

“Diversity in Higher Education”

A position paper forwarded by the
Faculty Advisory Council to the IBHE

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Executive Summary

Real diversity is an element of the climate at an institution: an openness, acceptance and enthusiasm for peoples' differences. As such, it is an entirely different issue than numbers of persons of a given ethnic or minority group at various levels of posts. Diversity in higher education cannot be relegated to EEO6 institutional reporting of the numbers of people in pre-set categories. Numbers alone do not make for a healthy diverse educational environment. Instead, we should count the numbers of intellectually diverse programs Illinois offers and identify the numbers of different ways to learn, of different educational options available in Illinois. We believe it is vitally important to emphasize the diversity of the educational opportunities provided by a wide range of institutions of higher education in Illinois. We also think it is important to create sound educational opportunities in diversity for the employees of institutions of higher education in Illinois.

A competent farmer who looks at a field where little or nothing grows will not likely assume that just sticking some plants in the ground will make for a lush, green field. That farmer would know that before the planting is done the soil of that field would need to be amended to make for a better and a more viable environment for the plants.

We think it is critical to ensure that the policies of the IBHE and institutional governing boards stress and foster such an approach toward diversity. This means: 1) ensure through appropriate guidelines, policies and funding priorities, that higher education retains its breadth of options and is structured to provide the opportunity and skills for successful interaction with diverse groups of people; 2) stress, through training programs and appropriately focused evaluations techniques, the importance of good communication by emphasizing the need to learn to communicate in a multicultural, multiethnic environment; and 3) choose, through recognition of the value of different backgrounds and accomplishments and by using hiring criteria and approaches that accentuate rather than minimize these traits, to value and employ people who reflect the many faceted aspects of Illinois and the world around us.

If a policy of increasing diverse hiring of faculty is to succeed in the state of Illinois without wasting valuable resources, institutional climates will need to be amended. The attached document explores the why and how of making the state's diversity policy work more efficiently.

Position Statement

The National Association of Multicultural Educators (NAME) indicates that two of the biggest challenges facing education in the next several decades will be:

1. the retraining of existing educators to better communicate with those from diverse groups and better teach those from diverse groups and
2. the training of new entrants into the field to do the same.

Diversity is an enormous area to try to fully comprehend. In its broadest sense, the term diversity means difference. Within this document, the term diversity will be used to

refer to differences between groups within one specific country's culture (co-cultures) as opposed to differences between the overall cultures of different countries.

All too often within the American culture, the term diversity is applied in a very narrow and exclusive sense to involve only the spectrums of race or gender or physical ability. The term diversity includes all three of those co-cultural groups, but it also includes religious co-cultural groups, socioeconomic co-cultural groups, geographical co-cultural groups, population density co-cultural groups, physical size co-cultural groups, chronological or age co-cultural groups, and regional co-cultural groups. These are only a few of the groups that fall under the term diversity.

When diversity's narrower definition is used in conjunction with improving diversity in the hiring process, two outcomes become very likely. *First, though it may not be intended, those outside of the co-cultural groups of race, gender and physical ability may perceive special policies have been generated that unfairly favor only those co-cultural groups.* Such a situation could have a negative impact on institutional climate and employee morale. *The second outcome deals with measuring the success of diversity in the hiring process.* Focusing only on those three groups makes it very tempting to measure success by simply counting. Once certain percentages of each of these three groups have been achieved, an institution can declare itself diverse. Although this approach might be a bean counter's dream, it would be a nightmare to the true goals of diversity.

According to the National Association of Multicultural Educators (NAME), diversity has as its major goals three things. *First, there is the reduction of uncertainty in dealing with people who are different.* A lack of diversity doesn't exist because most people are inherently evil and desire to be exclusionary. Diversity failures most often occur because people want to avoid the dissonance generated by the uncertainty of interfacing with those different from themselves. Quite simply, we feel less prone to error when dealing with people who look, talk, dress, and think as we do. However, when people are given the necessary skills and information, they can successfully interact with diverse groups of people.

A second goal of diversity is to improve communication skills as they relate to interacting with diverse groups of people. Even though the same language is spoken, diverse groups may verbally and nonverbally encode and decode the symbols and signals of that language very differently. These communication barriers may generate a good deal of miscommunication, which, in turn, may reduce the desire to interact with people who are different. When people acquire the communication skills that allow them to understand the different ways of encoding and decoding used by diverse groups, communication breakdowns are reduced and the desire to interface with diverse groups of people is not thwarted.

The third and final major goal of diversity is to remove the unintentional barriers to diverse hiring.

Again, it is important to recognize that there is no major conspiracy to block diverse hiring in most cases. Still, it may not occur because of the normal ethnocentric nature of people. Essentially, this means that we tend to favor people more like ourselves than people who are different from ourselves. When people acquire knowledge about how various co-cultural groups may respond differently within the context of an interview situation, many of the barriers to diverse hiring are often removed or reduced.

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Most often institutional climate is not resistant to diversity, but it has not been properly prepared to incorporate differing modes of perception and differing modes of communication into its environment. The best recruiting on the planet will not compensate for an institutional climate that is unprepared to understand the different modes of perception and communication that diversity brings to an institution or organization. Unrepresented or underrepresented co-cultural groups are rarely retained in an environment that tends to discount their co-culturally driven modes of operation (perception and communication).

If an organization or institution is not naturally diverse, this lack of diversity or this inadequate level of diversity may have been generated by the ethnocentric nature of that institution or organization. Ethnocentrism is a very natural state of human existence. According to Dr. Milton Bennett, creator of the Intercultural Sensitivity Model, ethnocentrism does not represent some great evil or some deeply rooted conspiracy. Ethnocentrism is just a habitual way of thinking that indicates that our group is the best and that our way of doing things is the right way of doing them. Every cultural or co-cultural group exhibits this characteristic.

In general, it is education and life experience that will reduce ethnocentric tendencies. However, general education and general life experiences may not alone reduce enough of these ethnocentric tendencies, and it will take a considerable amount of time for this to occur. As a partial but major solution to the lack of diversity among employees of educational institutions would be specific intercultural education. Educating institutional employees in general and educating those involved in the hiring process specifically will get more people to the same level of ethnorelative behavior faster and more efficiently. Ethnorelative behavior is behavior where cultural and co-cultural differences can be recognized, understood, and respected. Ethnorelative behavior would remove or reduce the unintentional obstacles to diverse hiring.

Diversity will only work on a long-term basis where institutional climates are able to understand, embrace, and respect cultural and co-cultural differences. When each institution has an active and competent program of intercultural diversity education, then each institutional employee will have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and the communication skills necessary to make diversity a viable characteristic of that institution.

A competent intercultural diversity education program would:

- provide the necessary cultural and co-cultural information and would help people acquire the necessary communication skills to allow effective and meaningful interaction between differing cultural and co-cultural groups
- provide a baseline level of knowledge and communication skills as well as generate a desire for individual self-learning
- require time; there should be a minimum of 28 interactive learning contact hours over a period of six months (possible) or a year (ideal)
- employ institutional climate studies to measure how successfully each intercultural diversity education program was and how well diverse groups were being incorporated into each institution
- be a practical, cost beneficial, and long-term solution to diversity issues
- not begin with the assumption that people are broken and need to be fixed
- not use guilt as a motivator
- focus more on the present and future than the past
- not attempt to generate a climate of universal love

If the diversity issue were one that had simple solutions, it likely would have been handled by now. If diversity is an issue that can adequately be dealt with at all, it will take effort and commitment on the part of institutions to create a fertile climate. If the climate is fertile, diversity will come.