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Winter 2016

Racial/Ethnic Minority Students

Diversifying Diversity

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By Mark Toner



Photo: Whitman College (WA).

Even as higher education continues to diversify, the meaning of what true diversity means continues to evolve.

When Diana Natalicio became president of The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) in 1988, conversations revolved around one set of numbers: SAT and ACT scores.

Soon the attention shifted to another set—those showing the stark difference between the demographics of the student body and the Paso del Norte region the campus overwhelmingly draws from.

“They didn’t match,” said Natalicio. With just under half of UTEP’s student body identifying as Hispanic, a closer examination of incoming students identified disproportionate numbers coming from more affluent and less diverse high schools. The response from other schools was “usually something like their students really weren’t college material,” she said.

In response, UTEP took a “very intentional and hard-driving” approach to changing perceptions throughout the community, Natalicio said. The university targeted outreach to high schools and communities where few students attended college, forged coalitions with K–12 districts and the region’s community college, and even addressed perceptions in its own teacher preparation program, which produces most of the region’s educators. Previously, the region’s educational institutions had been in “a closed loop,” Natalicio said. “We spent more time blaming each other for the weaknesses in the overall community.”

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As higher education aims to reflect an ever-wider diversity of students, faculty, and leadership,

- ▶ what successful practices can it look to scale up? What mistakes can it learn from? What does a realistic road map for more representative diversity look like?

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An oft-cited model for diversity efforts, UTEP today calls itself the largest Hispanic-majority university in the nation. But to Natalicio, the more significant result is that the institution's demographics now mirror those of its region, with Hispanics making up nearly 80 percent of the student body.

"We look like El Paso today. This was a big, bold goal in the 1980s," Natalicio said. But as demographic shifts continue across the country, colleges and universities everywhere are confronting a future that looks very different from the current compositions of their student bodies and faculties.

"As a country, we have to understand that the new America is a very exciting place," said Gail O. Mellow, president of LaGuardia Community College (LCC) in New York. "It's here for us, and it will be everywhere—and you have to embrace it and think about how you get ready for that."

While policies and practices at colleges and universities have shifted as a result of changing times and the courts—even as the Supreme Court prepares to take yet another look at admissions policies during its 2015–16 term—virtually all institutions are making efforts to accommodate a more diverse pool of incoming students. Even the most selective institutions are redoubling efforts to ensure that their faculties and students are more representative; at the same time, the concept of inclusion has grown to embrace not only race and gender, but also sexual orientation, age, and disability.

"We're increasingly in a diverse, complex world," said Benjamin D. Reese Jr., president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE). "One of the both exciting and challenging parts of the academy is that in a very appropriate way we've expanded the definition."

But it's equally clear that the higher education sector has quite a way to go. A "leaky pipeline" has prevented a broader range of students from translating to a fully diverse academy. Research confirms that even when controlling for academic achievement in high school, minority students still attend selective institutions at lower rates than their white peers. Media reports of troubling incidents such as fraternity members singing racist chants remind us that our institutions, like our culture writ large, haven't fully entered the post-racial era. And the recession hit low-income students, including many minorities, the hardest at a time when postsecondary degrees have never been more important for breaking into the middle class—and staying there.

The complexity and diversity of higher education itself—the types of institutions, the regions they draw from, and the policy or legal landscape in which many now operate—makes addressing these challenges more difficult. But as with so many other elements of strategic planning, savvy leaders are eschewing one-size-fits-all solutions to find ways to meld their institutions' missions with the changing face of the communities they serve.

"The biggest challenge for all of us is to define ourselves and not allow others to define us," Natalicio said.

CHANGE AGENTS ON CAMPUS

To get a sense of the centrality of diversity in higher education today, wander around the administrative building on any given campus. Positions that once carried titles like "minority affairs director" and "affirmative action officer" often now have a new name—chief diversity officer—and a higher rung on the organization chart.

"In the early years of this role, there was more of a focus on race and gender to the exclusion of other

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ACE President Molly Corbett

Broad focuses on the current

> state of diversity in academe, the

identity characteristics,” said NADOHE’s Reese, who is vice president of institutional equity and chief diversity officer at Duke University in North Carolina. “Diversity wasn’t seen as critical to the life of the entire college or university or essential for all students.”

Today, however, it’s an imperative—and focused equally on inclusion, often under the aegis of preparing students for the complex world beyond the campus. For example, after years of debate, this spring the faculty of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) approved a mandatory diversity class for all students, which will be offered starting in 2017. “Globalization in the workplace and society demands that graduates of UCLA be effective in understanding issues surrounding diversity, value the impacts of diversity in their environments, and develop the cultural competency to interact in these increasingly diverse work and social environments,” states a summary of arguments in favor of the class.

Chief diversity officers (CDOs) have played a growing role in such changes over the last eight to 10 years, according to Reese. In much the same way that technology leaders have shifted from the back office to C-level roles, CDOs now often sit on senior leadership teams, focusing on roles ranging from admissions and hiring to crisis management, curriculum, and overall campus climate. They also help infuse similar values in the rest of the leadership team, a trait that LaGuardia’s Mellow argued is critical. “You really have to hold that value deeply for every single one of your reports,” she said.

NADOHE approved the first professional standards for the CDO role in late 2014. The standards for the 500-member organization stress the importance of conceptualizing, communicating, and describing the benefits of “equity, inclusion, and diversity to the broader educational mission of higher education institutions.” They are already being used by internal search committees and external firms in hiring, according to Reese.

“Fundamentally, CDOs are institutional change agents,” the standards conclude, and Reese pointed to the broader role they play in ensuring that campuses remain conducive to teaching and learning as their compositions continue to change.

“What are the appropriate models for enhancing collaboration between people whose disciplines, perspectives, viewpoints, races, and genders differ?” Reese asked. “These are things that go beyond just numbers and categories.”

A WIDER DIVERSITY

While most estimates of the point America will become a minority-majority nation hover around 2050, it’s already a reality for educators. The 2014–15 academic year was the first in which minorities made up the majority of students in K–12 public schools, a landmark shift which is on its way to higher education, even as institutions face a shrinking pool of traditional students.

According to a national survey of undergraduate admissions and enrollment management leaders conducted by ACE in 2014–15, 60 percent of the most selective institutions consider race in admissions. Three of the five diversity strategies that colleges and universities use most often are in the areas of student outreach and recruitment, the report said. Even traditionally diverse campuses are finding themselves shifting in the face of new realities. Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), for example, are targeting more Hispanic, Asian, and international students as the percentage of African American undergraduates attending them decreases.

challenges we still face, and the nuts and bolts of making comprehensive diversity a reality.

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To address its own pool of underrepresented students, UTEP created a two-tiered admissions system. Conditional enrollees were required to participate in a series of activities, including advising and financial literacy. “What we’ve found is that if [they are] given an opportunity to succeed and they adhere to the plan we provide, they succeed and go on to graduate,” Natalicio said. “These are students who most people would have considered far too great a risk. Their lives have proven that making a bet on them was not foolish at all.”

Granted, UTEP is located in a majority-minority region—a context that is increasingly common but not yet universal. That doesn’t mean, however, that institutions in less-diverse areas don’t have other options.

LCC’s Mellow often makes a modest proposal to institutions seeking greater diversity: Look to community colleges, and create pathways to help students transfer. “That’s where the diversity really is,” she said, “If we think of ourselves as an ecosystem rather than about getting the best rating from U.S. News & World Report, you have to come to the community colleges.”

All institutions need to rethink the importance of measures like SAT and ACT scores that matter more to rankings than to the next generation of students, according to Natalicio. “You’ve got to be willing to not allow those prestige metrics to get in your way—and they will,” she said. “You’ve got to constantly bring them back to the reality of twenty-first century higher education in the United States.”

AIMING HIGH

The push for diversity hasn’t escaped the most selective institutions in the nation. Harvard University (MA) achieved gender parity in junior faculty hires for the first time in 2014–15, and earlier this year, Brown University (RI) pledged to double its proportion of underrepresented minority faculty members in a decade—a pledge that is audacious by design, according to Liza Cariaga-Lo, vice president for academic development, diversity, and inclusion.

“One strategy is not simply to assume this will happen,” she said. As part of a broader strategic plan, Brown “really put a stake in the ground by being intentionally concrete for setting goals for ourselves for the next decade, not just in terms of addressing diversity in terms of compositional diversity, but an academic environment that addresses these issues,” she explained.

As more and more women and underrepresented groups entered the academic pipeline, the assumption was once that they would eventually change the composition of the professoriate, Cariga-Lo said. “We have systems that in many ways weren’t designed to capture the broad group of scholars we are seeking now,” she said. “People need to be mentored, people need resources, and they need to see the professoriate as an exciting field.”

To that end, Brown is sponsoring conferences for young academics in underrepresented disciplines and creating a fellowship program targeting recent PhDs from diverse backgrounds to support their early-career research so they can be more competitive for senior-track positions—either at Brown or elsewhere. “It’s about creating a critical mass not just for our institution, but the academy as a whole,” Cariga-Lo said. “We can’t just be building the pipeline; we have to ensure that they have the supports to ensure they continue.”

Mellow believes that support must come from the top. “Presidents have to become much more active in becoming champions for faculty,” said Mellow, who personally interviews every new faculty member hired

at LCC. “If you don’t have a culture where faculty are supported and heralded and embraced as being central to your mission, you aren’t going to build a diverse faculty.”

She also urges leaders to take the long view. “A good college president is a steward,” Mellow said. “Don’t start thinking about diversity when you do an advertisement for a faculty member—you start when you take in your freshman class.”

CHANGE AT THE TOP

While most institutions are actively working to build more representative student bodies and faculty, fewer are preparing for another key demographic shift—the new leadership that will replace the large numbers of retiring presidents in the coming years.

The numbers are staggering—by the end of this decade, nearly 75 percent of community college presidents are expected to retire, according to a 2012 report by the American Association of Community Colleges. “We need to start thinking about talent development and management in higher education very differently,” said Lynn M. Gangone, ACE’s vice president for leadership programs. “We’re not going to diversify if we’re working off old models of identifying and hiring.”

One strategy is looking within. “We rarely think about our own personal successors,” said LCC’s Mellow, pointing out that CEOs of companies of similar sizes often identify and groom multiple leaders to potentially take their place when the time is right. “I don’t think we do enough as presidents to say, ‘There are two or three people on my campus who are ready to take over,’ and get them thinking about it. If they grew up in your institution, they’re probably a good fit.”

To that end, ACE’s leadership development programming starts at the department level and includes offerings targeted at women and both men and women of color. “We have always had this notion of the pipeline from the department chair to someone who wants to advance to the presidency,” Gangone said. ACE has also worked with a new group of LGBT presidents that is offering leadership development programming of its own, she said.

It’s also often argued that nontraditional candidates from outside academia will be needed to address the looming leadership crisis—and that could benefit diversity efforts if sufficient support is given to help them navigate the academy, according to Gangone. “Disruptive change is happening across higher education,” she said. “In order for us to lead in this kind of an environment, we have to be able to look at how we’re identifying the candidates who can manage these complex institutions.”

FORWARD THINKING

At all levels, it’s crucial to rethink the ways in which institutions reflect the widening diversity of students, faculty, and leadership. “Whatever mission you have as a university, as a president you have to think about the ways in which you provide opportunities for individuals to come into your environment to be able to fully participate in that mission,” Brown’s Cariga-Lo said. “All these individuals require opportunities and resources on an ongoing basis that allow them to do their best work.”

It’s a more nuanced approach to diversity that reflects our changing culture. “Saying you have to find a person of color is trite—it’s dismissive,” Mellow said. “It’s a deeper thing about where America is today. It’s about being a culture that embraces difference and defines difference as the reason that we’re good.”

Mark Toner is a freelance writer based in the Washington, DC area.

Learn more about ACE's Positions and Activities Around [Racial/Ethnic Minority Students](#)

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