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Strategic Diversity

An Innovative Leader
Explains How to Achieve It
on *Your* College Campus—
Q&A with Damon Williams

Special Focus:
The Role of Chief
Diversity Officers

Damon A. Williams

*Strategic Diversity Leadership:
Unleashing Entrepreneurial Change in Higher Education*

By Janet Edwards

One of the most dynamic and innovative voices in the contemporary practice of diversity and inclusion belongs to Damon A. Williams, PhD, vice provost and chief diversity officer for the Division of Diversity, Equity & Educational Achievement at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. At 41, Williams has already spent nearly two decades studying the role of diversity leaders and developing strategies for advancing diversity and inclusion in higher education, as well as corporate, government and nonprofit organizations. After conducting more than 300 hours of research, dozens of site visits, and surveys of hundreds of chief diversity officers across many campuses and sectors, Williams shares his findings and expertise in a set of newly published books, *The Chief Diversity Officer: Strategy, Structure, and Change Management* (co-authored with Dr. Katrina Wade-Golden), and *Strategic Diversity Leadership: Activating Change and Transformation in Higher Education*.

The NAACP and 100 Black Men, among other organizations, have honored Williams for his work. He is also a recipient of the 2013 Inclusive Excellence Award for Leadership, presented by the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. Williams received his doctoral degree from the University of Michigan Center for the Study of Higher and Post-Secondary Education, and received both his master's and bachelor's degrees from Miami University.

Williams, the newest member of the *INSIGHT Into Diversity* Editorial Board, recently discussed his research with editor Janet Edwards, beginning with the basics—how he defines diversity, and how that definition has changed historically through the years. The conversation moved on to a comparison of diversity issues facing higher education and corporate campuses, successful tactics for strategic leadership, and ways diversity leaders can excel in their work—even when higher-level support and funding are limited resources.

How do you define diversity? The language of diversity over the past fifteen-plus years, and now inclusion, has really come to the fore. In the minds of many, diversity has historically been a catch phrase around one particular identity of race and ethnicity. The way I define diversity is broad—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic background, nationality, disability—a range of different identities that constitute a broad landscape of what it means to be diverse.

From affirmative action to equity to tolerance to multiculturalism to inclusion to diversity, different words have been used to describe a similar core of work. In Strategic Diversity Leadership, I'm trying to elevate the conversation beyond being limited or mired in a particular back and forth around what terms to use and

tives and more fundamental support roles and paraprofessional roles within the organization.

That's one of the key factors that actually makes it quite different from what you see in the corporate sector, or government or non-profit sectors—our students; the fact that we have these very young people who are 18, 19, 20, who are not at work, who are at school, and they're the majority of the people in our environment.

At the same time we have a workforce dynamic that has a lot of similarities to other sectors, but also different, given the educational levels that people bring—they're some of the leading experts in the world in their fields—so all these dynamics, whether we're talking about decentralization, multiple goals, or different types of people within our organizations, create

this incredible need to try to address this complexity; this is where the challenge of diversity work at post-secondary environments really comes to the fore. You've got to be engaging issues in ways that are traditionally aligned with diversity and inclusion conversations in the corporate or nonprofit or management sectors in terms of recruitment, engagement, development, and promotion of diverse groups.

But you're also thinking about it in terms of the curriculum and what we're doing to prepare students for a diverse and global world, what happens outside the classroom—which connects to preparing students for a diverse and global world, what we do in our faculty as we engage in leading and cutting edge research about women, race and ethnicity, and sexuality, and a range of different ideas and scholarly themes, all of which makes it incredibly challenging and multidimensional and complex.

That's the reason why the best chief diversity officers bring the ability to interact across those multiple, different spaces. How institutions are able to respond to that, however, is going to take far more than an officer, or a department or a division; it's going to take a strategy, a commitment to prioritizing, and putting a number of different types of roles and people and tactics in place to get things done over time.

What is strategic diversity leadership? Strategic leadership is about collaboration and partnerships and ensuring diversity work is a top-level priority all the time. It can't be about one individual or officer. Aligning leadership in other areas is important; then, resources are in place to partner and collaborate. You need to help unleash the entrepreneurial energy to innovate around diversity. This plays into the decentralized, loosely coupled spirit—it's an independent endeavor. You have to have resources that allow different areas to explore—to activate change—on their own terms within the institutional framework.

For example, consider partnership projects. At UW Madison, my office creates multi-year projects funded by all partners; they're venture capital projects. We ideate, design, activate, move forward, and then assess where we are. At the assessment part, now we have new conversations: Are we going to

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really getting to the bigger theme at the core of the diversity idea: we're talking about full participation, engagement, ensuring that we're doing everything possible in our institutions and organizations toward inclusiveness and excellence for all, and that diversity becomes the driver of that excellence in the 21st century.

At the same time, it's very important to pivot very quickly when you're developing your strategy into what your strategic diversity goals are. That's where we move from the broad, conceptual inclusion of most of the group into more pointed discussion of our goals. And those pointed discussions oftentimes connect back to historic issues of access and equity of outcomes for racial and ethnically underrepresented groups, economically vulnerable groups, gender equity, and leadership.

Having studied diversity issues in higher education, as well as in corporate and non-profit organizations, what are some differences and similarities you see across these sectors?

Colleges, and particularly universities, are loosely coupled, decentralized organizations with a lot of different goals. Goals to teach, research, provide service ... a multitude of different goals. Also, too, with colleges, you have an incredibly diverse environment. Not just students, but in terms of the fact that we have students, and that we have faculty members, and senior execu-

continue with the funding? Should we bring in more partners? Are we going to look for external funding? Are we going to take it up the Hill to the provost or chancellor to get more resources to take it to scale because our activities are so successful? Or are we going to turn the lights out on it and maybe move in another direction because it's not manifesting the goals that we want to achieve, or are there other ideas that we think are more enabling? And that's becomes a part of the idea of strategic diversity leadership.

That's why I titled my books this way. I'm trying to create this notion that what we're doing has to be dynamic, it has to be leveraged in the best of what we know about strategy, it has to be unleashing change energy in our organizations, and it has to be done within a spirit of collaboration and in a spirit of possibility—not within a spirit that we're only doing this to satisfy a federal compliance, or we're only doing this to insure that we're not being sued, or for purposes that don't align to our broader mission.

What does strategic diversity leadership look like at UW-Madison?

We just delivered a 400-page report from my office that details all the things we're doing at UW Madison, laid out over six sections across the landscape of the institution. If we tunnel down into my section, you see us adding value in a number different ways. I lead a series of units with missions that run the gamut from directing one of the nation's most successful youth development student pipeline programs, to the world's only hip-hop based scholarship program, to leadership development effort, and research units.

We're activating change through each of those areas.

If you look at our collaboration metrics, last year we hosted 13 events involving over 3,000 participants; we sponsored 100 grants, with 40 percent of them going toward students; and we initiated 15 partnerships.

For universities in the early stages of addressing campus diversity, or that have limited resources, what are some ways to become proactive and engage in meaningful change?

When your Institutional Diversity DNA is configured in a particular way, you can get a lot of things done—when senior leadership is committed, there are resources, you've got an infrastructure, you've got a clear understanding of your diversity definition, and clear goals. But there are times when your DNA gets shifted. For example, you've got a new president. Now, your department is dismantled, resources are scattered, and your budget is cut; now, you have no grants program, no faculty funding. When the DNA shifts, it doesn't matter how committed an individual champion is, there's only so far you can move the agenda.

The concept of DNA is that it can dynamically recombine. Different things happen that bring new energy. If 15,000 students took over the president's office, and then the president says we're going to crystallize a new strategy and process, the DNA will shift. If a new provost says diversifying faculty is top priority, convenes a new group, and makes it a highest-level fundraising initiative, DNA will shift. Things can happen that cause new possibilities to emerge when that DNA shifts.

Generous alumni, or a dynamic new CDO, become powerful influencers and gain visibility. Now you have new energy. A key for leaders in this work is to be able to dynamically assess your organization and understand that at times change

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gets done through structure; at times change gets done through collegial relationships; at times change gets done through symbols; at times change gets done through politics; at times change gets done through research, evaluation, and having an evidentiary understanding.

People think because you have a title, you can get things done. You can be a vice president for diversity and inclusion but have no budget, no staff, and no resources: you just have a big title. Structurally, it looks like you're very empowered to get things done, but the reality is you may have very little structural power to get things done. But if you have a big title, what you may have is convening power. As a vice president and CDO, people may take a meeting with you. You may be able to leverage that platform to work with the president, write a letter with the president's name to get people to come to an event. Now you're leveraging not just structure, but the collegial dynamic; you're leveraging the symbol associated with being a vice president.

Diversity leaders have got to be dynamic and dexterous in their ability to get things done. You've got to know how to move the

effort forward through relationships. That's where having those resources becomes so critical. Sometimes, you don't have the resources. Sometimes your resources will be constrained. That's why it's important for diversity leaders to be entrepreneurial and innovative—not just in terms of providing venture capital to get things done for others, but by being entrepreneurial in terms of raising new resources. In my division at UW-Madison, I've raised over \$1.8 million in federal grants, alumni giving, and foundations and grant-giving corporations in recent years. We're constantly seeking out new resources. When you bring in new resources, you can more powerfully leverage what you have and then use those new resources to make new possibilities happen.



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What career initiatives are you most proud of? I was at the University of Connecticut nearly seven years (as assistant vice provost of multicultural and international affairs). We worked to expand participation in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), for which we got major federal grants. They continue to work forward: the number of students completing degrees in STEM in the past decade has quadrupled and some of our programs are yielding a better than 90 percent graduation rate. We're on a similar pathway at UW-Madison.

I'm extremely proud of the new division that we built at UW-Madison, the Division of Diversity, Equity and Educational Achievement. It did not exist before my arrival. We brought other offices together and built a strong identity as a new division working to create scale effect on campus. We are optimizing each of the various units and working to maximize our shared resources to have a broader impact overall on campus.

Also, the faculty diversification project at UW-Madison is getting some traction. Faculty diversity is probably one of the most difficult goals to get traction on across the entire higher education landscape because there's such a pipeline challenge. To be a faculty member at a world-class research university, you have to have a PhD from a world class research university

generally, you've got a research agenda, you're doing cutting edge scholarship, and you've been on this pathway trying to get there for close to 10 to 15 years before you actually get into the faculty. It takes a long time to go from high school to becoming a senior track faculty member.

So the goal of increasing minority, women, and STEM faculty, that challenge actually begins in middle school. You're not going to become the first woman physicist in the physics department unless you were doing well in physics in middle school. So the pipeline becomes the challenge. At each level that we go forward in the educational pipeline, less and less persons are available to be recruited to become a faculty member at the post-secondary level, which is one of the reasons that I focus so heavily on youth development in my division.

At the same time, many institutions are not even getting their fair share of the numbers of graduates that are already out there. The culture of the academy is oftentimes that we don't recruit; we search and we screen and then we hire, but we don't recruit. Oftentimes, we don't cast a broad net, meaning we don't post job descriptions in great publications like *INSIGHT Into Diversity* that are going to reach a number of audiences of diverse background. We don't recruit at events like the Black Accountants Association for an accounting professor, or we don't go recruit from the Society of Hispanic Engineers to find

diverse faculty talent ... so the lack of recruitment means we don't get them into our searches.

We need to get resources in place to incentivize search committees to do things differently. Just this morning, I had a meeting with a department that says to get a particular person on faculty would be a true coup; however, the department doesn't have an open search. But the vice provost for faculty and staff and I have some resources that exist centrally. We partnered in, putting in 65 percent of the salary for a period of two years. The greatest thing is when you have a department come forward and they're willing to hedge the possibilities in the future for the opportunities to diversify and drive excellence today. When you've got people who are willing to do that, then you know you're doing some good things. It's that entrepreneurial, creative spirit of moving the work that becomes very important.

At the same time I also talked about having a training and educational program in place to help to educate search committees. It's not one thing; it's having multiple systems in place that help you activate change over time. ●

Janet Edwards is the editor of *INSIGHT Into Diversity* magazine.