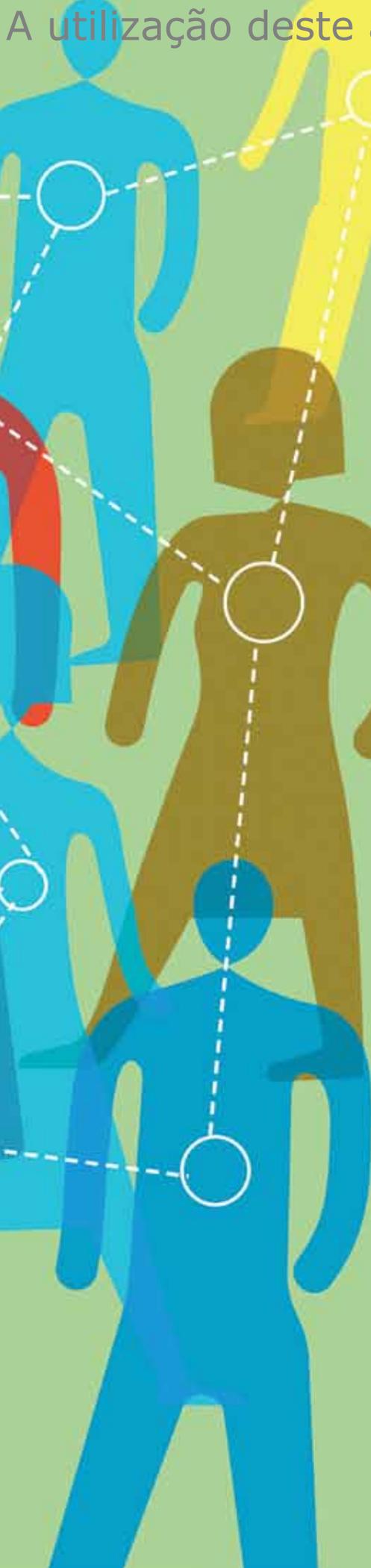


Social Justice: Creating an Inclusive University Culture

By **Charlita Shelton**



Education is essential to success, but academics didn't come easy for me. This may seem ironic coming from the president of a graduate school who has spent more than 25 years in the higher education industry. Nonetheless, it is true.

From the get-go, my career strategy was to first earn a doctorate degree—this was definitely the most demanding and, by far, the most important step in breaking through the proverbial glass ceiling. Were it not for my PhD, I would never have become president. When I earned my doctorate, many opportunities were presented to me. Without it, I would never have been considered for most of them. Education is the great equalizer.

Did I mention that I'm a black woman who grew up in the projects? I experienced what it meant to be poor, but I made a commitment to myself that I would never be defeated by gender or race. Today, diversity in higher education is my passion. While we have come a long way from a culture of universities exclusively for the elite, research demonstrates that students of traditionally

underrepresented ethnic backgrounds remain underrepresented in institutions of higher education.



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According to *Minorities in Higher Education 2010: Twenty-Fourth Status Report*, recently released by the American Council on Education, “Young Hispanics and African Americans have made no appreciable progress in postsecondary education attainment as compared to their older peers, and attainment rates have dipped for the youngest group aged 25-34. These flat-lining attainment rates indicate that today’s young adults are no better educated than the baby boom generation.” In addition, the study notes that “among all racial/ethnic groups in the United States, Hispanics—the fastest growing population—continue to exhibit the lowest educational attainment levels.”

Universities are increasingly creating diversity departments. Diversity officers are in turn establishing diversity initiatives and implementing programs with the goal of creating an inclusive environment. It is extremely important to gain a commitment from upper management when beginning these programs. Senior management’s dedication to diversity sends a message throughout an organization. Once initiatives are in place, senior management can help drive desired outcomes. Assessing the needs of the institution becomes critical to the mission.

In order for individuals in an organization to embrace the concept of diversity, a level of trust from the top down needs to be established. Trust is formed when the university alleviates executive, faculty, staff, and student fears of being judged or ridiculed because of cultural or personal differences. When leaders model and support the diversity mission, employees demonstrate a higher level of interest. I recommend creating a President’s Diversity Council, charged with framing strategic intent and business alliances for diversity operations. This group should be responsible for providing leadership and resources to the Diversity Task Force and its sub-groups, as well as reviewing plans prior to implementation.

A Diversity Task Force is the driving force for diversity work at all levels within a university. Membership should consist of staff, faculty, and students who develop programming and create a welcoming, inclusive climate.

It’s also important for an organization to understand that if it wants to create a successful program, it must be committed to a long-term effort. Positive change does not occur quickly. Successful programs survive when clear expectations have been established—a fundamental role for the president to play.

Initiatives for Improvement

Diversity training raises consciousness and breaks down barriers. Individuals need to have an understanding of one another’s norms, values, and belief systems. Everyone comes to the table with their experiences based upon many different factors that help shape them as human beings. We are all different and those differences make us all diverse.

In the past when I have conducted diversity training, I had participants who were reluctant to voice their perspective, because they perceived diversity training as something that addressed only people of different races and ethnicities. In actuality, diversity is all inclusive.

Diversity experts Anita Rowe and Lee Gardenswartz devised a unique, four-dimensional diversity model, in which diversity begins with



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I believe all academically qualified students deserve access to earning a college degree. Issues of diversity are integral to the successful and ethical functioning of traditional and nontraditional higher education institutions.

Research also suggests that a number of factors help attract and retain diverse students, including the presence of faculty and staff who are sensitive to diversity issues; support for diverse students, both academically and through a strong sense of community; opportunities for multifaceted areas of study; and the availability of mentors and advisers.

The Beginning: Define Diversity at Your University

What is diversity? It’s helping people understand the impact that they have on one another and the organization. It’s preparing flexible systems that support diverse opinions and ideas to meet organizational requirements. It’s developing socially conscious people and environments that are free from bias. It’s not a superficial, meaningless recognition, like a Diversity Day or Diversity Week. Instead, it’s an authentic culture that permeates day-in and day-out and becomes the way of being for the institution.

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Assess curriculum for learning outcomes that incorporate diversity knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Personality—elements that shape and form a person's persona. The next layer includes the *Internal Dimensions*—obvious elements such as age, ethnicity, race, and gender. The third level is *External Dimensions*. This could be geographic location, marital status, work experience, educational background, or religious preference. The last layer is the *Organizational Dimension*. This could be management status, division/department, political association, seniority, or work location.

In my experience, immediately after covering these dimensions in training, individuals who feel that they may not otherwise be included in the diversity dialogue lower their guard and their level of trust increases. Why? Because this model demonstrates that diversity is inclusive of everyone.

To build trust across a college, an understanding of what diversity truly is at one's university becomes imperative. From the beginning, we established that at the University of the Rockies, diversity means we encourage students of all cultures and experiences to seek higher learning opportunities and to learn from one another.

All stakeholders must believe that they are diverse in their own way and contribute to the university's "tapestry" of people who bring a level of richness to their environment. Before trust can be established, they must feel safe to be who they are. And they must feel included and valued.

To demonstrate leadership's dedication to diversity, create awareness about what it means to be "diversity challenged," and provide education about the complexity of intersecting value systems, we held a mandatory training session for all employees, offered multiple times over the course of several months. The primary purpose of this Diversity 101 training was to develop a shared mindset about what diversity means to our institution. Participants engaged in a two-hour interactive workshop. Group sizes ranged from three to 18 people. Each group was encouraged to dialogue and exchange ideas relative to diversity and how it affects their roles within

the workplace. After completing the workshop, participants submitted an evaluation form. Ninety-three percent said the training would improve their job performance. Seventy-five percent said their knowledge and skill level had increased by at least 50 percent after the training.

Professional development initiatives go hand-in-hand with training, and oftentimes include mentoring opportunities for students with staff or other students who serve as role models. The objective is to improve retention percentages of our underrepresented groups.

I also am a proponent of recruitment tactics to support diversity initiatives. Faculty should reflect the student body, including its diversity. In creating a diverse university, a proactive initiative to recruit underrepresented faculty and staff, as well as students, is imperative.

In addition, curriculum development should be a part of diversity initiatives. Assess curriculum for learning outcomes that incorporate diversity knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Ensure that these learning outcomes are being achieved. Review pools of curriculum developers for multiculturalism among material. Beyond integration into existing classroom studies, we are among the first regionally accredited higher learning institutions to offer an Organizational Diversity specialization, which is part of our Master of Arts in Psychology and Doctor of Psychology programs. We offer courses such as Mental Health and Psychopathology in the Workplace, Strategic Diversity Management, and Cross-Cultural Communications.

Master's degree students with the Organizational Diversity specialization learn to apply psychological research to lead and manage diversity strategies in organizations. They examine the socio-cultural and international contexts that influence individuals and teams. The doctorate degree program provides a deeper, broader emphasis on world views and diversity issues. It includes extensive research as well as advanced seminars in global consulting and the multicultural communication necessary to implement change.

Embrace and Engage

A successful university diversity program includes training and education, recruiting and retention efforts, organizational design, and curriculum that promotes a culture of embracing diversity and inclusiveness. It engages administrators, faculty, and students in what it means to be a world-class center of global learning opportunities and promotes learning from one another. ■

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