

Need for Collaborative and Evidence-based Culture for DEI Commitment at Higher Ed

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Introduction:

This conceptual paper will holistically discuss diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the context of higher education institutions in the USA. We will delineate the DEI-related planning and policies higher education institutions are undertaking, the existing challenges and provide recommendations on the best practices. The landscape of Higher education institutions is more diverse now than a decade ago. The shift is more evident among students than faculty and staff. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), college attendance increased among every racial minority group between 1976 and 2018. We can witness an upward movement in the socioeconomic diversity among students; Pell Grant recipients nearly doubled within the last two decades. The increase in student diversity over the past decades is indicative of the enduring success of the U.S. higher education system. This change also caters to the changing values, priorities, and needs of 21st-century College students. The evolution should be attributed to revising the missions and visions of the higher education institutions, systemic policy changes, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) becoming the strategic priority of institutions and student activism.

Higher education-related scholars have generated a robust body of evidence on the significance of DEI on college campuses. "Research has shown that diverse groups are more effective at problem-solving than homogeneous groups, and policies that promote diversity and inclusion will enhance our ability to draw from the broadest possible pool of talent, solve our toughest challenges, maximize employee engagement and innovation, and lead by example by setting a high standard for providing access to opportunity to all segments of our society." - President Obama, October 5, 2016

Even after the steady increase in diversity, U.S. colleges and universities face several challenges with DEI.

Conceptual Framework

The proposition that guides the flow of the paper is that institutions need to deepen their DEI capacity to optimally facilitate the interplay between internal and external constituents that disrupt inequitable policies and practices and seek to create conditions for minoritized student populations to thrive. Consequently, this study draws on the conceptual framework of LePeau's (2015) Cycle of Continuous Commitments to Diversity and Inclusion. LePeau (2015) contextualized barriers to a partnership that are both seen and unseen in Academic Affairs (A.A.) and Student Affairs (S.A.) organizational cultures. LePeau argued that the normative separation

between the two is related to "the premise that A.A. and S.A. are rewarded differently, that is, more often faculty are rewarded for working in isolation through individual scholarly pursuits for the tenure and promotion process while S.A. is rewarded for working collaboratively" (p. 99). LePeau's (2015) model points to the need to intentionally explore how institutional subcultures (whether it be academic affairs student affairs) related to the prospect of realizing an organizationally pervasive commitment to DEI (Rall et al., 2020) facilitated by the development of collaborations across subcultures. Another model that guided the paper is Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM). DDDM is a process for deciding on a course of action based on data. As data systems and technologies have become more accessible and interactive, it has become easier to use data to inform decision-making. DDDM can move an organization toward an evidence-based culture focused on the future. It promotes decisions based on data, experimentation, and evidence rather than opinions or intuition.

Based on the framework, this paper will point to the need for data governance in terms of DEI at higher education institutions and intentionally explore how institutional subcultures (whether it be academic affairs student affairs) related to the prospect of realizing an organizationally pervasive commitment to DEI (Rall et al., 2020) facilitated by the development of collaborations across subcultures.

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