

## Beyond Diversity: Implementing a Dynamic And Evolving Diversity Change Project



A quick Google search using the terms “higher education” and “diversity plan” will yield about 41 million links, most describing the work of diversity task forces and commissions at institutions across the country. These plans often emerge in the wake of a diversity-tinged conflict, like those at Harvard or Duke universities, or perhaps after the appointment of a new executive officer who prioritizes diversity as part of his or her leadership agenda.

Writing a campus diversity plan is easy, once the institution has defined exactly what diversity is. The real hurdle is implementing recommendations that invariably include a range of factors, including increasing the representation and retention of historically under-represented students and faculty, improving the campus climate and leveraging diversity in the service of all students’ learning and development.

But as many of us have learned, top-down mandates and isolated diversity plans are not enough. What happens after diversity Web sites have been launched and senior leadership accepts the plan? How do we ensure that the diversity plan will result in material change? In too many instances, the momentum slows once the low-hanging fruits have been picked.

At the University of Connecticut, we have engaged in a diversity implementation effort for the last several years. We quickly learned that encouraging people to “do the right thing,” “be more committed” and “try harder” was not enough. The systems, politics, structures, values and entrenched mental models of the institutional culture were too strong.

To achieve success, we learned that our implementation process had to be multifaceted, decentralized, integrated and dynamic. It requires numerous diversity levers, which must be turned simultaneously and continuously. Some of these levers are in place at UConn, others are in place at other institutions. Still others, suggested by the organizational change literature, have yet to find their way to campus.

- **Lever One:** Write diversity into the formal mission of the institution.

Given the permanence of the institutional mission statement, referencing diversity constitutes a deep and broad commitment and is an important building block for

other campus efforts.

- **Lever Two:** Build diversity goals and initiatives in all academic and strategic plans.

These documents communicate the campus-wide vision for current and future priorities. Incorporating diversity into these materials positions it in all discussions of institutional learning goals, curriculum, and the allocation of limited institutional resources.

- **Lever Three:** Connect diversity efforts to the financial systems of the institution.

From an organizational perspective, this is the only way to achieve accountability. Consequently, campus diversity efforts must be tethered to merit review, promotion decisions, hiring and departmental budgets.

- **Lever Four:** Require senior leadership, faculty and staff to learn about diversity issues and their relationships to student learning and institutional excellence.

Some strategies might include diversity briefings for executives and staff, campuswide diversity symposia, professional development opportunities for faculty and diversity leadership education for faculty, staff and students.

- **Lever Five:** Require each school, college and division to develop its own strategy for achieving institutional diversity.

The most successful change projects will have both centralized and decentralized diversity implementation efforts. Unless academic deans, vice presidents, department

chairs and others own the implementation process, diversity implementation efforts run the risk of being marginalized and limited.

- **Lever Six:** Create diversity grants, incentive programs and diversity champion roles to encourage campuswide engagement in the diversity change process.

People have a natural proclivity to resist change projects they do not perceive to yield a benefit and in which they have no role. Stakeholder-led programs transform students, faculty and staff from passive observers into creative initiators.

- **Lever Seven:** Cultivate chief diversity officers who are competent in the areas of academic diversity and organizational change.

While chief diversity officers cannot be the sole leaders of diversity change projects, this role is key to implementing the strategies listed here.

Unfortunately, these change levers will not lead to quick fixes. They require institutional leadership that is committed to change over the long haul. The process will be slow, incremental and evolving. Nevertheless, if done well, these efforts will result in a more meaningful engagement of the diversity change process and can potentially transform the culture in unprecedented ways. □

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