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Diversity Plans Can't Breathe without AIIR: Building a High-Caliber Diversity Initiative

By Rachel Ann Brooks, Tayo Clyburn, Lyonel Milton, Russell Valentino, Bonnie Walker and Damon A. Williams - October 17, 2018



For one intensive month this summer, we participated in an online leadership development program, the National Inclusive Excellence Leadership Academy (NIXLA), with nearly 100 leaders from across the country. The twin goals of the program were to hone our strategic diversity leadership skills and strengthen our best-practice too kit of resources, frameworks, and tactics for leading real change that we can see and feel on our campuses in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

During the five-week program, we worked on the same strategy team, despite emerging from five different universities, each with unique institutional structures, challenges, strengths, and opportunities: Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Indiana University, the University of Michigan, Purdue University, and The Ohio State University.

With the help of Damon Williams, PhD, NIXLA convener and a co-author of this article, we focused our “institutional transformation project” on creating a best practice framework for diversity plan implementation, designed to support the efforts of our home institutions. Through our research, we realized that several best practice frameworks already exist, but “snapshot” versions that include pitfalls to avoid are not common. With this in mind, we created a guide with explicit instructions for avoiding pitfalls paired with critical advice for advancing diversity and inclusion implementation.

Our framework is based on a key theme that we emphasized during the program — namely, that “diversity plans can't breathe without AIIR: Accountability, Infrastructure, Incentives, and Resources.”

Accountability

Create accountability systems that are felt up, down, and across the institution. Major institutional initiatives must have clear goals tied to strategies, metrics, and stories of impact; and they must be shared across the organization at every level in order to meet them, collectively.

You should develop an annual campus diversity report, as well as campus diversity reports that are made public to the campus community, as well as your highest governance community. These tactics create transparency regarding where we are, and where we are going on institutional diversity-related matters.

Campus-wide accountability systems must be complimented by individual level accountability systems. Some examples might include building diversity questions into individual performance reviews, merit considerations, faculty activity reports, five-year reviews, and hiring and promotional systems. While these tactics are used less frequently than institutional accountability systems, they are essential to shifting the culture of our institutions, by making diversity and inclusion a part of what is counted at not only the broad institutional level, but at the level of individual leadership, decision making, teaching, student development, and scholarship.

Infrastructure

Your campus diversity infrastructure must include a diversity plan that is activated campus-wide; senior leadership that prioritizes diversity in their budget and policies; an infrastructure of officers, units, and divisions that make diversity and inclusion matters their first priority; and a lateral diversity infrastructure of committees, liaisons, and champions.

Senior leadership at the executive, dean, and governance levels are essential to implementing a major campus diversity initiative. If this level of leadership is not engaged, then the effort can be meaningful, but it will not extend across the various formal and informal structures of the campus.

Another important aspect of your infrastructure is to develop a strong strategic diversity plan. This plan should include tactics, accountability measures, incentives, and a budget. Remember, that most plans fail because participants either don't know the goals or are unclear of how to behave differently to achieve the goal. A major aspect of your plan should focus on learning and skill development.

Form a planning team with a budget to support their work, engage senior leaders and a cross-section of students, faculty, and staff from across campus, solicit input and get campus engagement before moving forward with a new plan. Don't re-invent the wheel. Map what is going on across campus, assess strengths and weakness areas, and build from what works, scale up great things that are already happening, and turn the lights off on efforts that may have run their course. The key is to build a dynamic diversity infrastructure for the 21st century, not simply continue legacy efforts that may be missing the mark today.

When developing your chief diversity officer and other dedicated diversity roles and units, follow the evidence on sound organizational design. Don't just create positions with big titles, no budgets, and no ability to help catalyze change on campus. Diversity officer roles need senior leadership support, the budget to seed new initiatives, and support to create, innovate, and collaboratively disrupt the status quo.

When developing your lateral diversity infrastructure, remember to give your diversity and inclusion committees a clear charge, budget, and a mandate to get things done.

Finally, every school, college, and divisional area should have a diversity point person or liaison. This person should be able to lead change locally, as well as insuring fidelity and connection to the campus-wide effort.

Incentives

Actualizing implementation and incentivizing leaders to get involved is imperative. If accountability techniques are “push techniques” to drive the diversity and inclusion effort forward, incentive systems are “pull techniques” designed to create symbolic and entrepreneurial energy to drive change.

Competing priorities and calls to action are prevalent at every higher education institution. Create reasons for campus partners to follow through. Create positive energy and goodwill associated with your diversity and inclusion efforts through rewards. Identify people who are sparking progressive change.

If your campus is successfully engaged in campus diversity efforts, apply for recognitions such as the *INSIGHT Into Diversity* Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award.

In addition, create your own campus diversity awards for teaching excellence, leadership, community service, and more. Recognition is key to creating the type of symbolic energy that can be used to get more individuals involved, because you are building individual and institutional reputation by acknowledging the good work that is happening on campus.

It's also important to create diversity innovation grant programs that allow for the campus community to tap into resources that allow them to be innovative and creative in their approach to change.

Resources

Every diversity plan requires resources to be successful. Leaders must make financial investments, to launch new or stronger diversity efforts. This means reallocating budgets, developing fundraising initiatives, and reallocating money towards diversity that may have been earmarked for another area.

For example, use the remaining funds from student meal plan sales at year-end to feed students who are homeless and hungry. Allocate some of the earnings from institutional licensing and apparel agreements to support a campus-wide diversity and innovation fund. Consider a mere one percent strategic reallocation of all budgets campus-wide to drive a new diversity and innovation venture capital fund under the leadership of the chief diversity officer. These are just some of the ways to use financial techniques to fund under the radar diversity efforts.

Remember, your greatest resources are your people. Consult the wealth of resources at your fingertips, including diversity, equity, and inclusion leaders and champions in your network. Launch your internal work plan with point leaders and targeted departmental support.

Most importantly, develop “strategic diversity leaders” at the student, faculty, staff, and executive level. More people today want to get involved in the change effort than ever before. They simply don't know how!

Diversity landscapes vary significantly from one institution to another. But knowing best practices and what to avoid can save time, resources, and energy, and provide direction for success. This work is important and must strategically align with individual institutional values and goals. Don't assume that you can take a plan developed elsewhere and apply it to your institution — one size does not fit all; every organization has its own unique needs. •

Rachel Ann Brooks is director of diversity and inclusion at Purdue University. Tayo Clyburn, PhD, is executive director for mission and strategic partnerships at The Ohio State University. Lyonel Milton is managing director of the Center for Engineering Diversity and Outreach at the University of Michigan. Russell Valentino is associate dean for diversity and inclusion and international affairs in the College of Arts and Sciences at Indiana University. Bonnie Walker is executive director for diversity and inclusion strategy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. Damon A. Williams, PhD, is chief catalyst of the Center for Strategic Diversity Leadership and Social Innovation and a senior scholar in Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is also a member of the *INSIGHT Into Diversity* Editorial Board.



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