
Regional

There is proof diversity makes colleges better

Since the time of the Civil Rights movement the issue of diversity has been widely discussed in academia. First it was considered that institutions of higher education should increase the participation of minorities of both faculty and students as a matter of social justice.

Then came the legal aspect of increasing diversity when the concept of affirmative action was introduced in the early 1960s. After President John F. Kennedy issued an executive order in 1961 that required not to "discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of race, creed, color, or national origin" and "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin."

President Lyndon Johnson then added "sex" as one of the considerations for affirmative action in another executive order in 1967. When these approaches were legally challenged, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Grutter v Bollinger* (2003) ruled that educational institutions may use a narrowly tailored consideration of race as a factor when admitting students.

Despite all this, there has always been the suspicion in some quarters that diversity does nothing to improve the quality of any organization. However, a number of works published in the last few years show otherwise.

First the concept of diversity has been expanded not only to areas of age, disabilities and sexual preferences, but also when it comes to life experiences that provide different capabilities when it comes to solving an institution's problems.

For example, a department of engineering that has

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four faculty members who are white, come from college-educated middle class families, and who graduated from Georgia Tech – one of the prime engineering schools in the country – gains little diversity when hiring a minority candidate with exactly the same background. A better choice, some argue, would be to hire someone who is also a minority but who comes from a lower socioeconomic class, or a first-generation college graduate from a lesser-known institution. Such a candidate would have experienced a number of life events that would allow for greater understanding, and empathy for, students with similar backgrounds.

This has led to the concept of seeing people as "toolboxes," with life experiences providing different necessary tools. Based on our own experiences, we all have different capabilities. For example, if you are running a large building you need electricians, plumbers, computer technicians, etc. Each one of those professionals will need a different "toolbox" of experiences and capabilities to solve different problems. The more diverse those toolboxes, the more likely you are to have a team really capable of solving any kind of problem.

This phenomenon was proven mathematically in a 2004 paper that appeared in the "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences." The authors concluded that "the diverse group almost always outperforms the group of the best by substantial margins." Many

organizations have now adopted these views in order to become more effective.

Other studies have shown that, among other things, ethnically diverse companies are 35 percent more likely to outperform their competitors, that companies with such diversity are 75 percent more likely to have a marketable idea implemented and 70 percent are more likely to see their organization capture a new market.

Because of these benefits, many companies – particularly in the tech sector – have worked hard to increase the level of diversity among their ranks. Given the complexity of the social, economic, and political problems of today, many governmental organizations, including the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency, have redoubled their efforts to recruit personnel from highly diverse college campuses.

But while government and industry are turning to diverse college graduates to improve their performance, colleges and universities themselves haven't done very well in their own efforts toward diversity. Despite accusations of being too politically correct and "too liberal," educational institutions are still places of racial and gender discrimination, and the numbers speak for themselves.

According to a study by the American Council on Education, the participation of people of color in leadership positions in institutions of higher education is decreasing – even at predominately minority-serving institutions. The American Association of University Professors surveyed the salaries of faculty members at 1,156 postsecondary institutions and found that almost all of them pay females less than males by

about a margin of 10 percent. This disparity in salaries is particularly true for the upper echelon of academia: full professors. Further, women only make up 46 percent of assistant professors, 38 percent of associate professors, and 23 percent of full professors, despite the fact that 60 percent of all postdoctoral students, the main pipeline for college professors in this country, are women.

Part of the problem has been the false belief that by placing a diversity statement in job advertisements indicating that an institution follows affirmative action rules that minorities will flock with applications. In fact, except for a few individuals of color who graduate from Ivy League institutions, most of them tend to be overlooked. Another reason that we have difficulty in recognizing is the inherent bias we humans have against people who do not look like us.

In a paper authored by Harvard professor Robert Putnam in the journal "Scandinavian Political Studies," he showed that "In ethnically diverse neighborhoods (...) trust (even of one's own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer."

Until we recognize that inherent biases are part of the human condition, that racism and sexism is still alive in our society, and that to overcome those issues we need more than laws and good intentions, we will never achieve the goal of making of our institutions of higher education a true representation of the increasingly diverse society in which we live.

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