

So Our Campuses Look Like All of Us

Enacting Diverse Learning Environments

By Sylvia Hurtado, Jeffrey Milem, Alma Clayton-Pedersen, and Walter Allen
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Reviewed by Marie P. Ting

Enacting Diverse Learning Environments, a recent ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, is an important tool for those who seek to understand the value of diversity on college campuses. It's equally valuable for those who want to create programs that promote a diverse learning environment.

In a period when affirmative action and multiculturalism are being challenged and debated on campuses nationwide, this ERIC report could hardly be more timely, for both scholars and practitioners.

Why is diversity valuable in the educational process? What can institutions do to create a diverse learning environment? Is there really any scholarly evidence that shows the benefits of diversity? These are all questions that *Enacting Diverse Learning Environments* addresses directly.

The report looks at factors, both internal and external to an institution, that impact the environment for diversity on campuses.

"Central to the conceptualization of a campus climate for diversity is the notion that students are educated in distinct racial contexts where learning and socializing occur," the authors note, adding that "these sub-environmental contexts in higher education are

shaped by larger external and internal (institutional) contexts."

Internally, four main dimensions factor into the campus diversity climate: the historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion, the impact of structural diversity, the psychological climate, and the behavioral dimension of the institutional climate.

External to institutions is the public policy and socio-historical context in which every institution exists.

The report details each element of this framework and explains how, individually and collectively, these elements are crucial to enacting a diverse learning environment.

The first element of the framework, the institution's historical legacy of exclusion, reflects how desegregation and past vestiges of discrimination and exclusion factor into creating an unwelcome climate for students of color, both in the past and present.

The data presented in this study provide evidence of how the academy's shameful past in this area still haunts institutions of higher learning and limits their ability to achieve diversity.

The discussion of structural diversity, another element of the framework, centers on the impor-

tance of diversity. If there is no diversity in the student body or faculty and staff, the authors ask, how can an institution be a diverse learning community?

In this section, the authors demonstrate that an institution must have a critical mass of students of color to achieve an environment where students of color can feel comfortable and white students can dissolve stereotypes and prejudices.

Note the authors: "No matter how outstanding the academic institution, ethnic minority students can feel alienated if their ethnic representation on campus is small."

Structural diversity, the authors emphasize, benefits both majority and minority students: "the greater the structural diversity at an institution, the more likely white students are to socialize with students across racial/ethnic groups and the more frequently they are to discuss racial and ethnic issues."

Creating a diverse environment needs to be, in short, a concern to everyone, not just people of color.

The third dimension of the authors' framework is the psychological climate that an institution needs to provide for supporting a diverse learning environment.

An institution's psychological climate deals with student perceptions and attitudes: Do I feel welcome here as a student? Do I belong? Is my professor picking on me because I'm Asian American?

The authors show how the perception of racial tension between students can undermine their sense of belonging and, ultimately, their academic success.

Significantly, the book notes,

research also shows that white student sense of belonging is "negatively affected by a perception of a poor racial climate" and is "positively tied to having nonwhite friends and perceptions that the campus accepts and respects African American students."

The fourth and final piece of the framework: the behavioral dimension of the institutional climate.

This dimension includes the "actual reports of general social interaction, interaction between and among individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, and the nature of relations between and among groups on campus."

This dimension also covers interactions between faculty and students. The report discusses studies that show how faculty behaviors and student activities "can enhance interaction across race and ethnicity in the classroom."

Behavioral dimensions include, as well, discussions of classroom curriculum, campus race relations, and participation in racial/ethnic student organizations.

After examining the factors influencing the diversity environment that are internal to an institution, the authors turn to an examination of forces outside of the institution that may have an impact on campus climate. They discuss the role of state policymakers and the types of policies they must advocate to ensure a positive climate for students of color.

This portion of the book is extremely helpful for those who seek to understand how state and federal policy, directly and indirectly, plays into issues facing students on campus.

The authors present 12 strate-

gies for those who seek to improve campus climate. These strategies include such helpful and practical hints such as:

Affirm the goal of achieving a campus climate that supports racial and cultural diversity as an institutional priority.

Implement a detailed and ongoing evaluation program to monitor the effectiveness of and build support for programmatic activities aimed at improving the campus climate for diversity.

Involve faculty in efforts to increase diversity that are consistent with their roles as educators and researchers

Increase students' interaction with faculty outside of class by incorporating students in research and teaching activities.

Each of the 12 suggestions is practical and based on research and empirical evidence. The suggestions are applicable for faculty, staff, and students who want to play a role in creating a truly diverse learning environment.

The final part of this report details "promising practices" that have helped enact diverse campus learning environments. One such practice is an intergroup dialogue at the University of Michigan that gives students an opportunity to increase understanding of and mediate conflict between communities.

Another example is a CD-ROM developed at Carnegie Mellon University that teaches students conflict resolution among diverse populations.

These promising practices, note the authors, "reflect intentional ways that research-based design principles are enacted in diverse learning environments."

The book concludes with the notion that everyone within an institution, from faculty to admissions officers to student affairs staff, must play a role in providing a positive learning environment for diverse populations.

Acknowledging that their framework represents just the beginning, the authors argue that more research is needed in the area of campus climate as it relates to certain groups like Asian and Native Americans. They also offer suggestions for developing a plan of action for campuses that are eager to implement diverse learning environment initiatives.

The time a student spends on campus is crucial, the authors remind us, and a university needs to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for *all* students.

Enacting Diverse Learning Environments is an important report for every institution, faculty member, or policy maker committed to giving our students the best possible education.

The framework, recommendations, and best-practices provided here can help everyone seeking to provide students with the best possible learning environment—a diverse learning environment—not just for students of color, but for everyone. ■

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