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How to Ensure 'HSI' is Not a Mere Title

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How to Ensure 'HSI' Is Not a Mere Title

3/14/2018

In this week's class, the main focus of our discussion was UWM's initiative to become a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). HSIs are colleges and universities where the population of Hispanic students enrolled comprises 25% of the institution's total enrollment. According to UWM's press announcement about its upcoming initiative, HSIs "are eligible for funding to support student recruitment and retention, faculty development, community outreach and more." The announcement is, as you'd probably imagine, full of buzzwords and quotes from university officials that work as perfect sound bites to drum up excitement for this next chapter at UWM.

Excuse me if I sound bitter—it's not that I don't think this initiative sounds exciting and rife with opportunity. It's just that I'm often wary of such announcements due to the fact that, more often than not, these initiatives are deployed only on the surface level—meaning that they make for great PR, but don't actually do much to serve the communities they're claiming to assist. My classmates seemed to share my apprehension. The term "tokenizing" was woven tightly into our conversation. By targeting a group specifically, even with supposedly positive intentions, are we not merely reminding that group that they are the "other"? How does a university truly and effectively serve these students while simultaneously working to ensure that they are actually being helped, not just singled out in order to check off some boxes?

While our class is certainly not a group of experts, and it is impossible to find concrete answers to these questions within the course of a few hours, we did manage to come up with several ideas that we felt would assist our or any university in its journey to becoming a true Hispanic-Serving Institution—or, ideas that would serve any institution in becoming more inclusive and effective, whether they hold the title of HSI or not. (Disclaimer: although this blog post is my own, these ideas are the result of a class-wide discussion, and I by no means want to take sole credit for them). Here's the list we compiled:

1. Diversify curriculum and faculty. It's hardly a secret that the mainstream curriculum at most colleges and universities abides by a very specific tradition—that of white, Western males. In UWM's announcement about the plans to become an HSI, Chancellor Mark Mone said that these efforts "will benefit all students through a learning environment that prepares them for today's world." If we truly want to prepare students for "today's world," then it is vital that they be exposed to voices both within and outside of their own communities, both through their coursework and their institution's faculty.

2. Incorporate public texts and linguistic diversity into classrooms. While it's certainly important for students in higher education to engage with academic texts, we must recognize that not everyone who has important stories to tell or is doing critical work within their given field is going to be releasing their work through that medium. Just because someone does not use an arsenal of sophisticated vocabulary or isn't getting published within a prestigious journal does not mean that their work should go ignored. Further, this sort of work is not necessarily what resonates with all students. Instructors should work to find a variety of voices distributing their work in a variety of ways—perhaps through blogs, various forms of social media, and other public forums—to spotlight voices that may otherwise go ignored in academia.

3. Change terms, not just content. Many students are not only unfamiliar with traditional academic vernacular, but also run the risk of feeling alienated in the classroom due to this unfamiliarity. Instructors should work with their students to figure out what sort of vernacular their students are comfortable with, incorporate it into class discussions, and help students to most effectively utilize it within their work (while treading lightly, of course, so as to not become

appropriate). This may sound like a tall order, and we're not calling for the common vocabulary of academia to change overnight—just a simple willingness on the part of instructors to acknowledge the vernacular their students are comfortable with is a good start.

4. Be comfortable with the fact that you're not always the expert. Bringing different voices into the classroom and encouraging students to embrace their own vernacular and language means that instructors will often have to step out of their comfort zone. We cannot be afraid to allow the dynamics between instructor and student shift a bit—sometimes, they will be the expert and teacher, and we will have to defer to their expertise.

I'm sure this list could go on—in fact, it should. These are merely a few ideas of how the university could and should go forward as it works to achieve the title of HSI.

-CES