Will Your Campus Diversity Initiative Work?

Good intentions must be matched with careful planning and deliberate follow-through.

By Grant Ingle

You hear from colleagues that your dean is assembling yet another diversity committee. For years, you have strongly advocated addressing diversity issues at the faculty, staff, and student levels, yet you’re dreading that call from the dean. In the past, you have dutifully agreed to serve on diversity committees only to see the resulting recommendations end up on a shelf somewhere, never to be examined, discussed, or implemented.

First, a new crisis refocused campus attention elsewhere. Next, leadership changed, and the new leader didn’t pursue the diversity initiative begun by his or her predecessor. At other times, it wasn’t clear why the recommendations went nowhere. How can you assess the credibility, practicability, and likely success of a diversity initiative on your campus? Before joining that committee, make sure it has a chance of success. See if the following conditions apply to your campus’s initiative.

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1. The communications about the initiative, on and off campus, are comparable to those for a capital campaign. A campuswide diversity initiative is a major campaign, and its communications should reflect that level of importance and seriousness. Its intent is to get you and other members of the campus to contribute your time, expertise, and energy to help build a better campus. The communications should make it clear that you are being asked to join a change process, not just a committee. Expect to see a Web site and other well-crafted communications that describe the effort.

2. The initiative has an explicit goal or set of goals. Materials describing the effort should have explicit, preferably measurable goals, such as increasing the recruitment and retention of students of color, or creating a more inclusive and equitable campus community. A statement of goals not only clarifies the intended outcomes of a diversity effort but also manages expectations about what the effort hopes to accomplish. In addition, a statement of goals can help members of the campus to gauge the level of the campus leadership’s commitment to the initiative.

3. The initiative has a realistic time frame. The first full cycle of an effective diversity initiative will require roughly the same amount of time demanded by a major capital campaign—five to ten years—and this time frame should be evident from the start. A diversity initiative needs a planning phase, an assessment phase, an implementation phase, and then reassessment. Experience shows that it often takes two to three years after implementation to see initial trends in reassessment data and five or six years to demonstrate statistically (and practically) significant differences.
4. A rationale or "business case" has been put forward explaining why this diversity initiative is critical to the long-term educational mission of the campus. A campus diversity initiative should not stand by itself but rather have a rationale that is directly integrated into the mission of the campus. For example, the diversity initiative might be framed as a way to increase the social and cultural diversity of a campus so it can provide a competitive education needed by all students to succeed as citizens in the twenty-first century.

5. The initiative is driven by a recurring cycle of assessment. Too often, diversity-related change is driven by crises, incidents, or the arrival of a new leader rather than by reliable information about the status of diversity on the campus. Credible initiatives are grounded in solid assessment information that clearly identifies the current state of affairs and specific problem areas. These assessments are used to develop and implement needed changes, which are then subject to another assessment cycle three to six years later to see what improvements have occurred and what still needs to change.

6. A written plan or process exists to identify, approve, implement, and evaluate the changes for effectiveness. There should be no doubt about the steps by which proposals for change emerge.

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**Student Climate Survey**

As part of the assessment phase of the Community, Diversity, and Social Justice Initiative, a telephone survey was administered to a random sample of undergraduates. The following graphs and text are excerpted from a fall 2003 report available at http://www.umass.edu/wost/cdsj/January2004Report.pdf. Most students in all racial and ethnic groups report positive experiences with diversity in the classroom. Still, substantial differences exist based on race, ethnicity, and gender. The survey data indicate that the classroom is a less conducive environment for learning for African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American students. Latino/a and black students were, for example, less likely than white students to feel they had the opportunity to interact with students of different races and ethnicities in their classes. Note also that 27 percent of Latino/a and Native American students and 34 percent of black students indicated that they had "felt excluded or silenced because of a personal characteristic," such as race, sex, ability, social class, or sexual orientation. Higher percentages of African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American students than white students also report being the subject of stereotyping and derogatory comments from course instructors and other students. Gender differences are also significant, although students generally reported experiencing somewhat less targeting on the basis of gender than race. All seven of the results below are statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

**Percentage of Students Agreeing Strongly or Somewhat Strongly with Four Classroom Experiences**

- In my classes, I have had the opportunity to interact with students of different races or ethnicities
- I have had at least one class that included intensive conversations among students with different backgrounds or beliefs
- In classes, I have had the opportunity to learn about different racial or ethnic groups in a nonthreatening way
- I have not felt excluded or silenced in class because of a personal characteristic

**Percentage of Students Reporting Classroom Incidents Involving Race or Ethnicity**

- [I was] targeted unfairly or singled out unfairly by course instructors because of [my] race or ethnicity
- Instructors made stereotyping remarks about my racial or ethnic group
- Students made derogatory comments to [me] in class because of [my] race or ethnicity
Bullying As a Management Style

The findings of the Community, Diversity, and Social Justice Initiative often indicated that departments needed to improve the workplace climate for all employees before they could hope to attract new applicants, including those from underrepresented groups.

Department A, a 150-employee unit that provides technical services to faculty, staff, and students, was concerned about its lack of racial and ethnic diversity. The prevailing belief within the department was that the lack of diversity occurred because the department couldn’t pay salaries high enough to attract and retain employees of color.

However, assessment data from the climate survey for this department revealed disturbing findings: 26 percent of employees agreed that bullying was a problem in their work areas; 29 percent said they could not make complaints without fear of retaliation; 35 percent disagreed that their supervisors were role models for appropriate workplace behavior; and 37 percent disagreed that their supervisors adequately addressed inappropriate behavior that occurred in the workplace.

From these results, and from responses to open-ended questions that elaborated on them, it was evident that Department A had a poor workplace climate that would make it difficult to attract and retain any employee.

When the assessment results were shared with the department’s managers, a several-hour discussion resulted. Two of the managers asserted that bullying (yelling at and physically cornering people, slamming doors, pounding on desks) was a legitimate management style. Fortunately, the new director made it clear that such behavior was unacceptable and that he expected any employee experiencing or witnessing such behavior to report it immediately, to him if necessary. He also made explicit his expectation that managers and supervisors should model appropriate behavior and take the lead in confronting inappropriate behavior by others.

The director reiterated these same strong messages at subsequent presentations of the assessment data to employees throughout the department. Although a reassessment will not take place until later this year, anecdotal evidence suggests that significant improvements occurred regarding behavior related to the four survey items noted above. This example is one of ten changes this department has made to become an employer of choice for any prospective employee.

and then move forward. If proposals are to be forwarded to campus leadership for approval, all parties should agree in advance that every proposal will receive a full response. The plan should also specify that proposals for change be based explicitly on problem areas documented by the assessment results. Although this linkage may seem obvious, diversity initiatives can suffer over time from a disconnection between documented problem areas and plans for improvement. This form of “mission drift” can easily occur as other agendas emerge and times and issues change. Early on, every proposed change must be linked to an assessment result that can easily be reassessed to see if progress has taken place.

7. Campus leadership is committed to devoting the staff and financial resources necessary to implement recommendations emerging from the change process. No campus leader would be wise to make a blanket commitment for resources to implement yet-to-be-formulated changes, of course. Still, there must be evidence of commitment to make changes, even if they have price tags. Far too many campuses spend much money and staff time transitioning to a new software system but seem unwilling to make similar investments in efforts to improve campus climate regarding diversity issues. Instead of relying on volunteer efforts, a credible diversity effort will provide staff or students to committees and teams to take minutes and manage communications, such as meeting announcements. If an initiative is a campuswide effort, the coordinating group for the campus must also have an adequate budget and staff support.

8. The terminology surrounding the diversity effort is unambiguous. If terms like “diversity” or “multicultural” are used, they need to be defined explicitly. On many campuses, “diversity” informally translates to race alone, and “multicultural” refers only to people of color. The undefined use of such terms is confusing at best and exclusionary at worst, often leaving women; religious minorities; members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community; and those with disabilities wondering if their concerns are included. It can be entirely appropriate for a diversity initiative to focus on a single set of issues, such as racial and ethnic inclusion, but the language of the initiative should accurately reflect this focus.

9. The boundary of the change effort is well defined in terms of who and what parts of the campus are involved. Credible diversity efforts are explicit about who is involved and how. Students, staff, faculty, governance units, unions, and even alumni and community members can all be legitimate and valuable participants. Similarly, the effort should specify which parts of the campus are participating. Sometimes it is entirely appropriate to examine a narrow realm, such as student experience in the classroom or the practices of a particular department, school, college, or administrative unit. At other times, larger questions of campus climate appropriately include gathering information from all members and organizational units of a campus.

10. The leaders of the diversity initiative will use external expertise to shape and guide it. Effective diversity efforts benefit from drawing on the experience and advice of external partners who have managed similar change processes. This outside perspective can come from consultants, a team of trusted colleagues from peer institutions, or an educational association. Engaging parties from outside your campus provides not only valuable information about what has worked and not worked elsewhere, but also a critical independent perspective. External voices will be able to speak with campus leaders in a way that no one from the campus can, especially regarding their leadership of the initiative.
11. The assessment will use multiple methods. Although a single climate survey administered to an entire campus can provide valuable information, the findings will be clearer if they are supplemented by additional sources of information. Well-planned diversity assessments typically involve multiple sources in addition to survey data: demographic data about the racial and gender composition of students, staff, and faculty, and thoughtful analysis of existing policies, practices, and communications regarding diversity issues. Focus group data and interviews can be valuable secondary sources of information but should not serve as primary data sources.

12. The basic assessment methodology of the initiative makes sense. If the initiative aims to examine the experiences of students of color, it is critical to compare these experiences with those of majority white students. This comparison makes it possible to tease out the issues affecting students generally versus those that affect students differentially by race and ethnicity. Furthermore, examining the experiences of under-

graduates of different racial and ethnic groups in a particular academic department will likely make more sense when compared with the experiences of graduate students, staff, and faculty of color from the same department. Sampling issues are also important to address prior to conducting climate surveys. For example, many predominantly white campuses use random samples of undergraduates to collect climate data, but these samples typically will not generate enough responses from students of color to allow for meaningful analysis by racial or ethnic group. A well-known strategy of “oversampling” students of color can correct this deficiency.

13. The climate data are useful at the departmental level. Although a small random sample of undergraduates can give an accurate overall picture of the climate of a campus, providing valid data at the departmental level may require surveying the entire student body in a way that also ensures high rates of survey participation. For example, a campus might learn from oversampling students of color that a significant percentage of them are encountering faculty who express racial stereotypes. But the sample may not be large enough to provide valid information about which departments are the source of these complaints. In such cases, departments wanting to improve their performance regarding diversity issues may be truly concerned about the issues at hand but lack adequate data for making local changes.

14. The initiative has unambiguous support from campus leaders but is not dependent on any one of them. Higher education leadership is turning over at an increasing rate. On large public campuses, for example, the average half-life of a chancellor or president now seems to be three years or less. Given that a diversity initiative will probably need to outlast one or more of the leaders, ownership of the initiative needs to reside at levels below that of the president or chancellor, perhaps even below the level of vice presidents or vice chancellors. If the initiative is identified solely with the chancellor, president, or provost, it will probably not be supported by a successor who will find no advantage in continuing the initiatives of the previous leader. Unambiguous support includes a multyear commitment of funds and staff support; clear authorization of the initiative by leadership; integration of the initiative with other important areas, such as fundraising; assurance that those who participate in the initiative will receive frequent communications and acknowledgement from leadership; and so on.

The diversity effort you are asked to join will probably not pass muster on all the items above, but someone needs to be thinking about all of them if the initiative is to succeed. Before taking that call from the dean, it might make sense to query some of your colleagues and others about the initiative and do a quick search on the campus Web site. If it is a campuswide effort, your dean may not have a full picture of the larger effort and won’t be able to answer some of the questions cited above. Nonetheless, it’s important to push back by asking probing questions. You may end up improving the next diversity initiative on your campus. Or, perhaps, when you become the dean, you can use this set of questions to better shape a diversity initiative from the start.