

Chapter 13

Perspectives From a Multicultural Affairs Office Professional: Diversity Education During COVID-19

Tristen Brenaé Johnson

University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize the challenges that the office of multicultural affairs staff at one state university experienced while moving to virtual learning formats. This study seeks to offer four specific recommendations and best practices for both multicultural affairs offices/centers and higher education institutions, in general, to ensure that students who utilize these virtual format spaces will continue to develop a sense of belonging within the institution. The author historicizes the formation of Black cultural centers and their development into multicultural affairs, tracks the public recognition of the essential importance of these centers and diversity and inclusion programming, and outlines the issues and problems the OMA staff faced in virtually providing a continued and ongoing sense of belonging for diverse students and staff. Higher education institutions can use these recommendations to inform the future of virtual multicultural affairs offices.

INTRODUCTION

The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus (USF St. Pete campus) sits in the center of the first floor of the Student Life Center. When guests enter the front door of the office, a cardboard cutout of former President Barack Obama greets them with a smile as it rests on the back wall. There are approximately 16 flags representing various countries that hang from the perimeter of the square ceilings in a repeating pattern. The open center is designed to provide an inviting and harmonious space for students to utilize a number of big, colorful swivel chairs and a couch. The hospitable environment of the office was designed in such a way that students felt a

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sense of belonging when they visited the space. Malone's (2020) study posited that multicultural centers are the "hub(s) of all diversity initiatives within a campus community...and multicultural centers employ various methods to transform colleges and universities to a welcoming, inclusive environment for all" (p. 118). The OMA office is the main diversity programming office on this campus and, as Malone (2020) suggested, OMA staff utilize multiple techniques to provide a welcoming environment to students and a sense of belonging, one of them being the office design.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the functionality of this and many higher education institutional spaces, causing campus closures and student displacement from residential housing, as well as necessitating virtual programming for Student Affairs units. Due to the pandemic, OMA staff transitioned from more traditional in-person diversity and inclusion programs – created to foster a sense of belonging for diverse individuals - to solely virtual programming experiences. Friday, March 13, 2020 was the last day the USF St. Pete campus held in-person programs. The following weekend, the University of South Florida system announced that all classes and programs on all campuses were moving to virtual only formats until further notice. Like many others, the OMA staff at USF St. Pete campus faced the challenge of quickly reimagining and implementing programming and training for the rest of the spring semester and, unbeknownst to the author and the staff at the time, the rest of the summer and into the fall 2020 semester.

Historically, multicultural affairs offices and centers have been places of sanctuary and solace for students from diverse backgrounds (Shuford, 2011). OMA staff members recognized an ongoing duty to ensure students felt safe in the OMA office and during programs. This chapter begins with a literature review historicizing diversity growth in higher education, the creation of cultural centers on campuses due to Black student activism primarily during the Black Campus Movement, the role of multicultural affairs offices, and the need for organizational shifts. The next section discusses the issues OMA staff faced at the beginning of the pandemic. Finally, the author outlines best practices that the OMA staff utilized to virtually provide a continued and ongoing sense of belonging for diverse students and staff at USF. Higher education institutions can use these recommendations to inform the future of virtual multicultural affairs offices.

BACKGROUND

Black students at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) during the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s and 1970s played a significant role in the development of ethnic cultural centers through student activism (Biondi, 2012; Rogers, 2012). This integral time of activism on campuses is known as the Black Campus Movement (Rogers, 2012). Jones and Reddick (2017) posited that activism has been a key tool that students have used in the past that "called attention to institutional and societal power structures that reinforce inequity" (p. 205). Since the Black Campus Movement, college campuses across the United States of America have made efforts to diversify their institutions (Curette, 2016). This review of relevant literature will cover two areas that are important to the objectives of this chapter: (a) "diversity" on campus and (b) student activism during the Black Campus Movement and the development of ethnic cultural centers and multicultural affairs offices and/or centers. The author then presents the conceptual framework for change management. After the completion of the literature review, the discussion shifts to identifying the specific issues or problems the OMA staff faced as a team transitioning to virtual learning.

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