This chapter provides guiding principles for designing and implementing successful multicultural initiatives. A rationale for why these elements transcend both higher education and student affairs settings is presented. In addition to providing guiding principles, this chapter includes advice for socially and politically conscious-minded professionals who are leading the implementation of multicultural initiatives on their campus.

Designing and Implementing Multicultural Initiatives: Guiding Principles

Sherry K. Watt

I will be preparing your arrival
as a gardener tends to the garden
for those that shall come in the spring.

Paulo Freire, Obvious Song (Freire, 2004, p. xxviii)

Many student affairs professionals and higher education administrators are drawn to college environments because they are gardeners of a sort. These professionals view their work as if they are tending to a garden where they plant seeds, fertilize the soil, and facilitate the growth of the people and the organization. Paulo Freire’s metaphor in his poem Obvious Song may resonate with those practitioners who see their institution as having ever-evolving plants that come in the form of people (students, faculty, staff, and administrators) and environments (organizational and administrative structures) all existing within an increasingly diverse world. In this diverse world, communities manage the historical tensions between those marginalized and classically privileged groups. Systemic oppression describes the relationship between “embedded, integrated, and interacting contexts and social roles” (Cecero, 2010, p. 498). Systemic oppression frames the way that privileged and marginalized groups exist and interact in society. It results in unhealthy organizations and damaged relationships between members of the community. As Lewin’s (1936) Behavior = Function (Person × Environment) classic equation points out, our hope is that if we plant seeds that support the development of people and fertilize a healthy organization, then people in the environment will learn to behave as good
citizens who advance worthy causes in the world, which is the desired behavioral outcome (Huebner and Lawson, 1990).

The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) states that beyond economic prosperity the larger purpose of education is to engage its citizens civically, intellectually, morally, and ethically. In order for education to fulfill its purpose, it is necessary that we prepare college students to engage with difference in ways that are productive. *Difference* is having dissimilar opinions, experiences, ideologies, epistemologies, and/or constructions of reality about self, society, and/or identity. How well one manages conflict related to *Difference* is an essential skill set for living in diverse societies. For example, a first-year college student raised in one religious value system is likely going to encounter another student from a different faith tradition and each may differ on how they view certain issues, such as the role of males versus females in the home, contraception/birth control, or abortion/right to life. Part of the college experience is to engage in dialogue with others who have different views. Through high-impact experiences inside and outside the classroom, educators aim to increase students’ knowledge, skills, and awareness (Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller, 2004) related to both their discipline of study and also these types of differences.

Whether student affairs professionals and higher education administrators are designing programs to facilitate personal development or working to set up organizational structures to create effective learning environments, it all works together toward the ultimate goal, which is to provide college students with a holistic education that will prepare them to function as good citizens in society.

What does it mean to be a good citizen? Ravitch and Viteritti (2001) criticize the role of education in “instilling or nourishing the values that form a disposition toward responsible citizenship” (p. 6) due to educator’s fear of controversy. Ravitch and Viteritti allude to the characteristics of a good citizen by referring to a person’s ability to handle important ethical questions and engage in highly nuanced discussions “that require knowledge and involved crucial moral considerations, so as to engage in principled debates” (p. 6). This chapter assumes that good citizens not only are engaged in their community but also have personally developed the skills to interact in meaningful and responsible ways around difference (people, ideas, identities, experiences, and so on). This important skill set helps college students be active agents in change around social and political issues.

The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1995) posits that higher education institutions should cultivate the mind, abilities, and talents of college students toward them becoming productive and responsible citizens. The Boyer Commission suggests all institutions should offer a student careful and comprehensive preparation for postgraduate work, a wide range of quality opportunities to study the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences, as well as opportunities to learn...
through thinking critically rather than just the transmission of knowledge. Going even further, the Boyer Commission calls on research institutions to extend beyond those basic criteria and offer not only first-class facilities but also expanded opportunities to research and “opportunities to interact with people of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences different from the student’s own and with pursuers of knowledge at every level of accomplishment, from freshmen students to senior research faculty” (p. 13). Among these maximal opportunities for creative and intellectual development, the Boyer Commission has identified that a key element of learning is how to engage effectively with difference as essential for the development of good citizens.

We are living in socially turbulent times. There is push back against the dominant paradigms that are more evident on college campuses than any other environment. For example, college students today are questioning binary references to male and female, uses of heterosexist language, and biases toward structural racism. College educators have to wrestle with complex questions prompted by campus community members requiring gender-inclusive restrooms, the rights of undocumented students who have lived in this country since grade school, and a disproportionate number of white male and female faculty and administrators. The tensions between the dominant and subordinate paradigm are heightening. College campuses are microcosms of our larger society. It is the responsibility of administrators, faculty, and staff on college campuses to create an environment where these complex issues are handled well and represent good examples of how to exist in a diverse society.

Many institutions attempt to encourage skill development for managing Difference by designing various types of multicultural initiatives. A multicultural initiative is any type of program and/or a set of strategies that promote skill development to better manage difference on a personal, institutional, community, or societal level. The basic premise behind this chapter is that developing multicultural initiatives that promote skill development for managing Difference influences social change. And working toward positive and inclusive social change is every campus community member’s responsibility. It is necessary that college campuses create a culture whereby faculty, administrators, staff, and students skillfully manage controversy related to social and political issues. College campuses should be places where campus community members foster an environment where healthy interaction around controversy is nurtured. Healthy interaction around controversy requires a disposition where difference is engaged, not judged to be bad or good. In other words, healthy engagement with Difference allows for an acknowledgment that there are valid differences in belief systems and each must engage in the exploration of other ideas while withholding judgment.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a few of the basic principles for designing and implementing multicultural initiatives across student...
affairs and higher education settings. To begin, I introduce a conceptual lens through which to view diversity efforts in higher educational settings. Second, I outline guiding principles for designing effective multicultural initiatives. Lastly, I share advice for college educators who are taking on leadership roles in the design and implementation of these types of campus initiatives.

Diversity as a “Social Value” versus Diversity as a “Social Good”

There are many definitions of diversity. Diversity as defined in the Editors’ Notes is the state of having difference. A multicultural initiative aims to help campus community members understand and better navigate Difference. Prior to designing a multicultural initiative, a college educator must assess the intentions behind their multicultural initiative as it relates to diversity. The leaders of these types of initiatives will have to decide if the purpose of their program or set of strategies is aimed toward diversity as a social “value” or as a social “good” (Watt, 2011). In other words, is your intention through this program or set of strategies to change the culture and the fundamental ways Difference is managed on campus? Or is your initiative aiming to create space for the “marginalized or historically traumatized” (Kaleem, 2012, “Specialized Retreats,” para. 2) to exist on campus? Campus community members asking questions guided by this conceptual frame can more purposefully align their goals for an inclusion effort on their campus with the intended outcome.

Principally, “diversity as a social good” requires a surface level commitment to systemic change with a focus on outcomes without attempting to assess or dismantle the underlying problems that contribute to marginalization. An initiative operating off of this underlying assumption primarily and simply operates within the larger societal systemic structure, and the programs or strategies do not make attempts to drastically change the mode of functioning. Inclusion efforts viewed through this lens will meet the basic guidelines of state or federal law in that they require inclusion of those individuals who have been historically marginalized, but these efforts do very little to change the dominant culture influence and the traditional ways the campus operates. In other words, these inclusion efforts are led primarily by those in marginalized groups, they address relegated experiences on campus, and they occur outside of and/or in addition to the mainstream campus agenda. For example, a large predominantly white campus community hires a director of multicultural programs whose primary responsibility is to provide support to the students of color on campus. This director designs and implements programs, such as Black Alumni Reunion, or hosts social programs at the black cultural center targeted primarily at black students. These activities are held in conjunction with or in addition to other mainstream large campus events, such as major sporting events. Viewing inclusion efforts through the lens of “diversity as a social good” has pros
and cons. This director of multicultural programs position is dedicated to providing support to a group of students that is in the minority on campus and all students need to find a community when coming to campus. For many black students, this focused attention and intentional community could be a benefit. And yet, the structure of the position is such that the culture of the campus will not change and the skill development for engaging with differences is more likely to occur for the small number of black students and not the predominant number of white students on campus. Further, the intention of this inclusion effort is really to operate within the cultural norms that focus on the individual and continue to perpetuate a divide between marginalized and privileged groups.

Essentially, a multicultural initiative structured for “diversity as a social value” embraces strategies to disrupt systematic oppression on a deeper level with a shift toward considering diversity matters as “a central and integrative dimension rather than required and marginalized” (Watt, 2011, p. 132). A multicultural initiative that holds “diversity as a social value” fundamentally questions the underlying structures that bind the way campus community members interact. In other words, the focus is on the system and not on the individual’s position in the system. An initiative that operates from this value system considers the historical, social, and political context and engages in systemic analysis across all of those levels. Also, this cross-level analysis couples thoughtful dialogue with bold and innovative action. Lastly, when an initiative holds this social value, the work toward social change is shared across those who are historically marginalized and privileged. Further, the effort to create a culture change with this initiative is led by high-level campus administrators such as vice presidents, presidents, department chair, and deans. For example, an inclusion effort in an academic program that embraces diversity as a value would be led by a department chair or a senior faculty member. This inclusion effort might focus on creating a culture where students of color and diversity initiatives are not just tolerated, but made a central focus of the work done in the department. This could take the form of the department chair leading the faculty members to work together to create a culture both inside and outside of the classroom where Difference is engaged. This could be not only “what” we discuss within community but also “how” we discuss it. For instance, engaging Difference could involve creating more opportunities for thoughtful reflection and dialogue on the academic content and its connection to or divergence from Difference. It might also involve treating differences of opinions or experiences as chances to engage ideas and consider that a positive way of interacting within the community. If the faculty led by example, then this practice of engaging Difference as a positive practice would become a community value. Intentional and conscious action can be taken to question the traditional practices and conduct cross-level analysis from both a historical and a sociopolitical lens. Specifically, a program that embraces diversity as a social value does not only focus on making difference
(that is, multicultural curricula content, domestic students of color, sexual minorities, and international students) welcomed once “it” arrives but also leads efforts to intentionally change “how things are done here.” A program or set of strategies that embraces this value is evidenced when *Difference* is affirmed and there is an intentional shift in the culture to centralize and/or balance marginalized ideas and experiences with dominant ones.

There are pros and cons to approaching inclusion efforts with the philosophy of diversity as a value. Beginning with a con, this requires that the leadership of an academic department makes a decision to have intentional synergy around meaningful diversity work as a central program value. This approach requires relationship building, which is an investment in time and personal as well as professional energy. Engaging *Difference* in this way can bring about feelings of resistance that can manifest in how people react and receive this cultural shift. On a positive note, engaging in the process of a cultural shift that nurtures an environment where *Difference* is managed proactively has the potential to put academic programs slightly ahead of the inevitable changes that are occurring due to demographic shifts in this country.

It is necessary that campus community members not only consciously consider what operating principle underlie their multicultural initiatives but also understand the guiding principles that should inform their efforts when aiming to increase skill development with managing *Difference*.

### Three Guiding Principles for Designing Effective Multicultural Initiatives

The basic principles of an effective multicultural initiative assume that the development of the skills to effectively manage *Difference* requires a multilevel transformational approach involving individual and community, institutional and societal, and policy and attitudes. Sustainable approaches to managing *Difference* on multiple levels require dialogue and action that *balances the head* (intellect/thought), *heart* (emotion/spirit), and *hands* (practical/real-world application) (Potapchuk, Leiderman, Bivens, and Major, 2005). Lastly, an effective multicultural initiative requires careful and thoughtful planning to *align the goals with the outcomes*.

**Multilevel Transformational Approach.** Engaging *Difference* in healthy ways involves systemic-level shifts within social structures/institutions, attitudes, practices, and thoughts as well as policies and procedures that guide how citizens relate to each other within a community. A multilevel transformational approach aims to evidence these types of systemic-level shifts in the behaviors of its community members. It is the hope that healthy engagement with *Difference* will influence positive social change efforts. Social change involves acts of advocacy among individuals with shared values to transform their community in normative ways (Haferkamp and Smelser, 1992). Practicing a multilevel transformational
approach within a campus community requires seamless interaction between higher education administration and student affairs. Campus administrators who embrace this approach understand that substantive organizational change comes about when they are employing multilevel strategies. These multilevel strategies are not hinged on a particular professional identity; rather it calls for all college educators (staff, student affairs practitioners, faculty, and administrators) to work together using their skills and resources to take action to disrupt the structural inequities that historically have limited the experiences of marginalized groups while privileging the experiences of others.

For example, if a campus community aims to discourage hate crimes, then the campus must initiate a multilevel approach that addresses the campus culture by revisiting the policies and procedures both spoken and unspoken. In other words, campus leaders must not only consider the acknowledged policies and procedures for sanctions for undesirable behavior, and the guidelines for who is included and who is not in the campus activities groups, but also examine the more subtle practices for how Difference is treated and what the expectations are for how members should interact with each other when they disagree.

A campus administrator whose multicultural initiatives are guided by this multilevel approach can define their goals and objectives by devising a comprehensive plan that employs a program or set of strategies that addresses individual and community, institutional and societal, and policy and attitude levels. Within each of these levels, an effective multicultural initiative engages its campus community members by inviting individuals (1) to intellectually explore what it means to engage Difference, (2) to emotionally examine how engaging with Difference impacts their individual and collective behavior, and (3) finally, to consider ways they might take action to increase their capacity for managing Difference not only as individuals but also as a community.

Balancing Head, Heart, and Hands. Community change strategies that are lasting need to include skill development that balances the head (intellect/thought), heart (emotion/spirit), and hands (practical/real-world application) (Potapchuk, Leiderman, Bivens, and Major, 2005). Campus leaders have to use their intellect to take a wide view of the historical and sociopolitical context as well as examine the scholarly literature that helps to inform their view of the challenges they are facing. While campus leaders can think through the challenges they are facing in this way, it is also necessary when engaging a multilevel approach that they also locate emotionally where personal values and beliefs associated with the changes fit. Lastly, this approach requires that what you think, feel, and learn is all brought to bear on what you do. For instance, our culture is structured around “racist thought, emotion, and action” (Feagin, 2010, p. 10), and that trifecta results in a system that limits the lives of people of color and advantages white people. It is counterproductive and unbalanced to design a multicultural initiative that
only addresses one aspect. Considering that structural racism inherently involves aspects of the head, heart, and hands, multicultural initiatives that include this balanced approach require engagement of intellect and emotions that are all applied in some practical way in the community. Multicultural initiatives that do this are the most effective vehicles for facilitating learning that actually result in better skill development for managing Difference. As discussed, when designing a multicultural initiative, it is important to address oppression at multiple levels and balance the head, heart, and hands. It is also critically important that the intention for the initiative aligns with the intended outcomes.

**Intentional Goal Alignment.** When college educators consider whether or not their goal aligns with the intended outcomes of the program or set of strategies, it increases the likelihood that skill development for managing Difference will increase. The intent and the purpose of a multicultural initiative need to align with its stated goals and outcomes. Many multicultural initiatives have far-reaching goals. As campus leaders with good intentions, we want to change the world to be a better place and intend to start with our own campus community. When a multicultural initiative aims to abstractly and broadly change the world, it is difficult to measure or actualize that goal for many reasons. For instance, changing the world is ill-defined and it could mean many different things to any campus community member. Rather than focusing on lofty goals, campus leaders need to select more actionable goals and employ specific strategies to expand the campus community’s capacity to develop skills to better manage Difference. Campus leaders who design multicultural initiatives with the goal of teaching the campus community how to think together effectively, how to manage Difference and controversy in productive and meaningful ways, and then how to take thoughtful action on their campus after they have examined the history, the sociopolitical context, their personal thoughts, beliefs, and values may or may not immediately change the world. However, this approach may align the program’s objectives with more actionable outcomes.

In summary, the above sections review some important guiding principles for campus community members to consider when designing and implementing effective multicultural initiatives. In addition, I introduced the “diversity as a good versus as a value” conceptual lens through which to view diversity efforts in higher educational settings. Finally, in what follows, I share some advice for campus community members who design and facilitate multicultural initiatives in higher education.

**Advice for Gardeners: Self-Care and the Socially and Politically Conscious-Minded College Educator**

My body burned by the sun, I will drench it in sweat; my hands will become calloused hands,
my feet will learn the mystery of the paths
my ears will hear more,
my eyes will see what they did not see before,
while I am waiting for you.

Paulo Freire, *Obvious Song* (Freire, 2004, p. xxvii)

Paulo Freire’s *Obvious Song* reveals how seeding and reseeding our gardens in higher education is not easy work. Many college educators find it challenging to create campus environments where students develop better skills for managing *Difference*. After all, these skills are a sign that they are growing into being good citizens. Throughout the years, I have designed and implemented multicultural initiatives to engage students, faculty, and staff in learning more about themselves and to be thoughtful about their reactions to *Difference*. It is my hope that these opportunities for deep self-reflection nurture a skill that individuals use as they participate in social change efforts. I believe that critical reflection can inform action and profoundly improve the decisions made that impact a community. And while guiding people through this process of critical reflection can be life-affirming and exhilarating, it can also be depleting and disillusioning.

To attend to my angst as I guide individuals, organizations, and communities through this dynamic process, I conduct research that explores reactions individuals have to difficult dialogues. In addition, I am constantly in thoughtful reflection about my experience as a guide/teacher with others. I have learned some helpful lessons through the interplay of my research and experience. In the following, I share three of those lessons:

1. **Focusing Inward Not Outward.** Remember that the journey toward engaging with *Difference* is an inward one. An inward journey is a process by which individuals make observations of their personal reactions to *Difference*. In this process, individuals face their feelings and thoughts about differences as they hold these ideas up against their own values, beliefs, and experiences. An outward journey is a process where others place a defined value on the difference as well as the certain values, beliefs, and experiences, and decide there is a desired reaction. I take the inward journey along with those I guide. Also, I emphasize that this is indeed an inward journey for everyone and it is counterproductive to try to live up to anyone else’s expectations in these types of learning experiences. I trust the capacity of everyone to use the critical process I teach as they are ready and to find their own answers.

2. **Partnering and Scheduling Opportunities for Renewal and Reflection.** Whether I am teaching a course, or designing a workshop or a campus-wide initiative, I rarely lead multicultural initiatives solo. These partnerships are necessary for my own sanity. I also believe it is important to give participants in these experiences alternate sources of support. I believe these partnerships help me to be a cleaner, more
focused conduit when facilitating controversial discussion. I have also become keenly aware of how important it is to find ways to renew my energy when guiding multicultural initiatives. For me, this might include going for a walk or taking some time to rest and read, and/or going to a multiday retreat.

3. Managing Defensive Reactions. My observation of behavior through my research has revealed some useful insights for me (Watt, 2007, 2011). As individuals engage in difficult dialogues about Difference, they often initially respond in defensive ways. I have learned that it is helpful to understand as a facilitator that initial responses to dialogue about Difference might include reactions, such as denial, rationalization, or intellectualization. Many of these behaviors are launched as a protection in dialogue and are normal reactions to feelings of being threatened. When I see these defensive reactions, I have reacted in ways that have both furthered and hindered the progress toward developing better skills for managing Difference. When I facilitate, I try as often as possible to begin by identifying my own reaction to the defensive response from another. Doing this self-assessment creates a space that allows me to more thoughtfully hear another’s responses so that I can respond with intention rather than haphazardly.

In closing, I hope that these lessons learned might help college educators who design multicultural initiatives to find respite as they do the difficult work of creating more spaces for effectively engaging with others around Difference. It is my hope that facilitators, whether administrators, faculty, staff, or students, can intermittently sit in some shade while they work on the garden that hopefully will produce responsible citizens who can effectively manage controversy (a spring of sorts):

I chose the shade of this tree
to rest from all I will do
while I am waiting for you.

Paulo Freire, Obvious Song (Freire, 2004, p. xxvii)

Conclusion

This chapter introduces some basic principles for designing and implementing effective multicultural initiatives that educators can use to critically assess multilevel efforts aimed at engaging campus constituents around Difference. And above all, higher education administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals must understand that better decisions are made for all involved when intentional effort is given to balancing the head, heart, and the hands when engaging Difference—whether doing so in the classroom, in campus programming, or as it relates to administrative policy decisions.
REFERENCES


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