Multiculturalism and Social Justice in Student Affairs: Functional Area Exploration of the Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs unit at the University of Michigan

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Introduction

Colleges and universities in the United States are increasingly enrolling individuals with many diverse backgrounds and social identities (McClellan & Larimore, 2009). As more students participate in higher education, institutions are challenged with creating inclusive communities in which all students feel welcome. Because of changing demographics, student affairs practitioners need adopt a multicultural lens to work with students’ multiple intersecting identities and practice habits of inclusivity. Institutions of higher education should become multicultural organizations, and help shape socially aware, responsible and civically engaged citizens (Pope, Reynolds & Mueller, 2004). At the University of Michigan, the Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs (MESA) and Trotter Multicultural Center (TMC) function as a unit to promote multicultural awareness with the mission “to promote student development and empower the entire campus community around issues of diversity and social justice through the lens of race and ethnicity” (MESA, n.d.). Further, they “strive to engage and empower students in all of their identities by implementing programs that foster intercultural leadership and strengthen community development. In our ongoing commitment to social justice, we seek to create a campus that is inclusive to all students”. To better understand MESA/TMC’s purpose and goals, it is necessary to examine the theories that guide best practices to promote multiculturalism and social justice in higher education.

A Review of the Literature

The influx of students in higher education as a result of the G.I. Bill that enabled soldiers returning from WWII to attend college prompted unforeseen consequences in the field (Rhatigan, 2009). As new waves of students arrived on campus, they would meet groups with whom they had not previously interacted. Further, institutions would need to accommodate the unique needs of diverse groups of minority and non-traditional students. Thus came the emergence of multiculturalism as a concept in higher education and the practice of educating students in how to
live and work with others of a different background. The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War during the 1960s and 1970s further gave reasons to incorporate this practice as both events precipitated conflicts on college campuses (Pope et al., 2004). However, practitioners were bereft of appropriate theories that would help them manage the new cultural dynamics. Only in the 1980s and 1990s did researchers begin expanding theory on multiculturalism and on the identity developmental needs of different social, racial and ethnic groups.

In tandem with developmental theory, there is a growing body evidence of the educational benefits of increasing structural diversity and inclusivity, and including diversity awareness in college curricula and co-curricular activities (Gurin, Dey, Gurin, Hurtado, 2003; Milem, 2000). Not only do students who interact with diverse peers grow in their critical thinking skills and racial and ethnic understanding, but also they are more likely to practice community service and democratic, inclusive ideals once they leave college. Additionally, minority students who interact with minority faculty and staff may feel more welcome on campus, because of shared experiences (Milem, 2000). Yet, recent controversies around affirmative action in higher education (Tierney & Chung, 2002), the legislation partly reversing race-based undergraduate admissions at the University of Michigan (Gurin et al., 2003), and the passage of Proposition 2 in Michigan, preventing public institutions from considering race and sex for education or employment (Parker, 2007), may adversely affect diversity and multicultural awareness and education on campuses nationwide.

Best Practices in the Field

Despite challenges, Rhoads and Black (1995) believe it is necessary for student affairs to adopt a critical cultural perspective and create more multiculturally aware and inclusive campuses. Yet, given the relative newness of multiculturalism, practitioners are still working to identify best practices with which to educate themselves and others (Pope et al., 2004). According to Rhoads and Black (1995), multiculturalism “embraces the idea of cultural difference and seeks to build
communities where diverse groups and world views coexist” (p.416). Individuals are key in fostering multiculturalism within a community, but must develop a set of competencies to do so. Pope et al. (2004) define multicultural competence “as the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with others who are culturally different from self in meaningful, relevant and productive ways” (p.13). The authors identify thirty-three best practices a student affairs practitioner should develop to become multiculturally competent, and urge practitioners to recognize the uniqueness of their campus’ mission and culture, and the complex web of social identities that exist to better align best practices. Becoming multiculturally competent entails reflecting about and understanding one’s underlying assumptions, and identifying one’s personal theories and the formal theories one uses. One must also examine one’s own and institutional forms of oppression to avoid perpetuating it. To measure an institution’s hidden forms of oppression or alternatively its openness to diversity in terms of equity in educational outcomes, practitioners might apply the Diversity Scorecard Framework, developed by the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California (Bensimmon, 2004). Institutions that use this framework participate in a self-study to collect evidence on the inequities among underrepresented students and work to remove them. It is expected that engaging in this exercise will result in collaborative exchange and action among community members and prompt institutional change to increase equity and diversity.

In addition to becoming aware of attitudes and behaviors, practitioners should gain in depth knowledge of current and emerging theories and cultural constructs related to specific groups on campus (Pope et al., 2004). They should also acquire skills in evaluating theory to apply it to their campuses or to certain contexts or groups. In practice, theories should serve as templates for comparison and individualized to become more meaningful when interacting with different groups. It is important to recognize that multicultural growth takes place at different rates and is often “messy” and unpredictable. Thus, practitioners should value the process rather than solely focus on
outcomes. They must also commit to ongoing professional development, diversity training, assessment and evaluation to identify areas for improvement.

It can be overwhelming to attempt to apply best practices because of the variability between campuses. Practitioners should consult professional standards such as those articulated by the Council for the Assessment of Standards (CAS), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and the National Association of Student Personnel and Administrators (NASPA) (Pope et al., 2004). To reiterate, practitioners should then identify best practices that fit their institutions and find “common ground among divergent opinions” rather than develop “a unified mission for student affairs” (Blimling & Whitt, 1999, as cited by Pope et al., 2004). Additionally, Pope et al. (2004) stress the importance of leaders in fostering change. Leaders should communicate unwritten rules staff members might not be aware of, as knowledge about these rules is essential for an organization to work as a unit within an institution. Leaders must also take risks, engage in creative conflict, and target all levels of the institution through systematic intervention so multiculturalism becomes part of the culture and not the sole mission of an individual (Pope et al., 2004).

It is crucial for higher education to incorporate multiculturalism to create a more egalitarian environment where minority perspectives are accepted and valued (Rhoads & Black, 1995). Edwards (2006) reminds us that to help students develop into effective social justice allies, we need to break down stereotypes, and work with rather than for those who have been oppressed. In this way, individuals of the dominant cultures may avoid paternalistic interactions with members of minority groups, and practice fairness to achieve institutional transformation (Manning, 2009).

Student Development Theories

Creating a multiculturally diverse and inclusive community hinges on promoting student identity development. Thus, institutions and practitioners use identity development theories as a foundational base with which to advance programming and initiatives (Jones & McEwan, 2000). To
that end, there are numerous identity development theories that address specific development processes for minority groups. Hardiman and Jackson (1997) synthesized these theories in the Social Identity Development Model that elucidates the process of how members of agent (majority) and target (minority) groups understand themselves in relation to others. Additionally their model highlights the dynamics of social oppression and how these are perpetuated. Practitioners can use this framework to help students become aware of notions of privilege and subordination, and how they consciously or unconsciously benefit or suffer from them (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). As Laker and Davis (2009) highlight, it is essential to recognize social oppression and talk about it. Only then can progress towards creating a more inclusive campus occur.

Another model used to promote an inclusive environment involves addressing the multiple dimensions of students’ identity (Jones & McEwan, 2000). Recognizing students’ intersecting identities enables practitioners to understand the whole student and to create spaces where students feel comfortable expressing their entire selves. Similar to Hardiman and Jackson (1997), Jones and McEwan (2000) note individuals with privileged identities often lack awareness or salience of their advantage, as opposed to those with less privileged identities, e.g. homosexuals or black women. Again, practitioners should encourage students of the majority culture to examine their own identities and recognize and accept those of others.

Practitioners can also help students practice multiculturalism by helping transform them into interculturally sensitive individuals. Bennett (1993) created the Development Model for Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) in which he identifies several intercultural competencies such as self-awareness, tolerance, empathy and patience, essential for students to gain as they progress through the model’s stages. The DMIS could be combined with King and Baxter Magolda’s (2005)

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1 This notion of appreciating the whole student is not new to Student Affairs. As early as 1937, with the publication Student Personnel Point of View of practitioners advocated this practice (Rhatigan, 2009; Rhoads & Black, 1995).
Model for Intercultural Maturity to help students competently engage with a global society and deal with issues of diversity and difference without feeling that their identity is threatened. This model posits that intercultural maturity is the ability for students to apply their knowledge across various contexts, and acquire mature competencies within the cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions that increase their awareness and understanding about how they fit in a multicultural community. Loyola Marymount University in California is an example of an institution that seems to have applied these theoretical models to integrate and diffuse interculturalism throughout its institution. It created an intercultural framework that articulates the importance of focusing on holistic student development and engaging in diversity and cross-cultural exchange both inside and outside the classroom (Robinson-Armstrong, 2005).

Practitioners would also facilitate their task of promoting multiculturalism by creating a culture of student leaders who can educate their peers on campus. Thus learning partnerships should occur both between practitioners and students, and among the student population, thereby empowering students to take responsibility for their own and others’ education. To that end, Komives et al. (2006) created the Leadership Identity Development Model (LID), which provides that every student has the capacity to be a leader and help others develop, regardless of whether they are in a leadership position. The Multicultural Information Center, the multicultural unit at the University of Texas, Austin, seems to incorporate the LID model as many of its programs include multicultural and ethnic and race specific leadership institutes (University of Texas, M.I.C., n.d.).

It might be appropriate for institutions of higher education to adopt the Multicultural Organizational Development Model (MCOD) as a structural guide (Wall & Obear, 2008). This model incorporates a social justice perspective with the goal of eradicating social oppression and transforming organizations into diverse systems through questioning and assessing underlying beliefs, practices and core values (Pope et al., 2004). It also outlines steps to create assessment and
intervention plans, implement interventions and design evaluation processes to sustain organizational efforts. Another useful model is the Multicultural Change Intervention Matrix (MCIM), which has applications for creating systematic change in the short and long term. It helps institutions conceptualize and align goals with their mission and can be applied in student affairs and academic affairs as it assists practitioners and faculty to determine and achieve outcomes for their programs and/or courses (Pope et al., 2004).

**From Theory to Practice: The Work of MESA/TMC at the University of Michigan**

After gathering information on theories and best practices for creating multicultural institutions, I spoke with Nina Grant, the director of MESA and TMC about the unit’s work and practices (personal communication, October 21, 2010). Prior to MESA, U-M created the Office of Special Services and Programs for students of color in 1972, which became the Office of Minority Student Affairs in 1977. In 1995, it officially became the office of Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs and joined forces with the William Trotter Multicultural Center. TMC owes its origins to the Black Action Movement strike at U-M in the 1970s, which led to the creation of a cultural center for Black students in 1971. In 1981, it broadened its focus and became a multicultural center and a space for student group meetings (Grant, 2010; MESA, n.d.).

According to the Ms. Grant, MESA has undergone organizational changes in the past two years to better align with its mission and vision, and those of U-M and the Division of Student Affairs (DSA) to embrace the whole student within a diverse community and to better prepare future leaders (DSA, n.d.). In the past, MESA relied on the Ethnic Coordinator Model, which encourages hiring of minority staff to work with a specific ethnic group. It discarded this model because the DSA and MESA recognized that it did not support intercultural work and excluded groups such as multiracial students, allies, and Muslim and Arab American students, although the 2003 lawsuits regarding affirmative action at U-M may have indirectly impacted this decision. The
unit’s staff now includes a multicultural student services manager, an intercultural development manager and a community development program manager to embody its values of inclusivity and respect and create cross-cultural partnerships among different groups at U-M. This restructuring also aligns with its work of community building and helping students develop intercultural and leadership skills.

In essence, MESA assists individuals to understand their own communities, recognize multiculturalism and the existence of communities beyond their own, and acquire competencies to navigate differences, achieve successful interactions and engage in transformational learning experiences (N. Grant, personal communication, October 21, 2010). To that end, MESA offers academic and social programs and opportunities in which all members of the university can participate and thereby develop a sense of connectedness (MESA, n.d.). MESA uses several student development models in their practice (Grant, 2010), but adheres to Bennett’s (1993) Development Model for Intercultural Sensitivity to guide its programming and initiatives, because it is inclusive and beneficial for students from any background and skill level. The office does not apply any organizational model, though Ms. Grant has received MCOD training, which is useful when considering DSA’s structure as a whole.

MESA specifically sponsors the Support for Incoming Black Students (SIBS) and Assisting Latinos to Maximize Achievement (ALMA), two programs for incoming students, in addition to the Black Student Union (BSU), the South Asian Awareness Network (SAAN), and other similar organizations. It also coordinates Nourish, a lunch series for self-identified women of color with the Office of Counseling and Psychological Services. Ms. Grant specified that MESA worked with the Spectrum Center to come up with the term self-identified to ensure the series is inclusive of all women, including allies, and different genders and sexualities. These organizations may receive
some funding from MESA, but more importantly receive advice and support in how to carry out programs, obtain funding, and navigate the university’s structure to reach out to the community.

Additionally, MESA celebrates heritage months and invites participants with multiple identities, i.e. Latina Lesbian speakers, to highlight inclusivity. It also organizes the Taste of Culture and Year End Community Festivals. Ms. Grant was especially excited about the recent Taste of Culture festival because she witnessed cross-cultural interaction taking place. MESA also conducts community summits to increase intergroup dialogue about the needs of different groups on campus, and other initiatives related to racial and ethnic diversity. However, offices such as Intergroup Relations (IGR) and the Office of Multicultural Initiatives (OAMI) at U-M do related work, thus providing partnership opportunities to promote similar goals. Yet, Ms. Grant noted that the size and decentralization of U-M sometimes makes it difficult to identify the differences between units and the reasons they “do what they do”.

MESA recognizes several other racial, ethnic, religious, academic, artistic and Greek student groups, though does not directly sponsor them. These groups populate the floors of the TMC until it closes, and some organizations share office space in the building. These groups provide space where community members meet and exchange ideas, dialogue, frustrations and challenges related to issues of diversity and social justice they encounter in their daily lives.

MESA distributes small grants for initiatives that promote awareness of diversity and social justice, and build campus community and student leadership. These grants are included in the MESA/TMC operational budget, which this year consists of $715,000, and covers salaries, community events, and maintenance, etc. Because of university-wide constraints, the unit’s budget was cut by 1% and likely will sustain future cuts. This may affect the funding of programs and groups under the unit’s purview, but MESA will strive to keep student programs intact. It also means that staff will not to be able to participate in as many conferences and other professional
development opportunities. However, MESA/TMC’s staff is committed to self-development and engages in daily, weekly and yearly assessment and evaluation. Staff meetings allow for everyone to reflect on lessons learned, what went well and areas that need improvement to reach proposed goals. Staff members also often attend informational events and examine the history of student groups, e.g. the Order of Angels, to inform their work.

To assess and evaluate the unit’s effectiveness, Ms. Grant primarily consults the CAS standards, but applies these loosely as MESA is unique to U-M and its generally high performing and self-selecting student population. MESA is not as comprehensive as other multicultural organizations, which offer academic support services, and actively participate in student recruitment and retention. To assess students’ learning outcomes from participation MESA sponsored events and programs, it conducts student interviews and post-event surveys. However, several programs are not formally assessed. Instead, MESA relies on staff observations of student engagement and participation, but is currently developing more formal assessment plans to measure student development and competencies gained.

Much of MESA’s work and practices align with the best practices found in the literature. As a leader, Ms. Grant continually consults with colleagues at U-M and at other institutions to identify innovative practices and areas for improvement. However, MESA is evolving as a unit because of its recent restructuring and new staff members. They are still adjusting to campus culture and the rules governing the university. Despite these growing pains, staff members are committed to communicating that MESA/TMC welcomes and serves students of any and all identities. Likewise, they strive to actively listen and help students understand their intersecting identities, thus embracing a holistic development. Ms. Grant believes the university as a whole is committed to exemplifying the “Michigan Difference” and sustaining diversity, particularly in light of the 2003
affirmative action lawsuits. Thus, the community facilitates and supports MESA/TMC’s work because it is “in tune” with multiculturalism, though there is always room for progress.

**By way of conclusion**

This inquiry into how a unit within student affairs can promote multiculturalism and diversity awareness by no means provides an exhaustive overview of the best practices to create a socially just and inclusive university community. Likewise, it offers just a glimpse into the valuable work done by MESA/TMC. However, it gives an introduction to the ways to best support student and organizational development and prepare individuals to embrace the challenge of participating in a global society. The most important lesson gleaned from this exploration is that it is essential that student affairs practitioners approach their work with a multicultural perspective.
References


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