

DAMON A. WILLIAMS

Four years after the release of his books on diversity leadership in higher education, the need for even greater change remains

The groundbreaking books by Damon A. Williams, PhD, *Strategic Diversity Leadership: Activating Change and Transformation in Higher Education* and *The Chief Diversity Officer: Strategy, Structure, and Change Management*, co-authored with Katrina Wade-Golden, PhD, provided diversity champions with a navigation system for doing the work of diversity and inclusion and leading change on their campuses.

Yet four years later, the issues faced by colleges and universities remain much the same. Progress has been glacial, but leveraging the principles of strategic diversity leadership is more important now than ever.

The election of President Donald Trump has made the drive for inclusive excellence even more urgent, particularly with the resurgence of hate crimes on campuses, the promise of a new wave of attacks on race-conscious admissions programs, impending rollbacks of Title IX protections for gender equality, and the partially approved travel ban that has restricted visitors and immigrants from parts of the Muslim world.

In an interview with *INSIGHT Into Diversity*, Williams said he has continued to evolve his thinking on diversity and inclusion. He currently has an even more dynamic perspective having served as senior vice president and chief education officer for the world's largest youth development organization, The Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA).

He spoke powerfully about his work creating partnerships with Disney, Toyota, Comcast, UPS, the U.S. Department of Defense, the National



Science Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health, among others. These partnerships have provided him even more clarity regarding the connections between K-12, higher education, government, and corporate communities.

Williams hopes to supercharge the strategic diversity leadership movement through national tours, collective impact initiatives, technology, and an even greater focus on evidence-based practice and accountability. At the top of his agenda is helping leaders close the achievement gap, increase faculty diversity, expand minority and gender representation in STEM, create pathways to workforce development, and improve the campus climate for inclusion.

Q: What was your experience like leading initiatives at BGCA?

A: My goal has always been to be one of the most impactful leaders of my

generation, to look in the mirror and know that I gave everything I had to make a difference in the lives of others. I knew that I had to spend some time outside of higher education, moving the puck of diversity and inclusion at the K-12 and corporate levels.

To work at BGCA was an opportunity for me to serve nearly 4 million diverse young people, many of whom live in very challenging circumstances. To serve in that movement was an honor and one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

Q: How has your time in the nonprofit world shaped your thinking on diversity and inclusion, as well as higher education more generally?

A: I had a chance to partner directly with C-suite leaders in some of the most amazing organizations in the world — Coca Cola, Taco Bell, the Schwab Foundation, Microsoft, the Wallace Foundation, to name a few —

and through that work, I came to appreciate several things. One is that leaders across sectors are making million-dollar bets on the next generation, hoping they'll develop the skills necessary to not only go to college, but to be prepared to lead.

I had researched corporate responsibility and diversity initiatives in the corporate and government sectors, but to partner with leaders and be in the trenches building new initiatives and serving in our community was really eye-opening and emboldening in so many ways. It made me realize that we must have an ecosystem leadership perspective where we see how all pieces work together.

Higher education leaders can no longer lead in silos. We have to understand that strategy is not about mimicking what our peers are doing; it is about understanding your competitive environment, homing in on your competitive advantages, and building dynamic partnerships that help you win at an even higher level.

With the current change in demographics in the U.S., the emergence of a global economy and new technologies, and the increasing prominence of the business case for diversity, we have to engage issues of diversity as a major strategic priority as never before.

Q: After four years, what are you most proud of from your time working with youth and teens on the national level?

A: I was brought in to be a senior leader on the Great Futures Campaign for Impact, and we were incredibly successful over the last five years, raising nearly \$450 million in gifts and grants to drive impact and change. What I am most proud of is that we increased teen membership after a more than 10-year decline and created the first digital youth engagement platform, My.Future, that will allow club youth around the world to engage in coding and multimedia experiences to help them overcome the digital divide.

Almost 21 million youth — many of them African American, Latino, and low-income — lack high-speed access to digital learning opportunities. They are becoming experts at using Snapchat and Instagram, but they are not capable of creating the next social media platforms that will change the world. My.Future will provide millions of young people a chance to develop their STEM skills — 24/7, 365 days a year — in an inclusive environment where they can engage in self-directed learning experiences, interact with their peers, and collaborate with one another, whether they are in Germany, Ohio, Mississippi, or California.

Q: Do you think higher education has changed substantially over the past four years?

A: In some instances, we are moving in the right direction. In others, we seem to be doing worse.

According to a recent Education Trust report, more



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than two-thirds of public colleges and universities have increased graduation rates over the last decade, with those for African American and Latino students on the rise. But these improvements aren't equal among subgroups of students, and the overall improvement masks an especially alarming trend: the widening of the graduation gap between African American and white students and the even more subtle widening of the achievement gap between African American women and men.

In terms of faculty diversity, underrepresented minority groups held approximately 13 percent of faculty jobs in 2013, up from 9 percent in 1993. Yet they still only comprise 10 percent of tenured jobs, according to a study by the TIAA Institute. Collectively, women now hold 49 percent of total faculty positions but just 38 percent of tenured jobs.

All of this suggests some progress, but not nearly the gains we want to see. From my vantage point, this is a result of not using key strategies proven to work — for example, using diversity analytics to forecast graduation rates and make tactical adjustments in advising processes, course planning, and the development of student success programs. In addition, creating faculty diversity initiatives, with a mandate to train against implicit bias, and doing faculty searches until the candidate pool is diverse, as well as considering experiences that support diverse student success in the hiring process, should all be imperatives today. This is in addition to candidates possessing scholarly acumen and teaching prowess.

In terms of the campus climate, I think we have taken a definitive turn for the worse. Several shifts have occurred that have repositioned the campus climate conversation in the last year in particular. The radical right entered the popular imagination with Donald Trump's election, causing a ripple effect in our nation and on our campuses.

On the rise are campus climate

incidents — what I refer to in my research as “cheetah moments” because they often cause campuses to create a flurry of short-term diversity commitments and initiatives with little follow-up and few long-term strategies. Support for building walls of exclusion, the bullying of LGBTQ students, attacks against the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise of Islamophobia, and the emergence of hate messages under the guise of free speech suggest that our campuses are teeming with campus climate challenges that have always existed but are now bubbling to the surface more frequently.

In response to this reality, we must be strategic diversity leaders in our approach to building supportive campus environments. That means engaging in ongoing and regular campus climate research efforts to monitor and develop strategies to improve the climate and to foster a stronger learning and work environment for our communities. On too many campuses, we don't have credible information about the learning and work environment, nor do we know the level of diversity skills or cultural competence that students and leaders possess in order to interact across differences.

Q: What will be the single biggest factor in ensuring progress?

A: I think we have to continue not just establishing chief diversity officer roles, doing campus climate studies, and writing diversity plans, but also doing these things with a real focus on changing our systems and the ways in which we work. We need to focus on becoming more evidence-based in our approach. This means investing new dollars in our initiatives and creating leadership development and learning moments for students, faculty, and staff and, most important, creating a stronger culture of accountability and incentives to drive our work in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

College campuses need to be setting real goals, building scorecards,

and establishing an atmosphere of accountability. It can be frustrating for diversity planning committees to develop a wonderful new diversity plan, but no real investment goes into it, and ultimately very little change occurs. Diversity efforts must be a strategic priority of every institution. Ensuring that they are part of five-year performance reviews, budget processes, capital campaigns, academic plans, searches for new leaders, and annual and merit reviews is critical.

Finally, I think we need more partnership and collective impact initiatives that bring together the higher education, corporate, and K-12 communities.

Q: Having now stepped down from your role at BGCA, what is next for you?

A: I am building several new initiatives to strengthen the strategic diversity leadership movement. I kicked off the National Inclusive Excellence Campaign this summer with the State University of New York System; it is designed to empower the evidenced-based practice of diversity and inclusion work at 1,000 institutions, beginning with a national tour. We go live with the campaign and the tour in a national online webinar on September 13.

I am also launching my new strategy and learning center, the Center for Strategic Diversity Leadership and Social Impact, and serving as senior scholar and innovation fellow with the Wisconsin Equity and Inclusion (Wei) Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Finally, I am working on my new book on the centennial generation, as well as a number of new tools to empower the strategic diversity leadership community. You can visit drdamonawilliams.com to access some of the tools now. ●

Damon A. Williams, PhD, is an Editorial Board member for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*.