Professional Practice in Diverse U.S Learning Institutions

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1. Introduction

Professional practice can be defined as the exposure of students in a practical environment in order to extend skills and knowledge in their particular field of study. There are a number of factors that make higher learning in the U.S. diverse. First, the U.S. community is composed of people from different cultures given the numerous immigrant communities present. Second, higher learning institutions offer scholarships to students from other countries forming the umbrella of international students. Finally, diversity can be looked at in the basis of sexual orientation including gender. With the advent of new laws that allow people of different sexual orientations to express themselves freely, the LGBTs also add to the pool of diversity in higher learning institutions. While the United States community depicts itself as entrenched in an antiquity of equivalent chances, institutionalized systems of discrimination limit the lifetime odds of marginal people in the U.S. (Aguirre & Martinez, 2003). A number of ideas have been put forth to bring out different concepts of professional practice in the area of diversity in U.S. higher learning institutions.

Inclusive Excellence

A paper put forth by the Association of American colleges and Universities (AAC&U) contributed in the advancement of an effective description of inclusive excellence. The definition involves four primary elements. One of the elements is "a purposeful development and utilization of organizational resources to enhance student learning" (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). By using the term organizationally, it means instituting a setting that challenges individual students to succeed scholastically at elevated levels and every associate of campus to supplement knowledge expansion and learning. This element brings out the practical aspect of education by use of the institution's resources. Another element talks about, "paying attention to the cultural differences learners bring to the educational experience and that enhance the enterprise" (Milem et al., 2005). This adds the aspect of different diversities to practicality in the process of learning and in an education institution. Finally, the element that involves welcoming a culture that engrosses its entire diversity in the provision of scholar and educational erudition culminates the importance of incorporating different diversities in a learning system to achieve the most effective learning experience. These elements present the positive impacts of diversity, organizational modification, and accomplishment gap in education to bring out professional practice in a learning setup.

Compositional Diversity and Learning

In the past three decades a number of reviews have been published to address the issue on how ethnic and racial diversity in higher learning institutions offers edifying reimbursements for undergraduates. one significant conclusion derived from the appraisals is that the motivation, education potential and vitality of an educational center are interrelated with what the student faculty, staff and body is composed of (Milem et al., 2005). A previous review had established that, "the distribution of individuals in particular organizational contexts plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of social interactions that occur in those contexts" (Kanter, 1977). From this, we can deduce that the interaction of local U.S. students with students from different backgrounds escalates with the increase in compositional diversity of the campus. Since compositional diversity involves proportional representation of different groups of people, it enhances the educational outcomes in not only the learning process but also equipping the students with a mentality of equality. The aspect of equality in the learning and practical environment makes the students get used to the culture. This good ethical behavior cultured in students reduces occurrence of racial discrimination cases even at a professional level.

Affirmative Action

The concept of affirmative action was introduced in the U.S. in the early 1960s to combat the pronounced problem of racial discrimination. In 1967 the concept was expanded to incorporate sex.

According to (Aguirre & Martinez, 2003), "the U.S. supreme court shaped the contemporary legal context for affirmative action in higher education through its decision in two cases".

University of California v. Bakke

Alan Bakke, a white male, filed a case against University of California for repudiating him a chance to study at Davis school of medicine two times. The school's policy stipulated the 16 slots out of 100 were reserved for minorities. The minorities would be compared amongst themselves and not with all the people who had applied (Aguirre & Martinez, 2003). However, Bakke had one of the highest grade points and higher than those of all the minorities admitted through the special admissions program. The judgment of California's Supreme Court accused the school of violating the "equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment" (University of California v. Bakke, 1978). This judgment prohibited the institution from putting race into consideration when admitting students in the future.

Adarand v. Pena

This was a case that involved a roads construction firm in Colorado, Adarand constructors accusing the Federal Lands Highway Division for racial discrimination in their subcontracting recompense program. This was a violation of the fourteenth amendment and thus unconstitutional (Adarand v. Pena, 1995). The Supreme Court claimed that the design of affirmative action law was in such a way that it escalates the involvement of minority groups in federal contracting. This would generate a structure of partialism in such a way that minority groups anticipated to be accredited privileged treatment (Aguirre, 2000). However, the notion that minority groups are disadvantaged, results to intentional discrimination of the whites. The two cases have molded an unwarranted framework for diversity programs in institutions of higher learning. One case is from a higher education setup while the other is from a working environment. This shows that there is a link between professionalism and learning. The systems used to discriminate students and workers are applicable when students are involved in professional practice. If there is a number of slots placed during admissions, its shows that the resources available in learning institutions are equivalent to these number of slots. Even after admission, there is discrimination in the people allowed to use resources for professional practice based on the different diverse people in higher learning institutions.

Bridging Institutional and Departmental Contexts

There are several themes that can be used to describe both the institutional and departmental contexts. Among these themes, professional networks, allies, and colleagues are the most pronounced. These issues together with the existence of scholar diversity, faculty education/professional/research improvement support initiatives, an administrative understanding of the significance of achievement sharing with others who are in the position to deliver institutional and departmental prospects for progression, and a management that supports them to create a positive institutional and departmental work environment (Turner, González, & Wood, 2008). With the lack of institutional/departmental collaboration to recruit, hire and retain students from different cultures in the diverse institutions the final outcome will be negative. Incorporation of all minority groups in the practical learning system reduces the negative effects brought about by classism, racism, and sexism.

National context

Bringing the issue of professional practice in the area of diversity in higher educational institutions to the national context is greatly predisposed by the legitimate perspective on affirmative action and where it applies. Under-representation of minority groups has been the most causative factor of failure of affirmative action policies. One theme that stood out from a research by the faculty of color in academe was research as an outlet. Students describe the challenges minorities face is because the research and procedures used in professional networks were not legitimate. The illegitimacy of these research works makes it difficult for minorities to blend in the work environment rendering the professional practice invalid. Furthermore, nationwide studies of income inequalities emphasize on consequences brought about by salaries on; exemplification of diverse faculty and difference in income by institution type, ethnicity and race.

Bridging National, Institutional and Departmental Contexts

In 2004, an Academic Personnel policy was adopted by University of California. Section II of the policy on "Appointment and Promotion" stipulated that, "teaching, research, professional, and public service contributions that promote diversity and equal opportunity are to be encouraged and given recognition in the evaluation of a candidate's qualification" (section II, 2002). This policy articulates that professional practice in higher education systems should be implemented in such a way that promotes diversity and equal opportunities for all. In 2005, the policy was revised and used as a system for all higher education institutes as a tool of value addition on faculty impacts towards efforts on diversity when shaping promotion, hiring and tenure verdicts. Students who failed in their tenure course were frequently deprived off mentorship to assist in their absorption into the learning institution or working firm. Conversely, those that were successful revealed that mentorship was a crucial stepping stone for them to be successful professionally (Turner et al., 2008). In historical literature of the research carried out by University of California, it is evident that segregation, exclusion and underrepresentation are still rampant in higher education institutions. This extends to when the minority students want to be exposed to a working environment in the school setup. Because there are people who are segregated, there is a group of students that don't take part in professional practice. These apprehensions combined with convincing myths and pipeline subjects in the recruitment and employing procedure, uphold an absence of diversity in the profession.

Racial Climates in Campuses

An article based on data collected from multiple institutions published qualitative study of racial climates (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The study was carried out in a sample composed of entirely black scholars. Among the different focus groups used to carry out the analysis, one was composed of start-up and moderately experienced professionals from student matters, multicultural matters and academic affairs per higher learning institute. Even from the start it was evident that the racial climate in campuses was quite intense as portrayed by the minority staff participants. There were only five white participants out of the forty-one professionals that participated. The study generated nine themes in campus racial climates. Some of the common realities gave ideas about professional practice in the area of diversity in these institutions taking part in the survey.

Theme (I): *Cross-Race Consensus Regarding Institutional Negligence.*

All the students from different races expressed their frustration about the hypocritical nature of the institutions' administrations. One of the students participating in a focus group commented, "the university has diversity plastered all over, but I am yet to see any evidence of it" (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Another student from Texas explained how he had grown up having never interacted with anyone from another race until he joined the higher learning institution. He asked, "why should I be expected to know how to do this on my own? And the university expects us to talk about something as sensitive as racism without helping us. This is actually unrealistic and unfair" (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The scholars required a platform where they would interact with peers from different races. This shows that higher learning institutions don't have resources that aid in preparing learners to work in a world that is characterized by diversity. Institutions need to avail professional practices that enable students of different races to interact so as to relieve the tense racial climate. All the students that participated in this exercise expressed their dissatisfaction about institutions' negligence in the educational system that would lead to understanding the racial climate, both outside and inside a higher learning institution more so, in professional practice.

Theme (II): *Self-Reports of Racial Segregation*

Participants in the focus groups were aware of the racial segregation in their institutions. They even had names for these segregation spaces like; fraternity row and "Jim Crow Row". One of the students admitted of being denied access to fraternity parties and other events. Some of these events were to prepare students for the future work places. The minorities being denied access would have a negative effect after they graduated. Most white students expressed their interest to interact with students from other races but did not know how. It was evident that if these students were given a practical platform they would interact more and at the same time prepare them for future work places.

Theme (III): *White Student Overestimation of Minority Student Satisfaction*

Leadership is one of the most significant professional practices while in school. In most cases the students admitted that all their student leaders were white. White students were designated since they were believed to have networked with the racial/ethnic minorities in the scholar societies they headed (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Since the majority white scholars remained content with the social atmosphere, they enormously presumed that the Latino, African-American and Native American students experienced the schools in the similar manner. This attitude makes the situation more or less the same with minority students not having the chance to practice leadership in higher learning institutions.

Tokenism

Tokenism is where a certain institution or company admits or employs a person from the minority groups so that they cannot be criticized for any form of discrimination. The underrepresentation of minority groups in higher learning institutions can be attributed to tokenism. Instead of being treated as any other student, they are regarded tokens. Since this is prevalent in institution and working environments, it has extended in professional practice, which is part of the learning curriculum. Since there is a threshold in the number of people required to use school resources for professional practice, only a small number of people in the minorities are selected to act as tokens. According to Kanter, "tokenism contributes to the enhanced visibility of underrepresented groups, the exaggeration of group differences, and the alteration of images to fit the existing stereotypes" (Kanter, 1977). In addition to the small number of minority students involved in professional practice, social stigma affects the minority students as a result of underrepresentation. According to (Barden, 2000), "Racial entitlement and tokenism rob blacks off the intellectual and professional ability to overcome the stamp of inferiority". Statistics show that the number of black people holding high-level corporate jobs is less than 1%. The root cause of this statistic is the underrepresentation of minority students in professional practice workshops in higher learning institutions. The concept of tokenism is also shown in the underrepresentation of minority groups in certain courses that reflects the job market. The article goes further to state, "instead of the old rule that limited blacks to assigned positions and restricted admission to white institutions of higher learning, the rule now is to embrace tokenism as the polar star of racial independence" (Barden, 2000). Evidently, tokenism impedes professional practice in higher learning institutions and consequently affecting them in the future corporate world.

Notion of Individual Merit

The notion of individual merit has existed since the inception of the United States and has been intertwined with racial privilege. Individual merit can be described as the principle act of recognizing and rewarding individual effort in a learning or working environment. From previous ideas, it has been noted that there is a particular number of slots set aside for minority groups in all systems incorporated in the learning institutions. The number of slots reserved for minority students is usually less than 15%. If the rewarding mechanism is based on the same mechanism, the probability of a minority being rewarded is lower compared to the majority whites. Rewards contribute a great deal to the achievements of a student while in campus. They contribute in the selection process for one to be eligible for some professional practice workshops. Therefore, the minorities are disadvantaged in such selection systems thus getting minimal professional practice while in higher learning institutions.

Conclusion

Diversity and professional practice cannot be separated when it comes to higher learning institutions. There are numerous ideas published in countless journals and books about this subject. Some of the ideas discussed in this paper include: inclusive excellence, affirmative action, compositional diversity, tokenism, and individual merit. The essay also goes ahead to give policies and cases about the same in various contexts including; departmental, institutional and national. Most of the ideas show how racial/ethnical discrimination in higher learning institutions has hindered professional practice for diverse cultures in institutions. The ideas also show how the institution administrations try to hide the impacts of racial discrimination when the minority students try to expose themselves to the working environment. Certainly there is much needed to be done in higher learning institutions to make all the students, whether white or minority enjoy equal benefits.

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