

Interculturalism as a Foundation for Helping Students Value Diversity

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As colleges and universities grow in enrollment, administrators actively include diversity agendas in their growth plans (Castellanos, Gloria, Mayorga, & Salas, 2007). Yet while administrators reference diversity through the rhetoric of written mission statements and the increase in diversity enrollment statistics, there has been inadequate attention to understanding the complexity of multicultural issues (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). As we realize that student enrollment increasingly reflects diverse backgrounds (Jiang, 2006), we need to realize that simply adding to the numbers of students from diverse backgrounds is not sufficient in making a university open to diversity (Castellanos et al., 2007).

Brown (2002) identifies this as the difference between “statistical diversity,” or the demographics of a campus, and an “environment for diversity,” or the institutional goal of growing diversity (p. 1081). Simply enrolling a diverse student body does not equate to creating a truly diverse institution of higher education. One goal of the student affairs profession is to include diversity in a student’s higher education experience, yet there needs to be greater focus on how to train professionals to do so (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). Is there a framework that can address both student diversity development and the way in which student affairs professionals consider diversity when working with students?

Perhaps the answer lies within interculturalism, or the idea of “sharing and learning across cultures with the aim of promoting understanding, equity, harmony, and justice in a diverse society” (Intercultural Framework, 2008). This idea goes further than the idea of multiculturalism, which simply refers to the respectful coexistence of different cultures (Kymalicka, 2003). Interculturalism in education is not a new concept in regard to how teachers teach, yet traditionally it has entailed only inclusion of cultures in lesson plans (Lee, 2005). Of course, to make such a concept work, it is important to first assess the culture of the university; if the culture is not one that would support such open attention to diversity, any diversity programs presented to the student body might end in failure (Brown, 2002). To make this idea effective in the college environment and to truly create an atmosphere that supports understanding of diversity, I argue that interculturalism should go beyond lesson plans to include intentional dialogues and interactions between people of different cultures. This is where student affairs plays a critical role.

Pope and Reynolds (1997) recognize the need for student affairs professionals to acquire skills for effectively working with a diverse student body. To help build the concept of multicultural competence (which, by the definition previously mentioned, would be included in intercultural competence) in college students and to give student affairs professionals direction in working with students, the two researchers created a list of core student affairs competencies; the list includes elements like administration, theory, and ethics, but most relevant to this discussion are the elements of “teaching and training” and “multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills” (Pope-Davis, Coleman, Liu, & Toporek, 2003, p. 366). Pope and Reynolds elaborate on this second element by stressing the importance of students to have “the ability to identify and openly

discuss cultural differences and issues” (p. 271), involving both sharing differences and growing by openly addressing those differences. With these two core competencies in mind, I offer two categories in which student affairs professionals can intentionally help students value diversity: meaningful discussions and community service.

Fostering Meaningful Discussions

A central element of interculturalism involves critical thinking and the comprehension that “diversity in and of itself is of little value unless we can enhance communication among diverse individuals and groups” (Lee, 2005, p. 202). Student affairs professionals must realize that social pressures make it difficult for students to let their beliefs emerge, so open discussion is necessary to deal with and overcome such pressures; in our society, this can be especially difficult because agreement is valued and divergence is not (Opatow, 1990). For meaningful dialogue to take place, participants should be open to wherever the conversation takes them and understand that *different* does not mean *bad*—it simply means *different* (Roose, 2001). These might seem like elementary concepts, yet I believe starting with these reminders is important when working with college-aged students.

Kegan’s (1994) model of lifespan development reminds us that students go through a “self-authorship” phase as a way to organize their lives and act as the authors—not just the actors—in their lives, balancing outside influences with internal factors (p. 185). In other words, students are still figuring out who they are and might benefit from such elementary reminders, particularly as they enter college environment comprised of people from numerous backgrounds. One option when approaching discussions is to use trained undergraduate students to lead reflections (Ash & Clayton, 2004); having this peer-to-peer leadership might help students experiencing this self-authoring phase feel more comfortable being open in their sharing of thoughts.

Meaningful discussions can occur on their own as activities marketing with titles such as “discussion of diversity issues on campus,” but more likely they can be integrated into other activities on campus, chiefly through reflection at the completion of programs or events. Reflection is a process that allows a person to “integrate the understanding gained into one’s experience in order to enable better choices or actions in the future as well as enhance one’s overall effectiveness” (Rogers, 2001, p. 41). Even when experiencing the same activity, people generate different conclusions; engaging in collective reflection can bring together these multiple perspectives to increase learning (Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). So as college campuses gain greater statistical diversity in their student bodies, the discussions will provide increasingly diverse perspectives, allowing reflection discussions to positively impact a student’s diversity awareness.

Community Service

People who live an intercultural life are curious about other cultures, want to learn new ways of life, and are open to looking at issues from another person’s point of view (Kymlicka, 2003). Community service provides opportunities to satisfy all three of these characteristics, as well as support other aspects of student development and success. Astin and Antonio (2000)

found that the activities in which students participate while in college have a great impact on their character development, identifying volunteering as one such activity. Astin and Sax (1998) related serving the community with also positively influencing student retention. In addition, we see that serving the community provides students with an education in diversity; students who engage in domestic service projects—without even leaving this county—have been shown to have greater cultural competencies than those who do not (Miller & Gonzalez, 2009). Students can learn from their peers and from the people whom they serve. Their perspective can broaden a bit more than if they never went out into their community to participate in service activities. Considering how busy a college student's schedule becomes with classes, homework, student organizations, and social activities, they could use support from student affairs professionals to take the initiative to organize service activities. This could include offering a website with local agencies that need volunteers, organizing service events for students like cleaning up a local park, and giving students the resources and support to form Relay for Life teams. Outside of organizing service activities, collaboration with faculty who incorporate service learning projects in their classes could be beneficial for students, as we see that participation in such projects increases students' diversity awareness and appreciation (Simons & Cleary, 2006). Once organized, convincing students to participate in the activities should be an increasingly easy task: the Corporation for National and Community Service reports that the number of college students who engage in volunteer work increased by approximately 20 percent between 2002 and 2005, and that in 2008 69.7 percent of first-year college students believed that it is essential or very important to offer help to others in need—the highest rate for this belief since 1970. The Corporation also reports that the volunteerism rate for college students in South Carolina is 28 percent, ranking our state 39th among all states. And these rates are sure to grow. Mainstream media has already pointed to the impact of the Barack Obama presidential campaign as proving to students that they matter in social matters and inspiring them to serve their communities (Stone, 2009). Given the Millennial Generation's sense of social responsibility (Howe & Strauss, 2000), community service appears to be a viable way to support college students in their efforts to reaching out to other cultures.

Conclusion

To maximize the potential of interculturalism on college campuses, the idea must broaden beyond class curriculum and into student affairs practices like meaningful discussions and planned community service activities, though this broadening is not without its limitations. One main limitation for any diversity-related initiative looks at the reverse of inclusion: when we identify with traits that contribute to how we see ourselves (such as race and gender), we not only align ourselves with those who are like us, but we also create fragmentation in society by encouraging exclusion from those who are not like us (Brown, 2002). This realization does not mean that diversity efforts should be halted; it simply means that administrators, particularly student affairs professionals who work closely with students, should be aware of possible negative effects of well-intended diversity efforts. Based on the interactive nature of interculturalism and its focus on dialogue among individuals, campuses might also watch for negative effects in some students simply based on the chance of their discussion or activity group. Dominant individuals in a discussion could heavily sway others with their dominant voices (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006).

Despite these limitations, the broadening of interculturalism does provide a foundation that helps student affairs professionals understand their role in the diversity development of the students with which they work. As diversity will undoubtedly continue to grow as a topic of great attention on college campuses, attention to how to deal with students and their diversity development will also undoubtedly grow. Yet even as new theories are created for addressing diversity, I believe the fundamental elements of interculturalism—dialogue among different groups and learning across cultures—will continue to be essential.

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