

Diversity in Higher Education: The Three Rs

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ABSTRACT. Research indicates that a diverse student body is beneficial for education. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation standards also include a commitment to diversity. In California, as well as in some other states, preferential treatment in admissions to bring about a diverse student body is against the law, which may be problematic for some universities (Golden, 2003). Many schools have struggled with this dilemma of developing diversity in the campus population. In this article, the authors examine diversity in the student body, and the role of recruitment, retention, and relationship building. The authors propose a conceptual model for successfully enhancing student diversity. They also present the implementation of the model developed at a California university and discuss the benefits of the study to the students as well as the employers.

Key words: AACSB, accreditation, diversity, higher education

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In the past couple of decades the debate about learning and knowledge has undergone a quantum shift. According to Bruffee (1993),

... many people now tend to agree that the world is undergoing profound change and that college and university education based on traditional, cognitive assumptions, sometimes in this context called "structuralist," no longer prepares students adequately to live in it. Because the most threatening issues in the world today are multicultural, our ability to communicate instantaneously and threaten massively one another's lives has made effective interdependence a necessity everywhere. (p. 172)

Educators everywhere have been attempting to come to grips with the new reality of the need for diversity, with mixed results.

Lately, for business schools, the pressure to adapt and change has also been coming from another direction—the premier accreditation agency, the AACSB (see Miles, Hazeldine, & Munilla, 2004 for a general discussion of the new AACSB standards). AACSB (2004) reaffirms its "commitment to the concept that diversity in people and ideas enhances the educational experience in every management education program" (p. 9).

The leading accrediting body for business schools recognizes that diversity is a complex concept, and that there are many facets to it. It does expect accredited schools to demonstrate

"commitment and actions in support of diversity in the educational experience" (AACSB, p. 9).

Although *diversity* is defined broadly in terms of providing exposure to multiple frames of reference and opinions, for most schools it boils down to socioeconomic and ethnic diversity in the background of the students (Judkins & LaHurd, 1999).

In 1996, California voters passed Proposition 209 that effectively banned affirmative action in that state (Schmidt, 1997). The 2003 Supreme Court ruling on a University of Michigan admissions case and other court decisions has not clarified the affirmative action protocol (Golden, 2003). Reconciling the mandate of the AACSB with state law has been a challenge for California campuses. At the California State University (CSU), Chico, the college of business has developed a model that is seen as an example of best practices for the entire campus.

Background

The makeup of the workforce in the United States has changed and employers are looking for college graduates who reflect that diversity (Gilroy, 2003). Unfortunately, business education has become less popular among minorities even as colleges and universities are devoting greater attention to the issue (Gilroy). Thus, while 23% of bachelor's

degrees awarded to Hispanics in 1989 were in business, that proportion had dropped to 19% by 1998 (Gilroy). Similarly, the numbers for African Americans dropped from 26% to 21%, while those for Native Americans dropped from 21% to 16% during the same period.

Because employers emphasized the diversification of business personnel they were unable to hire enough minorities despite aggressive recruitment efforts (Gilroy, 2003; American Association of Advertising Agencies [AAAA], 2004). This difficulty in hiring has caused major corporations like GMAC, Citigroup, and KPMG to form the Diversity Pipeline Alliance in an attempt to increase interest in management education and careers among students of color (Gilroy). The AAAA, frustrated at the lack of college recruits of color coming to member agencies, recently launched *Operation Success*. This program is designed to significantly increase ethnic diversity and inclusiveness in key operational areas of the advertising business.

Retention

A Pew study found that in the period from 1997 to 2000, Latinos had high college enrollment rates but low graduation rates (Rooney, 2002). The study found that Latino Americans were second only to Asian Americans when it came to enrolling in college, but were fourth behind Asian Americans, non-Hispanic White people, and African Americans when it came to completing college education. Even the Wisconsin Alliance for Minority Participation, supported by a \$2.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation, reported a retention rate of 20% among minorities at the University of Wisconsin (Chappell, 2004). Clearly, retention of students of color is a serious concern.

To deal with the challenges presented by these facts, employers are also attempting to increase the popularity of business education among students of color. They believe that "unless efforts being made to increase enrollments succeed, the future impact on corporate diversity could be devastating" (Gilroy, 2003, pp. 46–51). Thus, success in business education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is becoming an

increasingly important policy goal. It is in this context that business schools have been attempting to develop student profiles that reflect the population they serve. The problem for business schools is how to not only attract but also retain students of color. The fact that many of the students of color are also first-generation college students makes it even harder to retain them (Gilroy). A recent study by the U.S. Education Department found that such students are more likely to take remedial courses, to have trouble deciding on a major, and have lower grades, on average, than are students whose parents went to college (Schuman, 2005).

The Challenges

The challenges in the path toward creating and maintaining a diverse student body can be of many kinds.

1. The social infrastructure at a campus may not be able to support campus diversity goals. For example, in terms of housing on campus, students from diverse backgrounds create more challenges for housing advisors and administrators. The area community may have elements that do not share the campus diversity goals. This can be devastating to some, and may even lead to hate crimes. CSU, Chico has faced such issues.
2. With a relatively small group of minority students everyone knows everyone's personal business. The mistakes that students make as they mature tend to become known by everyone and are rarely forgotten.
3. Students who prefer to date within their own race have a difficult time in a school that lacks diversity.
4. Students may face financial obstacles of different kinds, with some of them sending their financial aid money to their relatives.
5. Old survival skills that may have worked well in the neighborhoods where some students grew up are not appropriate in the higher education setting.
6. There is a general lack of role models for these students.
7. Many of the students encounter a lot of internal noise and they are always wondering if their skin color is a factor in what people say and do.

A Conceptual Model

A large proportion of disadvantaged students as well as students of color entering college come with characteristics that are unique. Many of them are first generation college-goers and other students from lower socioeconomic strata and, therefore, have greater financial problems or have not been adequately prepared for the rigors and responsibilities of an AACSB-accredited business program (Schuman, 2005). Even after those obstacles have been successfully overcome, many students are still faced with a nagging question: Do I really belong here?

It is up to business schools to help inculcate a sense of belonging in these students that comes from their being integrated academically as well as socially. Without a sense of belonging, students are likely to feel alienated from their new surroundings and are likely to drop out at a higher rate.

A sense of belonging can be developed by a series of activities that provide academic as well as social integration for the students (see Figure 1). It is only when they feel part of the educational institution that they can be expected to want to stay there and participate in the educational process. In other words, the social and academic integration can lead to a greater sense of belonging and community that in turn may lead to a greater retention rate.

A significant aspect of the integration is collaborative learning. Professor Uri Triesman's experiment at the Berkeley campus of the University of California revealed that, through collaborative learning even students in remedial math and science were able to eventually reach A and B grade levels (Bruffee, 1993). Collaborative learning gives students a chance to work together when the stakes are relatively low, so that they can work more effectively when the stakes are higher. These collaborations in small groups can also lead to a greater feeling of community.

The Business Resource Center

In 1998, CSU, Chico college of business recognized a lack of diversity among its students. Determined to

The Pillars of the BRC: Recruitment, Retention, Relationships

The BRC staff at CSU, Chico has cultivated relationships with select high schools—some as far as 500 miles away. These relationships have helped in recruiting new students of color, through the favorable word-of-mouth communications from past students.

The BRC attempts to build community through leadership. Activities include representing the college at key university events, on-campus housing programs, informal faculty-student interactions, personal integrity forums, and community service. Opportunities afforded to students in the BRC are:

1. Leadership. The BRC student board of directors meets on a weekly basis. In addition to providing insights into recruitment and retention issues, the students also engage in professional development activities.
2. Housing. BRC Theme House is the on-campus residence for 13 first-time freshmen studying business. The residence hall is a true multicultural living and learning environment where the students develop lasting relationships while also forming an informal network of information and support.
3. Faculty–Student Interactions. Bowling tournaments provide an opportunity for students to interact with faculty members outside the classroom. Hiking trips offer the students the opportunity to understand the geographic, uniqueness of the service region while providing a relaxed atmosphere for one-on-one conversations. Retreats focus on the formation of personal values and academic integrity and provide a forum for former students to share their experiences in the business world. Meals together provide the opportunity for additional relaxed conversation and a shared sense of community.
4. Integrity. Open and honest discussions are conducted within the group and center around ethics, both personal and professional.
5. Community Service activities. BRC is guided by the principle, “When I begin to give back, I know that I

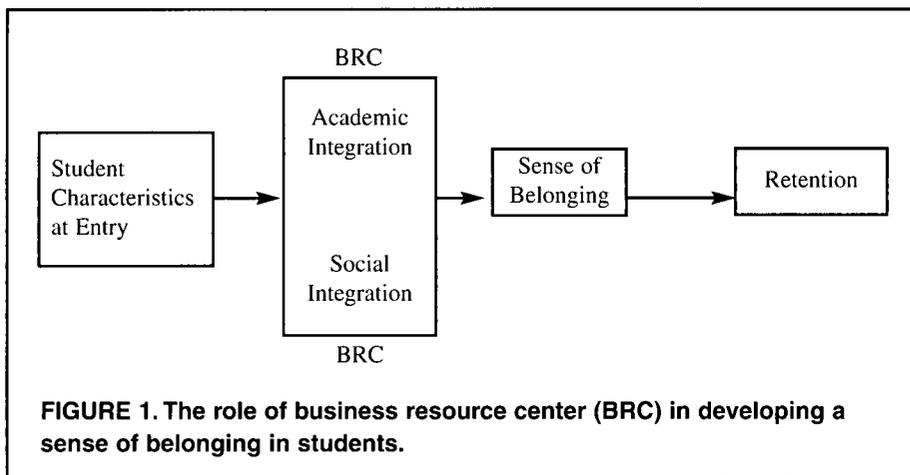


FIGURE 1. The role of business resource center (BRC) in developing a sense of belonging in students.

attract and serve a diverse student body, the college's administration established the Business Resource Center (BRC), a learning community with the mission of recruiting and retaining a diverse population of business students.

The BRC Program has been successful. According to data that we collected, the number of minority students enrolled in the college of business since 1997 has almost doubled. Enrollments of African American students have increased from 22 in Fall 1997 to 58 in Fall 2005, an increase of 164%, and Hispanic student enrollments in 2005 were 67% higher than they were 8 years earlier, going from 138 to 230. The number of students who were classified as Pacific Islanders increased from 12 to 31, an increase of 158% during the same 8-year period. The retention rate for African American and Hispanic students, the primary focus of the BRC, was 22 out of 25 (88%) at the end of the first academic year (Fall 2003 to the end of Spring 2004), and was 20 out of the original 25 (80%) at the end of fifth semester, Fall 2005. This compares favorably with the 20% retention rate reported elsewhere by Chappell (2004).

A uniqueness of the BRC is that it takes a multicultural approach to diversity, not an ethnocentric approach. That is, BRC activities involve as many majority students as they do minority students. Working collaboratively, the students begin to understand the dynamics of working in a true multicultural environment and are better integrated into the larger academic community.

The board of the BRC has representation from students of all ethnicities, including White students.

The BRC also has a distinct administrative advantage in that the center's founding director also served the college as an assistant dean for the college's student services and for the AACSB accreditation reports. The director was also a member of the college's administrative group, a group that oversees the operations of the college. This relationship allowed the rest of the college's administrators to remain updated on the BRC's progress and challenges. Although the assistant dean is no longer the director of the BRC he continues to represent that perspective in the administrative group.

The BRC works closely with other campus resources including financial aid, the educational opportunity program, and college preparatory programs to solve the traditional and well-identified obstacles. Where the BRC is effective is in helping students answer the question, Do I belong here?

If students do not have a strong belief that they belong in a university, programmatic solutions such as financial aid and the educational opportunity program can only provide temporary solutions. When students begin dealing with homesickness or a disappointing midterm score they often look for escape routes (Rooney, 2002). If there is a lack of other students in similar situations usually leads to even more difficult academic and social experiences as the students lose their commitment to academic and professional goals.

- belong.” Community service also allows for teambuilding opportunities.
6. Family. Getting to know the families of other students not only helps the students but also has sometimes led to siblings and cousins of past students enrolling at CSU, Chico.
 7. Mentoring. A mentoring program that links the BRC students with incoming freshmen provides the latter with a support system as well as role models.

For a residential campus like CSU, Chico the BRC also provides students with a feeling of having a home away from home. This helps foster a sense of belonging in the students. Having a physical infrastructure—a big room with sofas and six desktop computers—allows for a place where the students of color can mingle with White students who are also members of the BRC.

Outcome

The major metrics for the success of this model have been in the recruitment and retention rates. According to CSU, Chico records, the college of business enrollment of African Americans increased from 22 to 58, a 164% increase from Fall 1997 to Fall 2005. Hispanic students increased from 138 to 230 (67% increase), and Pacific Islander enrollment grew from 12 to 31 (158% increase). Overall, the number of students of color has almost doubled in the last 8 years, going from 265 to 481 (82% increase). During the same period the non-Hispanic White student population increased from 1216 to 1667, a 37% change. The retention rate for African American and Hispanic first time freshman students has also been well above the university averages. Over the five semester period (Fall 2003 to the end of Fall 2005), of the 25 African American and Hispanics first-time freshman that had enrolled in the college of business, 20 were still enrolled at the university, giving a reten-

tion rate of 80%. The comparable number for the 1,970 total freshmen at the university entering Fall 2003 was 70%. Similarly, for those starting Fall 2004 the university’s retention rate at the end of one year was 85% while it was 90% (52 of 58) for the African American and Hispanic freshmen. At the end of the third semester 81% were still enrolled, but comparable data for the university is not available. The high retention rate for African American and Hispanic students is particularly significant because many of these students are considered at risk and traditionally have had higher dropout rates than have other students.

Successful graduates have found placement with numerous prominent companies (e.g., Chevron Texaco, Hewlett-Packard, Pepsi Bottling Group, and Walgreens). One of the first graduates of the BRC at CSU, Chico became a staff advisor in the college of business undergraduate advising office and a member of the BRC board and is now the director of the BRC. The campus has now adopted the BRC as a benchmark program for the rest of the campus. Thus, whether examined quantitatively or qualitatively, the program has been successful in achieving its goals.

Conclusion

In order to prepare business students for the workplace of tomorrow, it is essential for the entire student body to be exposed to a diversity of ideas and people. The AACSB recognizes that importance and requires evidence of diversity for accreditation reviews. Some schools have difficulty in attracting and retaining a diverse student body. The successful experiment described in this study relates to recruiting and retaining students from underrepresented groups and provides a model for others. The primary focus of our effort is in providing a framework (recruitment, retention, and relationships) that can

facilitate the integration of the select students into the larger learning community. In the process students develop a work ethic and a sense of community. This sense of community helps engender a sense of belonging that prevents the at-risk students from dropping out, a problem that used to be a substantial concern in the past. The program also helps generate a reputation that helps attract future students.

NOTE

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