

Students at the Table: A Framework for Institutional Change

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores the benefits of involving students in institutional decision making. The authors describe an action research project conducted at a public institution that involved a working group of students, faculty, and administrators researching and cocreating solutions to develop a more inclusive and equitable environment for learning and student development. The university gained direct insight from the students' viewpoints, and students earned course credit while gaining skills in research methods, leadership, communication, negotiation, and writing. The collaborative, cocurricular experience resulted in the development of a center for cross-cultural engagement on campus. The authors also discuss considerations for this model. Institutions must demonstrate a firm commitment to addressing the issues they investigate by providing sufficient resources and recognizing the labor inherent in the transformative leadership of the community members who work to create institutional change.

PURPOSE AND CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

The purpose of this case study is to identify an effective strategy for including students in substantive change-making at higher education institutions. More specifically, as universities navigate and respond to racially charged and culturally insensitive events on campus, the students impacted are either not invited to participate in the solution or given the entire burden of “solving” deep-rooted institutional problems. This case seeks to find the balance of inclusion and support when involving students while providing not only an academic experience but also professional development. This case will focus on the parameters and suggested structure for this student experience and also considerations for implementation.

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The case study was prompted by a series of highly charged racial incidents and the administration's attempt to seek ways to respond authentically and with the intention of creating sustainable change to better the lived experiences of students on campus. The need for the university administration to create structure around student voice and participation in the improvement of the campus culture and climate was evident.

The vice-chancellor for student affairs sorted feedback from various listening sessions, standing institutional committees, and requests for support from student organizations. A consistent recommendation was that the institution should consider intentionally centralizing its multicultural resources by establishing a multicultural center. The Vice Chancellor enlisted the authors to create a student-led working group to discuss possible responses to this consistent observation. The vice-chancellor empowered a student-designed effort that would focus on determining if the university would benefit from the establishment of a multicultural center. Entrusting students with this presented the opportunity to equip the student participants with a set of transferable skills while also amplifying the students' voice regarding the project.

The members of the working group were leaders of student organizations which represented a wide range of student identities and interests. Those leaders consisted of the President of the Associated Student Body (White male), a senator from the Graduate Student Council (White female), the president and president elect of the interfraternity council (White males), President of Pride Network (White female), President of the Graduate student council (White male), Chair of the graduate women's council (White female), a student athletics ambassador (Asian male), president of a campus/community based racial equity focused organization (Black female), and president of the Black Student Union (Black female). The co-chairs were charged to lead the working group in conducting a comprehensive needs assessment and providing data-informed recommendations to improve institutional equity and inclusion efforts—including the need to create a safe environment for all community members. Recognizing the magnitude of the task, the co-chairs advocated for the student participants to receive course credit from the school of education for their work. The vice-chancellor supported the effort by assisting with course development, allocating a budget, and providing the human resources needed to conduct the research. The year-long effort ultimately resulted in unanimous support for a multicultural center and the subsequent establishment of the center at the university.

INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM CONTEXT

This case study took place in 2013 at a public institution in the southeast region of the United States, which was founded in the mid-1800s. As one of many institutions founded to preserve a sense of southern identity that was rooted in the institution of slavery, the institution enrolled its first known African American student over 110 years after its founding—under great duress. The university's history of racially exclusive enrollment practices perpetuated educational inequities in the state, which persist to the present (Edney, 2019). With a student body of over 16,000 students, the percentage of African American students at the institution trailed the percentage of African Americans in the state by over 20%. Graduation rates for African Americans at the institution fell over 25 percentage points below White students' graduation rate and over 21 percentage points below the university average. In addition to these disparate completion and success outcomes, the institutional climate was also a concern. Data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Diverse Learning Environments Survey (DLE), administered in Fall 2013, revealed:

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