argue, is a good thing. It is no less important to maintain diversity in social institutions and relationships. We who work in the field of diversity believe that it encompasses more than just “Taco Tuesday,” as one colleague recently put it, wherein it is simply enough to “celebrate” cultures. The point is to change institutions and individuals through exposure to ideas, attitudes and experiences that one would not ordinarily encounter.

Will the day come when there will be no need for groups such as the CSUSB Diversity Committee? I hope so. However with growing economic disparity in the U.S., overt sexism, heterosexism, and other “isms” on college campuses and elsewhere in society, I’m not sure this will happen soon. In the meantime and in many ways, diversity committees—and we who are committed to this social challenge—are still fighting for a place at the academic table in which diversity will not only be a goal, but a reality. There is little debate that the formation of these committees has moved institutions of higher learning closer to a more equitable environment.
The CSUSB Diversity Committee joins other campus organizations such as the Teaching Resource Center, the Ethnic and Women’s Studies programs, the Pride Center, McNair Scholars Program, and the Cross Cultural Center to achieve equity for all on our campus. We who serve on the UDC do not regard our attention to diversity as a perfunctory role, but see ourselves toiling at the grass roots level, working toward a campus atmosphere where everyone feels welcome. I am proud and delighted to be a part of that process.

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