

DIFFERENCE MATTERS

By Brenda J. Allen, Ph.D.

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.—*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

In December 2015, during a campus diversity forum entitled, “Let’s Talk about Race,” one of my co-facilitators asserted, “As a white person, I was raised not to see color.” And, she elaborated, she once thought that being oblivious to race was a good thing. I disclosed that I was raised to be acutely aware of race, starting with being labeled as “colored.” Throughout my childhood, I had received negative messages about my race. These messages were exemplified in a song that my colored friends and I used to sing: “When you’re white, you’re right; when you’re brown, stick around, but if you’re black, ooh baby, get back, get back, get back.” Although my colleague and I received starkly different messages about race when we were growing up, we currently agree that race matters to everyone, regardless of their racial identity. We also feel this way about other identity categories (e.g., gender, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few). As educators who are committed to equity and social justice, we believe that difference matters for achieving the promise of diversity in higher education. Our focus on difference points to how the discipline of Communication can help to enhance diversity and inclusivity on college campuses and beyond.

Three institutions of higher education in Denver, Colorado sponsored the forum, which convened public and private sector leaders to explore how race matters to their organizations and to examine promising practices. Faculty representatives from each campus co-facilitated the forum. After my colleague and I briefly shared how we were socialized about race, we asked participants to

reflect on race across their lives. We wanted them to understand that—similar to us—they had had varying experiences with race, with varying degrees of awareness of race in their daily lives. Because these variations can impact attitudes and behaviors, they matter for how leaders enact their roles, especially their efforts to achieve diversity goals. We also acknowledged that everyone embodies multiple social identities. I asked participants to visualize identity as a gemstone with many facets; although we often focus on one facet, other identities are always present, and they also can matter. The forum exemplified how institutions of higher education can partner with external organizations to share information about how to value diversity.

Diversity has long been a priority for many institutions and organizations. In higher education, diversity often denotes an ethical imperative to provide access to traditionally underrepresented groups, and to be more inclusive. This imperative has become more pressing due to recent demographic developments. In the United States, the most-cited population statistics refer to a “new majority” of persons of color. Other changes include increasing numbers of international students, persons with disabilities, veterans, and immigrants (documented and undocumented) who aspire to attend college. Many students will be the first in their family to seek a college degree. Also, today’s college-aged students are more diverse than any other generation in terms of religious identity. Thus, the pool of prospective students is and will continue to be more diverse than ever. Plus, students are more likely to encounter a variety of diverse peers on college campuses than in any other setting.

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Diversity has become crucial for helping institutions of higher education to be competitive globally. U.S. colleges and universities are facing pressure to prepare students to succeed in a global environment, where educated knowledge workers interact effectively in multicultural contexts. In addition, research reveals that under the right conditions, diversity can improve the bottom line for organizations; working in diverse groups can enhance creativity, productivity, problem solving, innovation, loyalty, and teamwork. Therefore, diversity has become an economic imperative and an economic asset.

Although institutions generally have improved access to undergraduate education for diverse students, they are not making much progress in terms of diversifying their full-time faculty or senior administrators. Especially for women and members of underrepresented racial-ethnic minority groups, institutions need to make these positions more accessible. They also need to be responsive to social, legal, and political issues and incidents such as the Supreme Court's decision regarding race-based admissions policies, presidential candidates' views on immigration, same-sex marriage laws, police shootings of black people, anti-Muslim sentiment, and domestic and international acts of terror.

Fortunately, a growing body of research offers guidance for how institutions can meet the challenges and optimize opportunities. Promising practices include developing and implementing comprehensive, strategic approaches to building institutional capacity for diversity. Proponents of these approaches advocate making diversity an institutional priority and creating inclusive educational and work environments. To accomplish these goals, strategies should aim to transform institutional cultures. As renowned diversity expert Damon Williams details in *Strategic Diversity Leadership: Activating Change and Transformation in Higher Education* (Stylus, 2013), colleges and universities will have to invest a lot of time and resources.

They also will need to examine and revise a wide variety of practices that might impede progress. For example, many campuses expend most of their diversity-related resources toward students, mainly for student services. They also tend to position diversity as a separate endeavor for which only particular programs, disciplines, groups, or individuals are responsible. A common example is that institutions often expect members of underrepresented groups to represent and serve as advocates for "their" groups, with little recognition or reward. There usually are no similar expectations for members of dominant groups.

In addition, any formal commitment to education about diversity is generally limited to the undergraduate curriculum, if it exists at all. Some campuses require students to take a diversity course, which can reinforce the idea that only certain people or disciplines are responsible for diversity. This may lead students to believe that they are culturally competent because they have fulfilled the requirement, while also validating a common assumption that certain disciplines or topics are exempt from addressing diversity.

Strategic approaches involve providing diversity resources (including training and professional development) to *all* faculty and staff (including high-level leaders), and expecting everyone to be responsible for accomplishing the institution's diversity-related goals. Regarding diversity and education, institutions must infuse diversity throughout the curriculum and offer resources and incentives for faculty in all disciplines to engage in more culturally responsive teaching. Strategic approaches also include conducting and valuing research that advances knowledge and practice related to diversity, and partnering with internal and external groups, communities, and organizations who seek to realize the promise of diversity.

To develop and implement strategies for building institutional capacity for diversity, identity is a core concept



for effecting the intended change. Institutions should provide opportunities for students, staff, and faculty from all social identities to learn from and with one another. Although individuals classify themselves into innumerable identity groups, those that are especially crucial for diversity endeavors in higher education include gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, ability, nationality, and religion. The salience of these identities is rooted in historical inequities and injustices. These categories matter because they create hierarchies that place members in dominant or non-dominant positions that can affect their experiences in higher education. Dominant groups tend to have more economic and cultural power than non-dominant groups, and their ways of knowing and being tend to be more valued in organizations and institutions. Institutions of higher education are prime sites of power dynamics that perpetuate dominant belief systems that influence policies, procedures, and practices in ways that privilege some groups and disadvantage others.

These perspectives on social identity and power underpin the premise that difference matters. However, my definition of difference diverges from those that focus on how members of non-dominant groups vary from, or compare with, members of dominant groups. I use

difference as an inclusive term to invite members of all groups to reflect on how difference matters to them. For example, most humans categorize themselves in terms of gender. They have learned how to enact gender based on implicit and explicit messages from a variety of sources that influence their attitudes toward gender (theirs and others'). Although their notions of gender depend on contextual and cultural variables, they likely will be familiar with power dynamics that value masculine more than feminine gender roles. They also will have had similar experiences with other identity categories.

Moreover, their range of social identities probably encompasses dominant and non-dominant classifications. I stress and illustrate this point whenever I facilitate discussions about difference: Because my gender and race fall under non-dominant categories, ways that I have been socialized because of these identities can inform diversity efforts that seek to understand difference. As standpoint theory explains, members of marginalized groups often can offer valuable insights as outsiders within dominant organizations: In order to succeed, they are obligated to understand their roles from dominant group members' perspectives in addition to their own. They also are often more aware of, and wary about, oppression



and discrimination. However, my sexual orientation (heterosexual), socioeconomic class (middle-classed), ability status (able-bodied; mentally capable) and nationality (U.S. citizen) place me in dominant categories that allow me to be oblivious to negative implications of these aspects of identity for members of non-dominant groups.

To build institutional capacity that benefits from the diversity that many colleges and universities claim to value, they must strengthen relationships across difference. Scholars from many disciplines (including Communication) have developed programs to cultivate intergroup relations. Growing numbers of campuses are employing these programs or other resources on intergroup dialogue for groups of students, faculty, staff, and/or community members. Their goals include fostering intergroup relations, multicultural education, improving decision-making processes, managing conflict, and engaging in deliberative democracy. These endeavors correspond with my framework for difference matters by focusing on participants' multiplicity of social identities and exploring issues of inequity and power. They furnish much-needed space and guidelines for people to talk with one another about identity. Research on campus intergroup programs has reported positive results.

Ideally, colleges and universities will support formal programs and initiatives. However, they also can incorporate tenets and processes of intergroup dialogue into various institutional practices to sustain work groups, committees, teams, coalitions, and alliances that appreciate difference. Their goal should be to create healthy, inclusive campus climates that enable and empower all members to thrive and be productive.

The discipline of Communication can play a crucial role in exploring and valuing difference through promoting intergroup relations, and in other ways related to building capacity for diversity. Within our various areas of scholarship, research, teaching, and service, many of us already are applying and advancing a wealth of relevant knowledge, skills, and experience. However, we can do more.

On an individual level, become more committed to acknowledging and valuing difference in all aspects of your job. Work within your spheres of influence to help your institution realize the promise of diversity. Within your department or unit, analyze whether or not the barriers to optimizing diversity I've identified exist. If so, initiate discussions with your colleagues about how to remove them. Request or provide resources to build capacity for diversity, including ways to create more inclusive and respectful

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workplaces. This aspect of capacity building for diversity is one of the most-neglected yet most-deserving of attention.

At the college or university level, develop or strengthen partnerships for diversity-related teaching, research, and service. Bridge the silos of student and academic services, as well as those within departments and between academic disciplines. Engage in transdisciplinary research, teaching, and practice. As you conduct the business of these partnerships and collaborations, explore and implement ways to cultivate intergroup relations.

Efforts to build capacity for diversity should extend to external communities and organizations. The diversity forum on race I mentioned is a good example; it was sponsored by three institutions, co-facilitated by four faculty from various disciplines, and designed for leaders from public and private sectors. The forum also illustrates how to foster intergroup dialogue. According to attendees, we accomplished our goals to provide a safe space to openly discuss race matters, to illuminate how race matters, and to share promising practices. Attendees especially appreciated our brief overview of race as a

social construction, and my colleague's account about how she changed her assumption that not seeing color was a good thing. A scholar of secondary education, she studied race and other aspects of identity in graduate school, where she learned that "not seeing color," however well-intentioned, invalidates non-dominant racial groups' experiences and identities, ignores racial inequities, and seems to imply that being a person of color is a bad thing. Narratives that co-facilitators and attendees shared about race and its intersections with other social identities helped prove the premise that difference matters, while also demonstrating that difference matters differently for different people.

I have outlined some of the challenges and opportunities related to diversity in higher education that seem especially germane to the discipline of Communication. The project of building capacity for diversity is daunting, yet necessary, if we wish to realize higher education's potential to help develop a pluralistic, inclusive, and equitable society. Communication ought to be a principal participant in that project. ■



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