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Building and Implementing a
Relentless Diversity Change Process**

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Overcoming the Brutal Facts: Building and Implementing a Relentless Diversity Change Process

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The cultural DNA of colleges and universities is different from corporations or even other non-profit organizations in a number of fundamental ways.¹ Where most corporations have a clear financial goal of increasing profits, colleges and universities pursue research, educational and service goals that often fly in the face of the financial bottom line. They use accounting processes, hire talent and have many of the same functions as any corporation, but the organizational culture in which these dynamics are nested is often anarchical, political, highly symbolic and steeped in a confusing and long-standing tradition of shared governance.

The unique nature of college culture, fostered by a deep sense of ownership and control that faculty, administrators and students feel over their institutions is uncommon in other types of organizations. The result is a nearly intractable culture that is often times slow and resistant to change, whether the domain of the change is diversity or something else. With all too much frequency, high profile and institution-wide diversity plans are quickly forgotten or abandoned as the *brutal facts* of institutional culture short circuit top-down edicts from the president or provost.² To successfully lead campus diversity efforts, institutions must clearly address the brutal facts — organizational dynamics — which are at the crux of why diversity plans fail.

If our diversity achievements are to be more than symbolic then we must address and overcome each of these facts and relentlessly approach the diversity implementation process with a focus on real change and results. In a recent article I coauthored on organizational change and diversity,³ my co-authors and I outlined seven brutal facts:

1. Failure to conceptualize diversity work in terms of organizational change and shifting the institutional culture;
2. Resistance to the logic that diversity is fundamental to excellence;
3. Low levels of meaningful and consistent support from senior leadership;
4. Failure to allocate sufficient resources to the process of change;
5. Lack of a comprehensive and widely accepted framework to define diversity and track progress;
6. Lack of accountability systems and means of getting individuals engaged in the change process at all levels;

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7. Lack of leadership and infrastructure to guide and facilitate the change journey and provide leadership to campus diversity efforts at all levels of the institution.

In this article, I will address the brutal facts and recommend ways to overcome them.

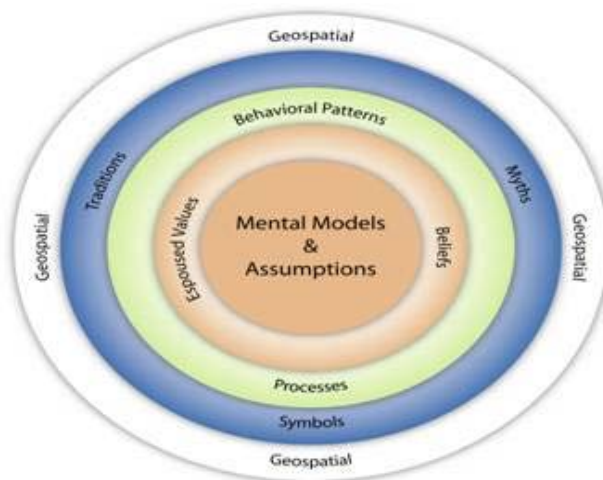
Brutal Fact 1

A failure to conceptualize diversity planning and implementation as a broad-based change project that centers on shifting the institutional culture

When we desire to implement a new university-wide information technology system like People Soft or SAP, we strategically allocate resources, hire implementation specialists to develop a change-management plan, establish metrics to track progress and implement the plan with a well-mobilized effort. However, when implementing a new vision for diversity, we rarely follow such a rational implementation process. Even if we did, diversity unlike software implementation efforts, does not have a beginning, middle and comfortable end point. Instead, it is an evolving and organic process in which one change may catalyze another in unexpected ways that may never truly be complete. To quote from an American Council of Education monograph, "real change means there is no point in time when everyone can declare a victory and go back to normal."⁴ Real change is about consistently engaging in the individual and organizational work necessary to change the representation, climate and culture of an organization.

The long-term success of college diversity initiatives centers on the institution's ability to provide a road map for shifting the organizational culture and systems in ways that focus on intentionally unfreezing, moving and refreezing the culture.⁵ Whether diversifying the profile of our student bodies, establishing seed grants to spur curricular innovations, supporting ethnic-specific student organizations, funding a minority-focused outreach or hosting a faculty development institute on diversity, the focus of each of these efforts is the cultural transformation of institutions that were in many ways built to serve the nearly all white male student populations for whom they were founded.

Figure 1. Adaptation of Schien's 1985 Model of Organizational Culture [7](#)



Institutional culture is multilayered, ranging from the pictures and signs that hang on the walls at the geospatial level, to the deep level of embedded values, beliefs and assumptions that guide the behavior of students, faculty, staff and administrative leaders (see Figure 1).⁶ It is easy to change the pictures in our brochures and web sites, but these changes touch only the

surface of institutional culture. To create an inclusive and excellent environment for everyone, we must build new structures, systems and mental models that create powerful understanding of how diversity is part and parcel to institutional excellence.

Brutal Fact 2

Resistance to the logic that diversity is fundamental to institutional excellence

At the heart of any diversity change project is a focused attempt at shifting the mental models and assumptions that individuals hold about issues of diversity that rest at the center of institutional culture. This means reflecting upon and talking about individual's perceptions of the world and the ways in which power and privilege govern reality.⁸ By participating in this individual work of exploration and questioning, people gain greater potential to make individual contributions to the diversity change process.

This personal work must center on examining deep-seated assumptions. For example, the assumption that embracing diversity is antithetical to quality or that:

- racism, sexism and homophobia don't inhibit the presence and success of certain groups.⁹
- white men are the victims of "reverse discrimination" or conversely that poor whites are not relevant to future discussions of access and equity.
- the presence of diversity means lowering admissions requirements defined nearly singularly as standardized test scores.
- minority and women faculty are hired into university slots only to fill diversity or affirmative action "quotas" and set-asides
- in terms of teaching, learning and research, the introduction of issues of race, ethnicity, gender and other "disruptive" topics, weakens the curriculum and represents inferior scholarship.¹⁰

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Lastly, and quite commonly, we must challenge the belief that the presence of diversity-targeted services and programs divides the campus environment by creating separate spaces for students from ethnic and racially diverse backgrounds.

Diversity plans and goals help our students, faculty, staff and executives reconsider these assumptions and embrace a new tradition of what the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) refers to as *Inclusive Excellence*. From this perspective, excellence is defined as more than test scores and research grants. Excellence is defined by how well our systems, structures and processes meet the needs of all students, faculty and staff once they are hired or enrolled.

Hence inclusive excellence exists when our environments are diverse and academic support systems are in place to assist first-generation college students and minorities, who may have lower test scores, to obtain a degree in mathematics despite inferior preparation in overcrowded and under-resourced urban and rural school systems. It's not simply what feeds into our institution's that determines quality, but more importantly, the diversity of the graduates produced that determines quality.

To achieve this shift in mental models, we must establish intentional learning moments for executives, faculty, staff and students to reframe the diversity agenda in new ways. Some intentional learning strategies might include: diversity briefings for executives and staff,

campus-wide diversity symposiums, professional development opportunities for faculty to explore inclusive classroom teaching methods, diversity training programs and leadership diversity initiatives for undergraduate students. These strategies may prove especially important among white men and others who are often in leadership roles and may have never actively considered these issues before. Although faculty and others may resist these types of programs, they are critical to changing the core of institutional culture and setting in motion a new understanding of diversity and excellence.

Brutal Fact 3

Low levels of meaningful and consistent support from senior leaders for diversity planning and implementation efforts

Senior leadership is essential to the success of any change process. The power of organizational change is unleashed when individuals have a common vision of the future. Senior leadership help to launch this process by creating a broad institutional vision, redirecting resources necessary to implement that vision, and requiring plan development and accountability from individuals at multiple levels of the institution.

Plans called for by the board of trustees or president can mean very little within the decentralized academic and student affairs units of an institution — even if these areas are represented on an institution-wide planning committee.¹¹ It is not enough for the committee to recommend that the institution increase the representation of historically underrepresented students. Admissions and other units that play a key role in achieving this goal must actively define what this means for them in measurable terms and then develop realistic objectives, tactics and metrics to guide their efforts.

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Colleges and universities are diffuse environments, therefore deans, vice presidents and others must participate in the planning and implementation process. The enforcement of diversity plans by the president or provost may be viewed as an intrusion into areas where they have rarely ventured before. Such an intrusion may be perceived as a violation of school, college or divisional autonomy. As a result it is important to scale the diversity planning process to achieve activation at the local level of schools, colleges, divisions and departments.

One approach is to require diversity plans from each major school, college, division or unit to complement the institution's overall vision for diversity and excellence. At the unit or divisional level, each dean or vice president might co-chair the task force or committee assigned to create their unit's diversity plan. Only the divisional head has the power to hold department heads accountable for the plan's adoption, provide incentives, generate short-term wins, consolidate gains and anchor new approaches in the culture. Hence, it's essential that the Dean or other relevant senior leaders are involved from the beginning.

To keep diversity on the radar of campus priorities, progress reports must be given regularly to the board of trustees, faculty senate, alumni board, parent association and elsewhere. Furthermore, the president should give an annual "state of diversity address," in which major milestones are presented and next steps are discussed within the context of a broad community effort to implement the plan. These strategies are necessary because they both communicate what is going on with the diversity change project and simultaneously position that project within the evolving myths, symbols and rituals of the institution.¹²

Brutal Fact 4

Failure to allocate sufficient resources to the change effort

Colleges and universities are resource-dependent organizations and rarely have the necessary financial resources to accomplish every objective outlined in an academic or strategic plan.¹³ Only at the nation's most wealthy institutions, which rely upon large endowments, will resources be plentiful to fund diversity plans. Finances, however, cannot continue to hinder our diversity implementation efforts.

Very simply, new initiatives require either a reallocation of current resources, additional resources or both. Leaders must develop creative funding models that reallocate significant resources to support diversity activities within their respective areas. According to James Duderstadt, president emeritus of the University of Michigan and architect of the "Michigan Mandate for Diversity" in the 1980s:

"We fund what we prioritize. Every year, schools have money that is set aside for institutional priorities. If we value diversity and believe it essential, then we place this priority [diversity] in that list every year."¹⁴

President Duderstadt did exactly this at the University of Michigan when he called for each unit across the entire university to allocate one percent of its total operating budget to a central fund that was used to develop diversity programs and initiatives.¹⁵ This fund was then reallocated to support several high-profile diversity initiatives across campus. The resource allocation process was highly formalized and reflected the vision, will and commitment of the institution's president to make diversity a shared priority that everyone could contribute to realizing. In a similar fashion, deans, vice presidents, department heads and others can make the same type of financial commitment to sharing the responsibility of funding new diversity efforts.

"The key is for institutional leaders to know when and how to leverage symbolic resources — not to use symbolic efforts as a replacement for material contributions to the change process."

In addition to financial support, institutions must also leverage other types of resources to make change happen.¹⁶ For example, a letter of endorsement from a dean that goes into a tenure file, or a diversity award for community outreach or recruitment work, can send powerful symbolic messages to faculty and staff regarding the importance of diversity. The key is for institutional leaders to know when and how to leverage symbolic resources — not to use symbolic efforts as a replacement for material contributions to the change process.

Brutal Fact 5

Lack of a comprehensive and widely-accepted definition of diversity, and a framework to assess its progress

On many campuses, the breadth and depth of efforts needed to develop highly effective diversity plans are bypassed by a narrow focus on the compositional diversity of the student body. Although this aspect is critical, diversity plans are more than simply "improving the numbers" and "recruiting more students of color on campus."¹⁷ Colleges and universities must embrace comprehensive performance measurement indicators linked to goals, objectives, strategies and evidence.

The notion of assessing organizational diversity in a manner that is balanced between outcomes and process¹⁸ is described in business literature and has been adapted to the higher education and non-profit sectors.¹⁹ For example, Estella Bensimon of the University of

Southern California, has written extensively about equity or diversity scorecards. ²⁰

Scorecards are powerful tools for helping institutions align their change vision with bureaucratic structures, day-to-day operations and overarching organizational processes.²¹ They can also be used to communicate progress to stakeholders of the institution. Such a tool, when constructed as the guiding vision of a diversity plan, can enable campuses to move from simply "checking off" diversity outcomes — usually represented by the compositional diversity of the student body — to managing a comprehensive plan to reach diversity and educational quality goals and to place these goals at the core of institutional planning and action.

The Inclusive Excellence scorecard developed for AACU is a multidimensional management and measurement tool that can simultaneously drive and assess change in four areas: (1) access and equity, (2) campus climate, (3) diversity in the formal and informal curriculum, and (4) learning and development. These areas, along with sample indicators of progress listed in Table 1 are recommended to guide the construction of both campus-wide and unit-based diversity plans.

Table 1
Inclusive Excellence Scorecard

| IE Area | Definition | Sample Indicators |
|---|--|--|
| Access and Equity | The compositional number and success levels of historically underrepresented students, faculty and staff in higher education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of students, faculty and staff members of color at the institution ● Number of tenured women faculty in engineering ● Number of male students in nursing ● Number of historically underrepresented students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) |
| Diversity in the Formal and Informal Curriculum | Diversity content in the courses, programs and experiences across the various academic programs and in the social dimensions of the campus environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Courses related to intercultural, international and multicultural topics ● Campus centers, institutes and departments dedicated to exploring intercultural, international and multicultural topics ● Articles, monographs, lectures and new knowledge on issues of diversity |
| Campus Climate | The development of a psychological and behavioral climate supportive of all students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incidents of harassment based on race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation ● Attitudes toward members of diverse groups ● Feelings of belonging among ethnically and racially diverse groups on campus ● Intergroup relations and behaviors on campus |
| Student Learning and Development | The acquisition of content knowledge about diverse groups and cultures, and the development of cognitive complexity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acquisition of knowledge about diverse groups and cultures ● Greater cognitive and social development derived from experiences in diverse learning environments ● Enhanced sense of ethnic, racial and cultural identity for all students |

Brutal Fact 6

Lack of accountability processes and means for engaging individuals in the process of change at all levels

The Inclusive Excellence scorecard can be linked to an institution's diversity plan through a combination of push (accountability) and pull (entrepreneurial) strategies to drive and orchestrate diversity implementation efforts.

Push strategies drive accountability by connecting diversity efforts to the performance appraisal, budget and reward systems of the institution. This technique is an essential tool for reinforcing the relationship between diversity and excellence, and prioritizing diversity for every member of the organization. For example, each vice president might be required to illustrate how their unit advanced institutional diversity efforts as part of their annual performance and review process. From this vantage point, merit, budget allocations and promotion decisions would be partially determined by efforts to deliver the diversity plan. From an organizational perspective, this is the only way to achieve accountability.

Pull strategies present a framework for independently orchestrating resources that can be configured quickly and easily to serve a broad range of diversity priorities. These strategies are essential because they allow campus leadership to orchestrate and drive the change management process. The orchestra metaphor is powerful, because it suggests the unique ways that multiple instruments, or in this case units and individuals, can combine to create a powerful performance or diversity change process.

Pull strategies provide incentives for individuals, departments and coalitions to develop independent and entrepreneurial approaches to implementing diversity efforts on campus. Examples include the development of diversity challenge grants for students, faculty and staff. Such grants allow individuals to create their own projects and initiatives thereby helping the institution to fulfill its broad vision for change. Another pull measure might provide funds that departments could tap to support "diversity brown-bags," to expose the department to individuals doing diverse research, in areas of strategic priority — like minorities in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

"Pull strategies provide incentives for individuals, departments and coalitions to develop independent and entrepreneurial approaches to implementing diversity efforts on campus."

In many instances, these initiatives are easily doable and provide potential opportunities for corporate, private and individual development efforts, particularly for those alumni and organizations interested in contributing to diversity initiatives.

Brutal Fact 7

Lack of point leadership and diversity infrastructure to guide diversity efforts throughout the institution

Any implementation of strategies to enhance organizational diversity must focus on building long-term organizational capacity. "Quick fixes," like committees, task forces and commissions, are only part of the solution and will not sustain the long-term commitment necessary to lead change over time. If institutions desire high-level outcomes across various dimensions of a diversity plan, senior leadership must invest in building diversity infrastructures and developing new capabilities. This means having institutional leadership and staff that have diversity goals and priorities as their primary functional mission on campus.

Diversity must be reframed as a "functional" resource that is cultivated, nurtured and managed. This recommendation is not offered as a way of "ghettoizing diversity" within one function.²² To the contrary, it's an argument to build a deeply institutionalized capability to provide leadership that will help drive and orchestrate the change process throughout the institution, similar to a movement to create new capabilities in other areas of our institutions.

Just as the priority of a VP for Information Technology or Admissions is inherent in the title, a person with diversity as his or her main priority is a must. Without a leader dedicated to and empowered by his or her job description to lead the diversity and organizational change

efforts, little progress can be made. It is essential to have the right person providing diversity leadership, with the requisite skills and perspectives to perform the role. Just because someone represents a particular race, or has a research agenda focused on diversity issues, does not mean that they can lead institutional diversity efforts. Universities need people who can lead diversity change within the related areas of access and equity, curricular diversity, enhancing the campus climate, and enhancing the learning and development of all students, faculty and staff.

During the last several years, no fewer than 30 institutions have created executive-level diversity roles and units to address these complexities and provide leadership in establishing a capacity to encourage and support campus diversity, however it is defined.²³ Higher education officers carry titles like Senior Diversity Officer (SDO), Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), Vice Provost, Vice-Chancellor, Vice President, Associate Provost, Assistant Provost, Dean, or Special Assistant to the President for Multicultural, International, Equity, Diversity or Inclusion Issues.

These new roles provide leadership and ensure that diversity does not fall through the cracks of already overcommitted and busy faculty and staff, which rightfully focus on their primary duties when they leave diversity committees and task forces. Similar principles are applicable at the school, college or unit level, as each area should have a point person who dedicates at least some of their time to leading the unit's diversity efforts. While these administrators cannot have sole responsibility for diversity, they can play coordination, mobilization and thought leadership roles that ensure the forward movement of the diversity train. Once a proper structure is in place, a broad vision can be more easily constructed and implemented throughout an institution.

"Without a leader dedicated to and empowered by his or her job description to lead the diversity and organizational change efforts, little progress can be made. It is essential to have the right person providing diversity leadership, with the requisite skills and perspectives to perform the role."

Conclusion

The scale of change required to achieve the broad aims of diversity is almost unimaginable when considered in terms of transforming organizational culture. It can and must be achieved in order for the diversity discussion to move from the margins of higher education. A major part of achieving this success is attending to the brutal facts and recommendations outlined in this article.

Institutional commitment to diversity cannot be short term. It must be founded in a long-term, sustained focus on achieving deep and meaningful diversity results. These can only be achieved through sustained dialogue and a culture change process. These recommended actions are neither simple, nor easy, as many will resist change in deep and fundamental ways. Nevertheless, achieving new outcomes requires a relentless approach based on doing things differently at all levels of the institution.

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