

Building and Sustaining an Institution-Wide Diversity Strategy

By: Alvin Evans, [Edna Breinig Chun](#)

Evans, A., & Chun, E. (2007). Building and sustaining an institution-wide diversity strategy. *CUPA-HR Journal*, 58(1), 3-10.

Made available courtesy of the College & University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR): <http://www.cupahr.org/index.aspx>

*****© CUPA-HR. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from CUPA-HR. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. *****

Abstract:

How can educational leaders, human resource professionals and diversity practitioners create the dynamic strategies, structures and policies that will promote the inclusion of diverse and talented faculty and staff? What is the role of the human resource professional in the diversity change process? This article explores how to build the framework necessary for a diversity change initiative, how to drive the change effort, and the role of human resource practitioners in the planning and implementation of such an initiative.

Keywords: Higher Education | Faculty | School Administration | Diversity Initiatives | Human Resources

Building and Sustaining an Institution-Wide Diversity Strategy

BY ALVIN EVANS AND EDNA BREINIG CHUN

*Evans and Chun are co-authors of a new book, **Are the Walls Really Down? Behavioral and Organizational Barriers to Faculty and Staff Diversity.***

How can educational leaders, human resource professionals and diversity practitioners create the dynamic strategies, structures and policies that will promote the inclusion of diverse and talented faculty and staff? What is the role of the human resource professional in the diversity change process? This article explores how to build the framework necessary for a diversity change initiative, how to drive the change effort, and the role of human resource practitioners in the planning and implementation of such an initiative.

Introduction

Implementing an institution-wide diversity initiative in higher education is a major change initiative: it is neither quick nor simple. It requires systemic, prolonged and intensive efforts to facilitate structural and cultural change. In this process, the role of human resource practitioners is often overlooked, but is nevertheless essential in several important respects. Human resource practitioners are vital to the process of assessing and addressing organizational climate, developing strategies and approaches that will support the transformational change process and promoting institutional dialogue and professional development in support of diversity. In this respect, HR practitioners need to be able to identify behavioral and organizational barriers to diversity, design specific approaches to enhancing a culture of inclusion and ensure consistent administration of organizational policies.

Fundamental Requirements for Implementing a Diversity Change Initiative in Higher Education

Since higher education differs from other organizational environments in many significant respects, key contextual characteristics need to be taken into account when planning and implementing a diversity change initiative. The higher education workplace is comprised of distinct subcultures driven by differing norms, values and operating assumptions. Clear differences exist between faculty, administrators and staff in terms of roles, expectations and terms of employment. Other characteristics of the higher education workplace include shared governance, multiple authority structures, academic culture in which faculty hold tenure, and goal ambiguity (Kezar 2001).



ALVIN EVANS is associate vice president for Human Resources at Kent State University, where he oversees a broad range of functions including recruitment and staffing, labor relations and benefits. He has more than 20 years of experience in HR and served as director of Personnel for the Cleveland School District prior to coming to Kent State. He can be reached at aevans3@kent.edu.



EDNA BREINIG CHUN is vice president for Human Resources and Equity at Broward Community College. She has two decades of human resource leadership experience in higher education, including at public research universities in California, Oregon and Ohio. She is a frequent presenter on topics related to diversity at national and regional conferences. She can be reached at echun@broward.edu.

Essential elements of leadership practices that promote the potential for transformational change include a willing president and active support among senior administrators; visible action; commitment to change; collaboration among leaders across the institution; flexible vision; persuasive communication; a long-term orientation; the necessary professional development for the change process; robust design of goals and objectives; rewards; and development of support structures (Eckel & Kezar 2003; Kezar & Eckel 2002a, 2002b). Furthermore, leadership for diversity involves the practice of empowering individuals as change agents by ensuring that minority voices contribute to decision-making processes and by supporting the role of minority faculty in the governance process (Aguirre & Martinez 2002).

Planning a diversity change initiative requires intervention on the part of institutional leadership to ignite the forces of change, sustain momentum, reward innovation and establish inventive programs and structures. The diversity initiative must be broad-based in order to leverage the capabilities and talents of faculty, administrators and staff regardless of differences in demographics, departmental locations, disciplines and levels and types of positions (Brockbank 1999).

The phases of a diversity initiative demand unrelenting stamina and continuous effort to ensure that one phase seamlessly transitions into the next. Getting the initiative started means capturing the excitement of beginning the process and sustaining that excitement and inspiration throughout the long, slow process of change. Sustaining momentum involves quickly identifying those who are willing to “carry the standard” and visibly rewarding their efforts. Reward strategies are critical and implementing these strategies through both informal and formal processes can serve as a powerful motivational force.

Organizing Principles of the Diversity Framework

A common conceptual framework which captures the key elements of diversity will help guide the change process. To reach conceptual clarity, the framework for a diversity change initiative requires cross-functional, multilevel campus involvement and discussion. To conduct such discussions, human resource administrators need to actively consider how to address managing for diversity within the workplace and the concrete ways in which diversity is supported. Since, at best, such diversity discussions tend to be brief, abstract and without substance (Thomas 2001), a dynamic campus agenda coordinated by the collaborative efforts of key departments including human resources will necessarily draw upon the talents and resources of leaders and committed stakeholders in facilitating substantive dialogue.

In developing a conceptual framework for the diversity effort, several thematic elements can help shape the thought process. The matrix for a conceptual diversity framework reflects the following five organizing principles: (1) holistic and inclusive, (2) challenging the status quo, (3) recognizing the value of differences, (4) promoting organizational consistency, and (5) embracing complexity.

Holistic and inclusive. Diversity needs to be understood as a holistic phenomenon, embracing all facets of difference. From this perspective, diversity and difference are not synonymous, but diversity includes and encompasses differences and similarities (Thomas 1995).

Challenging the status quo. Implementation of a diversity change initiative may require respectful challenge to traditional ways of thinking and doing. As such, resistance to change can be expected.

Recognizing the value of differences. Awareness of the importance of recognizing the value of difference and the need for diversity is critical. In this respect, reaffirming the need for diversity examines the importance of diversity to institutional mission, success and excellence. Furthermore, this concept includes the self-recognition by women and minorities of the value of the differences that they bring to the organization (Thomas 1995).

Promoting organizational consistency. The diversity framework must be understood and implemented at all levels and within all subcultures of the institution. As such, the diversity initiative cannot be localized to certain strata of the organization, or to the leadership of one or two individuals. The ultimate aim of a comprehensive diversity initiative is to attain organizational consistency throughout all subcultures of the institution.

Embracing complexity. Diversity demands increased knowledge, education and growth to prepare individuals to understand its complexity. Administrative leadership, department heads and chairs, and managers can foster opportunities to advance diversity awareness and expand cultural competencies.

Driving the Diversity Change Effort

How can change permeate the multiple layers of organizational culture in higher education? Organizational culture can be described metaphorically as a complex hologram that reflects different angles of light illuminating unconscious beliefs, tacit assumptions and hidden cultures that provide shared but unwritten rules for behavior (Kilmann 1984). The metaphor of the hologram captures the existence of assumptions and attitudes which only become visible when exposed to the appropriate angle of light. Organizational culture, in fact, is driven by powerful phenomena that exist below the surface, have significant impact, are invisible, and often are unconscious (Schein 2004).



Experienced. Reliable. Personalized.

Integrated, web based, health and welfare benefits solutions

- Enrollment & Eligibility
- COBRA
- FSA, HRA, HSA
- Tuition Reimbursement
- Commuter
Transit & Parking
- Retiree
Billing
- Debit Card
- Insurances
Brokerage & Innovative Plan Design
- List Bill Reconciliation

“For more than twenty years, I have relied upon Crosby Benefit Systems for their expertise and personalized services in the areas of FSA administration, voluntary benefits, COBRA administration and more. Their top-notch staff is at the ready to meet our unique needs, even if it’s something never before done.

We highly recommend Crosby’s services to other institutions of higher learning.”

— Susan P. Glover, Director,
Human Resources Operations,
Bentley College

CROSBY
Benefits People

Crosby Benefit Systems, Inc.
www.crosbybenefits.com

27 Christina Street
Newton, MA 02461

617 928 0700
617 928 0001 fax



From this perspective, institutional culture can be understood as comprised of three layers: the top layer is the visible artifacts or processes, rules and structures; the second layer reflects “espoused values;” and the third layer is composed of underlying assumptions (Schein 2004).

Bringing about cultural change in higher education is a challenging and even daunting process. Cultural rigidity and inflexibility can make breaking through cultural strata to address underlying assumptions extremely difficult. Due to the fragmentation of the culture in higher education and the existence of multiple subcultures, readiness may vary widely among different units, areas and departments.

Perspectives on Change Strategies

Different theoretical perspectives address how systematic, organization-wide change can be implemented. The findings from research conducted in six institutions of higher education undergoing major change initiatives over a four-year period indicate that when strategies violate cultural norms or are culturally insensitive, they will not be successful (Kezar & Eckel 2002b). From this perspective, change strategies cannot be generalized or uniform, but instead need to be aligned with the culture.

Organizational Sensemaking

Organizational sensemaking is an overarching strategy that involves stakeholders, in a reciprocal and collective process, conceptualizing the change and its institutional impact (Kezar & Eckel 2002a). Through the process of sensemaking, individuals can alter their mental models and develop new meanings that are consistent with changed organizational realities (Kezar & Eckel 2002a).

From a practical perspective, Thomas (1996) identifies three critical tasks which can be linked to organizational sensemaking: (1) talking the talk — gaining conceptual clarity, (2) thinking the talk — internalizing the process through experimentation and initial application to daily realities, and (3) walking the talk — advancing to broad, in-depth application. In organizations that act without adequate conceptualization of diversity goals and processes, sustained institutional transformation will be difficult (Thomas 1996).

Tracks

Another theory for implementing change is to do so through tracks that can be deployed either sequentially or simultaneously (Kilmann 1984). This theory proposes that readiness is critical in shifting to the next strategy. In Kilmann’s analysis, these tracks include the culture track that lays the groundwork for mutual respect and trust; the management skills track that addresses management understanding of the complex issues and assumptions involved; the team-building track that allows team members or groups to identify and solve collaboratively the most difficult problems; the strategy-structure track that aligns structure and resources with strategic direction; and the reward system that ties rewards to performance and represents the most important track for an initiative’s success (Kilmann 1984).

Role and Task Alignment

In contrast to theories which first address cultural assumptions as fundamental to transformational change, other theorists identify what they call the “fallacy” of beginning with the knowledge and attitudes of individuals. This alternative approach argues that effective change is essentially based upon “task alignment” — focusing on the solving of concrete “business problems” through the reorganization of roles and responsibilities (Beer, Eisentat & Spector 1990). For this reason, each organizational department needs to be allowed to reinvent the wheel and find its own path to the new organization. These theorists assert that forcing change from the top only “short-circuits” the process (Beer et al. 1990).

Given the difficulty of changing behaviors and underlying attitudes, building the diversity effort through role and task alignment is an effective way to begin to increase ownership and build investment in results. Allowing ideas to “bubble up” rather than “trickle down” from the top creates a sense of engagement and greatly reduces resistance. Using the insights from this theory, human resource practitioners can identify departments or areas of the college or university which are successful and reward these visible role models in the diversity change process. Similarly, individuals who make a difference in the area of diversity through concrete role contributions need to be visibly recognized.

Although task and role realignment opportunities are certainly more limited in academic environments than in the corporate world, the idea of building involvement through responsibilities and roles has potential application in the higher education environment. For example, assignments as diversity coordinators, affirmative action coordinators or members of diversity councils, commissions or task forces substantially strengthen stakeholder involvement in the diversity change process.

Any or all of the change strategies listed above may work in concert. Balance among strategies, such as between cultural and structural strategies, is an important principle in effecting transformational change. Balance ensures that disequilibrium is not created by moving too quickly in one area, and the bundling of interrelated strategies allows them to be enacted simultaneously in nonlinear fashion (Kezar & Eckel 2002b).

How Can the Diversity Change Initiative Take Hold in the Higher Education Environment?

Four important observations crystallize how and where the diversity change initiative can take hold in the higher education environment. First, the diversity change initiative should be driven below the executive level by departments, areas and individuals through a process of constant innovation and experimentation. Second, successful diversity strategies take hold when originated by a relatively small number of change agents or units. This understanding builds upon Koch's (1998) 80/20 principle which states that, “a minority of causes, inputs or effort usually lead to a majority of the results, outputs or rewards.” In moving the institutional giant, a relatively small number of key stakeholders within the various organizational spheres of influence in the college or university can spearhead the change, develop and test innovative strategies and carry forward the diversity initiative. Third, the network of change agents that originate strategies needs to be heterogeneous in composition. It should include individuals in different types of positions, representing different viewpoints and backgrounds. Finally, pace, timing and readiness are critical factors in gauging when, how and where to introduce change.

In summary, launching the diversity change initiative involves pursuing multiple channels and strategies and keeping these in balance in order to address institutional readiness. These multiple channels include communication, training, structural changes, role assignments, policies and procedures and new approaches to rewards and recognition. Approaches to diversity change need to be generated throughout the university or college, at all levels, at all strata and within all subcultures. Roles, responsibilities and tasks related to diversity heighten the involvement and engagement of stakeholders. The process is interactive and collaborative and requires utilization of sophisticated research insights, sensitive and non-threatening approaches, and state-of-the-art tools.

The Road to Diversity Change: Organization Development Intervention Strategies

During the last 50 years, organization development (OD) has emerged as an avenue for transformational change by focusing specifically on culture and processes. As a starting point for reaching common conceptual understanding, organizational development intervention strategies can provide a window on the culture of the college or university. This window can be the “tipping point” for the change process (Gladwell 2000). Due to its complex and often decentralized environment, higher education seems particularly challenging in this regard. How can organizational development strategies be deployed in higher education with its multiple subcultures? Is this feasible or merely an organizational consultant's dream?

In recent years, a more specialized field called “multicultural organization development” (MCOOD) has emerged that specifically addresses conflicts which have arisen because of monocultural hierarchies and from the differential distribution of power (Chesler 1996). Although MCOOD models can take either a consensus or conflict orientation, consensus-driven models that do not explore conflict or challenge forms of subtle workplace discrimination may not lead to required change (Chesler 1996). Gauging which approach to use involves assessment of the particular culture, readiness and openness, and an analysis of the best way to build support in the culture as it exists.

Three prototypes of multicultural OD intervention strategies are: 1) the cultural appreciation strategy, 2) the inclusion strategy, and 3) the social justice strategy (Cross & Conklin 2003). These prototypes represent very different approaches to the issue of diversity. The *cultural appreciation strategy* addresses the importance of cultural competence in an increasingly multicultural society and links cultural appreciation to the business case for diversity. This approach focuses on skill-building for leveraging diversity and increasing individual flexibility and empathy. Since it does not involve discussion of social justice or values necessarily, the cultural appreciation strategy draws attention to the positive benefits of diversity, while minimizing resistance (Cross & Conklin 2003).

The *inclusion strategy* highlights the importance of inclusion at all levels of the organization and builds upon the added value that differences can bring in terms of competitive advantage, teamwork and work output (Cross & Conklin 2003). This strategy, like the first, approaches the issue of diversity in a more consensus-oriented fashion, and can draw on the wide variety of experiences of those who are not part of the mainstream.

The *social justice strategy* is a more confrontational and conflict-oriented approach which focuses on historical injustice and its manifestations through exploitation, marginalization, subordination and cultural imperialism (Cross & Conklin 2003). This strategy can involve conflict and may generate resistance, if not approached with sensitivity and attention to the research supporting the concepts used.

All of these approaches are simply starting points on the road to organizational learning. They can be utilized in a planned effort to reach common conceptual understandings on the issue of diversity; surface hidden and suppressed conflict; and generate creative strategies for moving forward. These diversity intervention strategies, in and of themselves, will not effect change, but can begin the process of thoughtful examination and discussion of issues.

In assessing the viability of these different approaches, educational leaders can expect some degree of defensiveness, denial and resistance. How does the organizational consultant charged with implementing such interventions anticipate and handle these reactions? An important observation in this regard is that no single group is monolithic. In this regard, Cross (2000) recognizes the importance of “white men as champions,” noting that just because white males are members of the dominant group, this does not mean that all have power, are accepted by the elite group or even have equal opportunities. Similarly, white women can share the attitudes and behaviors of the dominant group around race, and minority men can share the dominant group’s attitudes relating to gender (Cross 2000).

Diversity intervention strategies that begin with the participants’ own experiences, probe for understanding and engage the participants in discussion are more likely to minimize resistance and defensiveness. In addition, attention must be drawn to the systemic and social framework of racism, rather than adopting too individualistic a perspective that would describe particular persons as “racist” (Feagin & O’Brien 2003). Racism within the context of higher education must be understood in terms of prevailing social patterns and how these patterns have consciously or unconsciously become embedded in institutional culture (Feagin & O’Brien 2003).

Conclusion

In the process of institution-wide diversity change, human resource practitioners can play a significant role in identifying internal barriers to diversity, developing reward programs and institutional policies that support diversity, and facilitating meaningful cross-campus dialogue and organizational learning related to diversity. Furthermore, expertise in the design of programs, metrics, change strategies and organizational development approaches is essential for transformational change related to diversity.

As a result, HR is a logical strategic partner in the diversity change process, due to its close relationship with employees, understanding of workplace climate and culture, and responsibility for human resource-related policies and procedures. In all phases of a systemic diversity effort, human resource professionals can be proactive in forging collaborative alliances with diversity and affirmative action officers and other key stakeholders to plan and implement an institution-specific approach to diversity.

References:

- Aguirre, A. Jr. and R. Martinez. 2002. Leadership practices and diversity in higher education: Transitional and transformational frameworks. *The Journal of Leadership Studies* 8(3): 53-62.
- Beer, M., R.A. Eisenstat, and B. Spector. 1990. Why change programs don't produce change. *Harvard Business Review* 68(6): 158-166.
- Brockbank, W. 1999. If HR were really strategically proactive: Present and future directions in HR's contribution to competitive advantage. *Human Resource Management* 38(4): 337-352.
- Chesler, M.A. 1996. Strategies for multicultural organizational development. In E.Y. Cross and M.B. White (Eds.) *The diversity factor: Capturing the competitive advantage of a changing workforce*. Chicago: Irwin Professional.
- Cross, E.Y. 2000. White men as champions. *Diversity Factor* 8(3): 2-7.
- Cross, E.Y. and W.A. Conklin. 2003. You are the CEO: Which diversity intervention strategy will work for your organization? *Diversity Factor* 11(3): 4-13.
- Eckel, P.D. and A.J. Kezar. 2003. *Taking the reins: Institutional transformation in higher education*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Feagin, J.R. and E. O'Brien. 2003. *White men on race: Power, privilege and the shaping of cultural consciousness*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Gladwell, M. 2000. *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Kezar, A.J. 2001. *Understanding and facilitating organizational change in the 21st century: Recent research and conceptualizations* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports 28(4)). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kezar, A. and P. Eckel. 2002a. Examining the institutional transformation process: The importance of sensemaking, interrelated strategies and balance. *Research in Higher Education* 43(3): 295-328.

- Kezar, A. and P. Eckel. 2002b. The effect of institutional culture on change strategies in higher education: Universal principles or culturally responsive concepts? *The Journal of Higher Education* 73(4): 435-460.
- Kilmann, R.H. 1984. *Beyond the quick fix: Managing five tracks to organizational success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Koch, R. 1998. *The 80/20 principle: The secret to success by achieving more with less*. New York: Doubleday.
- Schein, E.H. 2004. *Organizational culture and leadership* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thomas, R.R. Jr. 1995. A Diversity Framework. In M.M. Chemers, S. Oskamp and M. Costanzo (Eds.), *Diversity in organizations: New perspectives for a changing workplace*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Thomas, R.R. Jr. 1996. *Redefining diversity*. New York: American Management Association.
- Thomas, R.R. Jr. 2001. Diversity tension and other underlying factors in discrimination suits. *Employment Relations Today* 27(4): 31-41.