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Regional

Issues with diversity on campuses continue

In the current debate about maintaining an ethnically diverse environment on colleges and university campuses, we have been listening to a lot of generalizations. Among the clichés floating around are assertions such as to ensure equal access to higher education to all regardless of racial background or the need to expose students – as part of their education – to the diverse world they will encounter once they graduate. Although all these thoughts are true, they lack “teeth” when it comes to convincing the skeptics for the need of more racially diverse colleges and universities.

However, there are a lot of data that actually support the notion that more diversifying efforts by campuses do indeed further these ideas about what a college education can provide students. Those statistics come from the recent work by several researchers at the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the Higher Education Research Institute of the University of California, Los Angeles.

These researchers found that an increased representation of students of color reduces the racialized vulnerability of minority students, although it has no effect on the frequency with which students of color interact with peers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. In other words, the more diverse the campus, the more likely that minority students will feel comfortable and the more likely they will be to succeed. Yet, at the same time, they may be more likely to keep interacting mostly with people of their own ethnicity, which leads toward self-segregation. Also, they found that white students who enroll at campuses

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with greater proportions of white undergraduates feel less vulnerable and tend to interact less with peers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Also black and Latino students who enroll at more racially diverse campuses are less likely to report incidents of bias or discrimination to campus authorities as compared to their peers who attend less racially diverse colleges.

And diversity as a factor affects not how welcome students feel, but minority faculty as well. For example, the relationship between feeling stressed due to subtle discrimination and research productivity depends upon a faculty member’s race/ethnicity. According to one of their studies, the authors found that white faculty tends to be unaffected in terms of research productivity as their levels of stress due to subtle discrimination increase. By contrast, faculty of color tends to produce significantly less research when they experience greater stress due to subtle discrimination.

Studies like these clearly show not only the need for more diversity on campuses, but also another challenge for colleges and universities on how to achieve more inclusiveness beyond just numbers.

When it comes to recruiting students and faculty, higher education institutions need to be

more deliberate in their efforts. To just pretend that nice words and platitudes in their diversity statements will be enough to attract minority students is not going to be enough. First they need to diversify both faculty and administrators so prospective students and faculty can see more faces like theirs. After all, these minority faculty and administrators will be the ones with whom minority students and faculty will interact the most. Therefore, those faculty and administrators need to actively participate in their diversity efforts.

This is a more important factor that it may seem. Despite the fact that the number of people of color getting into academia has increased, according to a study by the American Council on Education, the number of minorities in leadership positions on campus universities has been decreasing – even at minority serving institutions.

Also these institutions need to be more proactive by making more concerted efforts to go where prospective minority students and faculty are to recruit them. The idea that “if we build it they will come” does not work. These institutions also need to understand that while more diverse faces help, the message coming from these institutions also has to be different.

For example, the kind of message to African-American students will never be the same as the one needed for Latino students. For Latino students, many of who are first-generation college students, family considerations are important and

sometimes require them to put additional efforts in convincing their parents that a college degree makes a tremendous difference both financially and socially. And many times that message needs to be delivered in Spanish.

Also, economic status requires fine-tuning for each case. Even different communities will require different approaches. Latinos from Florida think differently than those from the New York area or from those from California and Southwestern states. These differences are related to the immigration experience as well as issues of discrimination they may have faced in the past.

There are a number of national organizations such as Minority Access Inc., which provides educational institutions useful tools to be more effective in their interactions with minorities, including where to find them and how to interact successfully with a diversity of demographics. Nonetheless, colleges and universities need to have a clear strategy and the right people to carry out those plans.

But together with the increase of diversity is another equally difficult task – ensuring that the problems of integration are also addressed. At the end of the day the issues with diversity require planning, staffing and clear objectives.

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