

Creating Diverse Communities

BY BRIAN ROSENBERG

Absent any easy way to measure the messy, nuanced work of education, colleges tend to rely upon the numbers. How many applications were received? What are the median SAT scores? What percentage of students graduate on time and (thanks to the Department of Education) what is their annual income?



So it is with the project of creating diverse communities on our campuses. How many students of color are enrolled? How many international students, and from how many countries? What is their rate of graduation?

All of these numbers are important. They should, however, be thought of not as the whole story, but as the opening chapter in a long and complex narrative. Enrolling a diverse student body, hiring a diverse group of faculty and staff members: these are necessary steps toward the goal of building diverse communities, but too often, I think, they are seen as ends in themselves.

Among the many lessons that might be learned from the recent wave of discontent among students of color and their allies is that simply bringing those students onto a campus is insufficient. Increasing their number, while critically important, is not in itself enough, a truth demonstrated by the fact that some of the most profound unrest can be found on campuses where the number of students of color has increased most dramatically.

Even good intentions are not enough, frustrating as this may be. Racism in overt and covert forms exists on college campuses, as it exists in all corners of our society, but I do believe that the leaders of most colleges and universities genuinely embrace both the educational importance and the societal value of creating diverse communities.

Yet we struggle. Without dismissing our progress and our successes, we must acknowledge that the pain and frustration felt by many people of color on our campuses are real. The sense of being within but not truly a part of a community is real. The anger is real. Those who dismiss these feelings as somehow immature or overstated are, I think, in error.

While there is no quick or easy way to build campus communities that are diverse, inclusive, and supportive, there are, in my view, best practices that will move those communities in the right direction. At minimum our efforts must be *intentional*, *pervasive*, and *visible*.

By *intentional* I mean that bringing people of color onto campuses that have historically been and largely remain white and expecting community just to form, as if by some spontaneous chemical reaction, is unrealistic. Even as we alter the mix of students we enroll, we need to ask, and attempt to answer, a range of difficult questions: that is, we need to have a plan. How will traditional, more homogeneous populations and newer, more diverse populations be helped in the effort not just to coexist, but to benefit from proximity? How should programming outside the classroom and teaching inside the classroom reflect and support this new group of students? How will we respond when things go wrong, as inevitably they will?

By *pervasive* I mean that the work of creating a diverse community must be shared by the entire community.

Perhaps the most common mistake made on our campuses is to designate responsibility for “diversity” to a single office or administrator and allow everyone else to go about business as usual. This reinforces the perception that diversity is a side-project rather than a central priority. While offices and administrators focused on multiculturalism play a crucial role, the responsibility for thinking about the implications of diversity must be distributed much more broadly among students, staff, and administrators, and—I would say especially—faculty. The majority of complaints I hear about unwelcoming environments relate to experiences in the classroom: the place most crucial to learning is sometimes the place where students feel most ill at ease.

And by *visible* I mean that leadership, mission statements, and symbols matter. Presidents especially must address the importance of having diverse campus communities, must highlight successes and acknowledge failures, must make decisions about resource allocation and strategic directions with diversity in mind. We have seen what happens when this is not done, or when it is done only in response to demands. Boards of Trustees, too, should underscore diversity both in their composition and in the priorities they communicate to the president.

None of this will provide a quick fix. Colleges and universities are embedded in a society whose challenges are deep and ongoing and from whose conflicts they will never be immune. But they—we—should aspire both to model that society at its best and to educate those who will improve it. This means doing all in our power to form communities that are both diverse and cohesive: to discover, in Lincoln’s famous phrase, “the better angels of our nature” at a time when so many seem to have abandoned the search.

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