

A Collaboratively Designed Catalyst for Change

Introducing the *Framework for Diversity Assessment and Planning*

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In 1996, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges embarked upon a two-year Multicultural Efforts Project. The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education became a co-sponsor of this project. Between February 1996 and November 1997, all of the community and technical colleges in the state were involved in a process of assessing, planning, and implementing projects to foster and improve academic success for students of color. As this project came to a close in the spring of 1998, the staff of the State Board decided to involve campus diversity leaders in the development of what would be the State Board's next state-wide diversity project. The State Board issued invitations to about seventy-five people, representing the various sectors of the colleges, to attend a two-day planning workshop designed and facilitated by the Washington Center.

In June 1998, a group of forty-three faculty, administrators and staff members from across the community and technical college system in Washington state met at Seabeck Conference Center to discuss this question: *What can the community/technical college system do to help students of color achieve more academic success?* The group included nine faculty, ten multicultural affair directors, ten student services staff, four academic officers, six State Board staff members, and four presidents and trustees.

By the end of the two-day workshop, participants had generated ideas for many projects that would help students of color achieve more academic success, but a clear future direction for the work had not emerged. Participants agreed that data distributed by the State Board, on which the Multicultural Efforts

Project was based, demonstrated clearly that students of color, particularly students with limited proficiency in English, do not enter and proceed through college transfer and vocational programs at the same rate of progression as do white students. Since the community and technical colleges serve as the entry point to higher education for a large proportion of students of color, every small success opens paths for people who might otherwise be denied access.

At the same time, however, as one participant wrote, the way

forward to system-wide or even campus-wide change is not obvious: "As we moved through the days of retreat time, we tended to repeat our frustrations and feelings of fragmentation and alienation, even loneliness, that many of us feel in our daily work. We may not see how our everyday tasks are contributing to change, or fear that they are not contributing to change fast enough. More importantly, we may not see how small incremental changes that we do have the capacity to control can be part of larger organizational change. These are the leadership roles that we are called upon to learn more about, whether we are in

a formal position of authority or whether we learn how to make our own less prestigious work site a position of power."

The group agreed to reconvene to finish the work of the retreat, specifically to produce a list of strategies that could be carried out by the state system. A smaller group, about twenty-five, met in July 1998, to develop and prioritize possible strategies.

Recommended Strategies

The final recommendations to the staff of the State Board, listed in order of priority, were:

Improving the
academic success
rates of students of
color on a campus
requires a campus-
wide effort.

1. Retention: Address the issue by developing a plan based on careful listening to students' voices. The first step of this system-wide, campus-based project would be to conduct focus groups with students to find out what makes them stay and what makes them leave. Use the information gleaned from those conversations to develop a campus-wide retention plan. From the beginning of the project, aim for wide campus participation to better address the underlying issue about retention—namely, whose job is it to do anything about it?

2. Professional Development: Offer staff/faculty-training workshops on specific topics on a regional basis. These workshops would address the concern that many people do not understand what it takes for students of color to succeed. In particular, the workshops would be designed for staff members who are first line people working with students of color, and would address the multiplicity of students of color.

3. Link diversity to accreditation: Work with the accreditation liaisons. This long-term goal drew mixed reactions. Participants thought this work could happen regionally, if a small group wanted to find out what other states in the accrediting region are doing with diversity and then they could build a coalition. An alternative would be to propose that Washington state colleges be held to a diversity standard in their accreditation processes. Another route would be to propose a diversity performance funding goal/indicator for the system, or at least collect information about how many campuses already value their diversity work in this way.

4. Clarify system goals related to diversity for use by individuals and by institutions. Clarify State Board's current language about diversity to initiate action among system-wide groups. Emphasize and publicize good practices, recognize work that is already going on, and disseminate that information across the system via a newsletter and/or web site.

5. State Board staff convene groups to share ideas and training. For example, one group might meet around strategies

for folding diversity action plans into campus strategic plans. Other potential topics could be curriculum infusion/development, assessment resources and results, and sharing best practices in a number of areas.

Statewide Initiatives

In response to the first recommendation, the "Transfer Transitions" project was launched in November 1998. Teams from two- and four-year campuses conducted focus groups with students who were planning to transfer, or who had already transferred. Several efforts (regrettably unsuccessful) were made to find system-wide funding to continue the project. In 1999, the Washington Center began working with others on the *Critical Moments* project. In June 2004, the Center published a comprehensive report on *Critical Moments* work on four campuses. More information about this project is available at www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/cmproject.htm.

In response to the second recommendation, from 1999-2001, the Washington Center and the State Board organized seven retreats on cultures and the process of learning held around the state.

The response to the third recommendation, that diversity efforts be linked to accreditation, emerged in 2000 and eventually resulted in the development of the Framework for Diversity

Assessment and Planning. During the fifth annual Faculty and Staff of Color Conference, at one of the most well-attended sessions at the conference, a team of experts from the Commission of the States, including Dr. Mildred Ollee, reported on efforts in other regions to link diversity with accreditation. During the discussion, a suggestion was made for Washington state to explore ways to link diversity with assessment on campuses. A group of people who had helped shape the recommendations from the Multicultural Efforts Project, including staff from the State Board and Washington Center and multicultural affairs directors, organized a meeting with Mildred Ollee to further discuss the idea of linking diversity efforts to accountability and accreditation.

"Conversations about campus diversity efforts are often based in an emotional perspective deeply rooted in a sense of social justice. Developing the framework offered an alternative perspective, a way of looking at diversity issues differently, still rooted in a passion for educational and social justice, but grounded in quantitative evidence."

Rachel Wellman, Multicultural Services Director, Olympic College

Developing the Framework

Based on the outcomes of those two events, the State Board in collaboration with the Washington Center, Dr. Ollee, and representatives from the Multicultural Student Services Directors Council, the Student Services Commission, and the Instruction Commission began work to develop a framework for assessing diversity efforts on campuses. After the first meeting of this community and technical college system committee in July 2001, the group met regularly to identify the areas of a college where diversity should be present. (Residence halls were omitted, given the campuses participating in the initial development of the framework.) In 2002, the committee invited campus institutional researchers to join the group to assist in identifying methodologies for data collection.

The collaborative process used to develop the framework became a powerful professional development opportunity for those involved. Many multicultural affairs professionals do not have a strong background in assessment, while many assessment experts have scant background in multicultural education. The collaboration across roles and expertise affected the learning of everyone, and resulted in a tool that is becoming a catalyst for similar rich conversations on campuses.

Support for the Framework

Several colleges volunteered to pilot the instrument during winter and spring quarters 2003 to provide feedback to the committee on the framework's usability and feasibility. In September 2003, at its final meeting, the committee modified the framework based on the recommendations of the pilot campuses. At its October 2003 quarterly meeting, the Student Services Commission endorsed the instrument and it was subsequently endorsed in November 2003 by the Educational Services Committee of the Washington Association of Community and Technical Colleges (the presidents' group). In May 2004, the Instruction Commission endorsed the framework as an instrument to guide colleges in identifying and effectively addressing issues related to diversity on college campuses.

Campuses that have already piloted the framework find it a valuable tool. For instance, at Everett Community College, Christina Castorena and Darryl Dieter organized one of the most systemic and wide-ranging projects with significant consequences for the campus and wider community. Positions at Everett were reorganized to more easily provide support and accountability

for equity efforts, and Everett's president, Charles Earl, testified to the legislature about the negative impact of imposing higher fees for adult basic education services, using data gathered from the framework to support his view.

Currently, several residential colleges are considering adapting the framework for their campus contexts. Washington Center's Campus Equity and Engagement retreat in November 2004 includes a session on the framework, creating an opportunity for campus teams to share their experiences. In addition, early in 2005, Washington Center will convene a meeting of stakeholders throughout the system, along with members of the original development group, to consider how as a state-wide system, we can support an approach to diversity that is grounded in data available on campuses.

Purpose of the Framework

The framework is based on two assumptions: first, that achieving educational equity for *all* students will remain one of higher education's primary goals; and, second, that colleges are taking steps to become more accountable. The framework has been designed for use by campus teams to assess and improve their *own* institutional efforts; it has not been designed as a basis for comparison with other institutions.

The purpose of the framework is to provide campuses with a tool they can use to assess their efforts in promoting and supporting the academic achievement of students of color. Research shows that the success of students of color is tied to efforts made in all areas of the institution. Furthermore, research shows that when campuses successfully organize to support the academic achievement of students of color, all students benefit.

The framework approaches diversity planning by using data gathered about the external and the internal environment of the institution. This approach has a strong quantitative focus, and it is designed to use information that campuses are likely to have access to. Campuses may choose to develop new methods for gathering information that will enable them to assess their diversity efforts, but because time and resources are so often an obstacle for campus-wide work, the framework relies on "data on hand" as a place to start the conversation. For Rachel Wellman, Multicultural Services Director at Olympic College, the most useful consequence of focusing on institutional data is that when the question of retention comes up, she can now say, "Let's see where we are with instruction. Let's see where we are in terms of

community outreach. Let's see where we are in terms of faculty and staff hiring." Moving multiculturalism from an emotional "feel good" sense to a phenomenon based in tangible data gives campus wide efforts a specific focus. For Ron Leatherbarrow, Executive Dean of Instruction at Bellevue Community College, adopting the framework is a way to build on previous campus diversity efforts, focusing particularly on how diversity work can become part of everyone's work. For instance, Bellevue faculty, staff and administrators are working to make their pluralism initiative part of their strategic plan.

Improving the academic success rates of students of color on a campus requires a campus-wide effort. As the retreat participants in 1998 pointed out, retention (and achievement) have to be everybody's responsibility. Consequently, from its origins, the framework was designed to be used by a team that represents all the divisions of a college with the understanding that the whole team will become involved in both collecting data and planning campus strategies for change.

In practice, the ways campuses have worked with the framework varies. At Olympic College, for instance, Wellman teamed up with Kristy Anderson, the institutional researcher, to gather the data and each worked to understand how the other thought about issues of multiculturalism, institutional change, and responsible data sampling and interpretation. As a result of their intense work, each has developed the ability to consider assessment and multiculturalism as inextricably linked. Together, they have presented data to relevant campus groups, and Wellman notes that her colleagues at Olympic are primarily interested in discussing the implications of the results, rather than the process of gathering the data. Olympic College plans to update its assessment results once every two years to ensure that it continues to make progress.

In order to help teams collect data and information about diversity efforts in a systematic way, the framework divides the work on campuses into eight major categories: access; student progression and achievement; student goal attainment and completion; hiring and retaining staff, faculty, and administrators

"It is not enough to use this framework as a general guide, given the history of privilege in this country and in higher education. We have to move from what we can do to what we must do. We need to hold ourselves and our campuses accountable."

Ron Leatherbarrow, Executive Dean of Instruction, Bellevue Community College

of color; instruction; student services; institutional/administration; physical environment.

Campus teams may elect to collect data and information within one or two of these major categories, but the benefit of the framework as an analytical tool is its comprehensiveness: it crosses divisional lines. Since each category is also com-

prehensive, campus teams need to select an appropriate starting place for data collection within each category, clarifying terms so they make sense within their campus context. To make the process of data collection within a category more manageable, each major category is further divided into sub-categories. Campus teams are invited to focus on those sub-categories that seem most appropriate for their institutions. Wellman points out that a possible source of resistance to using the framework is the fear that it will indicate a campus is not doing something it could be doing. In response, she notes the framework can help make clear why certain approaches are likely to be promising. Furthermore, on her campus, conversations about data gathered through this process have led to more realistic considerations about what can be accomplished given current campus resources.

Gathering information across a range of categories is the first step campus teams take towards developing an action plan. The next step is for teams to examine the data they have collected and talk about what the data means. Based on this discussion, teams move into planning appropriate action, including a plan for assessing the effectiveness of these steps. Ultimately, this approach to planning can lead to the development of an action plan that should be aligned and integrated with other college plans and strategic directions, as is the case at both Olympic College and Bellevue Community College. That alignment is critical. The degree to which the action plan developed through this process is consistent with the college mission, vision and values is an important factor in determining whether the plan will be implemented successfully.

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