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Shifting the onus from racial/ethnic minority students to faculty: Accountability for culturally inclusive pedagogy and curricula

Abstract

In this article, our goal is to personalize the concerns of diverse student populations and encourage faculty to intentionally incorporate cultural inclusion into their pedagogy and their courses. In light of a student's story (Julian) story and the responses of some of his peers, we emphasize that the onus needs to shift from students, who are expected to adjust to insensitive and monocultural classroom environments, to faculty, who need to change their teaching approaches to benefit an increasingly diverse array of students.

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Faculty Accountability for Culturally Inclusive Pedagogy and Curricula

Accountability for culturally inclusive curricula and pedagogy is necessary in order to shift the onus from students to faculty

JULIAN IS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN college student. All of his professors, and the overwhelming majority of his classmates, are white. In fact, as he approaches the end of his senior year, Julian has not had a single instructor who was not white. He and his same-race peers often meet at the black culture center on campus to decompress and reflect on instances of marginality that repeatedly arise in their predominantly white classroom environments. Their frustration at the cultural negligence with which their professors approach teaching and learning is among the usual topics of conversation. Having somehow survived almost four years at a university that remained unresponsive to his cultural needs and interests, Julian has emerged as a mentor and self-appointed peer adviser for younger African American students who gather at the black culture center for support.

Julian actively encourages the other African American students to assume increased levels of cultural ownership of their educational journeys. Specifically, when they complain about the absence of Africentric perspectives in the curriculum, their professors' blatant disregard for multiculturalism in class discussions, and their disappointment

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with the limited opportunities to learn about their cultural selves and diverse others in the classroom, Julian discusses his approach to "filling in the gaps" in his own educational experience. He supplements assigned course readings with culturally relevant books and essays written by black authors and other scholars of color. Despite having asked several of his white professors for help, Julian has had to search for this body of knowledge on his own. Also, he spent the spring semester of his junior year studying in West Africa. Julian pursued this opportunity not because a professor encouraged him to do so, but because he realized on his own that this would likely be his only formal opportunity in college to learn about the history and origins of his people. He often shares photos and details from the trip and encourages other African American students to seek out similar educational and cultural ventures.

Aside from advice on making curricula more culturally relevant for themselves, Julian also teaches his younger peers how to speak up for themselves and demand that their voices be represented in classroom dialogues. His approach entails the voluntary provision of a black perspective on course topics, the unsolicited sharing of his own life story as it relates to course content, and the introduction of facts and histories that extend beyond (and sometimes contradict) the white viewpoints offered in assigned readings and reinforced by his professors. While this approach works well for Julian, most students in the peer group are afraid to question their professors' intellectual authority and selection of readings. Likewise, they are reluctant to insist upon the inclusion

of cultural perspectives that faculty at the university obviously deem unimportant.

Not all of the African American students who engage in these conversations at the black culture center agree with Julian's approach. Some take issue with his willingness to assume work for which faculty are paid. One student recently said to Julian, "Just like the administrators at this university, you are willing to let these professors off the hook. No one holds them accountable for meeting my needs and enhancing the cultural learning experiences of all students in the classroom. I shouldn't have to do this work for them." Outside of the black culture center, Julian engages his white roommate and friends from different racial backgrounds in related conversations. Like the African American students, Julian's other peers also complain that the classroom offers few opportunities to learn about cultural diversity and multicultural perspectives. "Were it not for my interactions with you, I would feel culturally illiterate and insufficiently prepared to work with people who are not white," Julian's roommate asserted.

In this article, our goal is to personalize these concerns of diverse student populations and encourage faculty to intentionally incorporate cultural inclusion into their pedagogy and their courses. Julian's story is a composite of perspectives shared by the 219 participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study,* many of whom described similar approaches to assuming cultural ownership for their learning in classrooms on thirty predominantly white campuses. In light of Julian's story and the responses of some of his peers, we emphasize that the onus needs to shift from students, who are expected to adjust to insensitive and monocultural classroom environments, to faculty, who need to change their teaching approaches to benefit an increasingly diverse array of students.

Accountability and diversity

Accountability has become a prominent movement within higher education. No longer can institutions of higher learning simply rely on anecdotal accounts of student learning. Faculty and administrators now must document student learning and achievement through the systematic assessment of outcomes. Alongside the accountability movement is the use of "diversity" as a buzzword

within most, if not all, colleges and universities. One would be hard-pressed to find an institution whose mission does not include helping students appreciate diversity. Yet, students continue to grapple with learning how to value the differing experiences and perspectives their peers bring to the campus. If students are to benefit from the gains associated with classroom diversity, faculty must respond to the accountability movement by holding themselves accountable for offering culturally inclusive pedagogy and curricula.

In 2002, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education issued fifty "incomplete" grades in its 2000 and 2002 state-by-state report cards, *Measuring Up.* The center deemed evidence of student learning both inconclusive and insufficient in all fifty states. State policy makers and regional accrediting agencies are responding by requiring institutions to engage in purposeful and systematic assessment efforts to confirm claims of educational effectiveness. The center's report incited an accountability wave to create measurable learning goals. Since learning and engagement are inextricably bound, and students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be engaged when faculty expose them to multicultural perspectives, it is clearly appropriate to connect classroom diversity with accountability.

Acknowledging the outcomes

Cognitive development, perspective-taking, critical thinking skills, academic achievement, and problem-solving skills are among the outcomes that researchers have consistently noted in studies about the effects of inclusive pedagogy and curricula. Accordingly, engaging in meaningful, but sometimes uncomfortable, discussions about racial/ethnic, gender, religious, and socioeconomic differences, as well as privilege in all its forms, affords students opportunities to think critically about topics to which they previously had not been exposed. When faculty interweave multicultural perspectives into classroom discourse, students can challenge preconceived notions and learn about the unique knowledge that their peers of diverse backgrounds hold and bring to the classroom.

Octavio Villalpando (2002) studied the effects of diversity on student learning among 15,600 undergraduate students from 365

postsecondary institutions. He found that after four years of college, students were most satisfied with faculty who employed methodologies that respected and were inclusive of cultural differences; constructed welcoming environments for sharing cultural perspectives; and required writing assignments that challenged students to think critically about diversity and equity issues. Villalpando's findings do not apply only to minority students; white students reported the same outcomes.

In their study of the educational benefits of diversity within higher education, researchers Patricia Gurin, Eric Dey, Sylvia Hurtado, and Gerald Gurin establish that curricula that expose students to racial and ethnic diversity enhance intellectual engagement and active

It is clearly appropriate to connect classroom diversity with accountability

thinking skills. "The success of these curricular initiatives," they report, "is facilitated by the presence of diverse students and pedagogy that facilitates learning in a diverse environment. In conclusion, we find that education is enhanced by extensive and meaningful informal interracial interaction" (2002, 359). In the example above, Julian searched for readings and experiences on his own that reflected diversity since his professors relied exclusively on white, mainstream perspectives. As a result, neither he nor his white peers benefited from the type of classroom learning environment Gurin and her colleagues describe.

Similarly, Richard Light (2001) found that students at Harvard University consistently reported educational gains accrued through

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meaningful interactions with diverse peers and exposure to multicultural academic content. Approximately 93 percent of the students Light interviewed recalled moments in their educational experiences when a comment from a peer provoked them to think differently. This was especially true for white participants in the study, as they were affected most positively through interactions with their racially and ethnically different peers. Light concluded that it is important for educators to capitalize on such educational moments that allow students to interrogate and rethink their assumptions in order to facilitate meaningful learning.

Where's the accountability?

Despite the abundance of evidence showing the positive effects of diversity on student learning, most college and university instructors continue to teach in culturally neutral ways. Faculty socialization is conceivably the most salient explanatory factor. More often than not, faculty members have not been trained to seek out and infuse diverse readings and pedagogical methods into their courses. Most of the professors they had as graduate students did not model an appreciation for multiculturalism, emphasize cultural inclusiveness in their socialization efforts, or engage in culturally empowering pedagogical practices. Therefore, it is no surprise that graduate students enter

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the professoriate and recycle the content, knowledge, and teaching behaviors of their former professors.

When students are exposed only to white, dominant perspectives, they come to believe that viewpoints from other racial and ethnic groups are trivial and lack value, intellectual worth, and scholarly credibility. Julian's story exemplifies this point. The black culture center was the only place on campus where the experiences of African American students mattered. Since faculty devalued the knowledge of other cultural groups, classroom spaces were exclusive. If professors were critically to examine their classroom practices and assigned course materials, the extent to which they are (or are not) welcoming of multiple groups would likely become apparent.

Another reason many professors fail to capitalize on the opportunities that increased classroom diversity can offer students is because it is more convenient and safer to ignore diversity. Mildred Garcia and Daryl Smith (1996) assert that educators at most institutions continue to use monocultural, rather than multicultural, methods to engage students. Christine Bennett insists that "when predominantly white campuses serving culturally diverse populations take a business-as-usual or assimilationist approach, they allow institutional and cultural racism to persist" (2001, 674). Like Garcia and Smith, Bennett draws attention to the fact that most professors still expect students to assimilate to white cultural norms and practices, while overlooking contributions from other racial and ethnic groups. Changing pedagogy and curricula to be reflective of diverse experiences and viewpoints inevitably will lead to conflict among students who come from differing vantage points. It is therefore safer and easier to avoid the potential friction between students and focus on the white, heteronormative content and knowledge that is already dominant.

Academic freedom is another barrier to holding faculty accountable. Since most professors maintain autonomy over what and how they teach, it remains difficult to
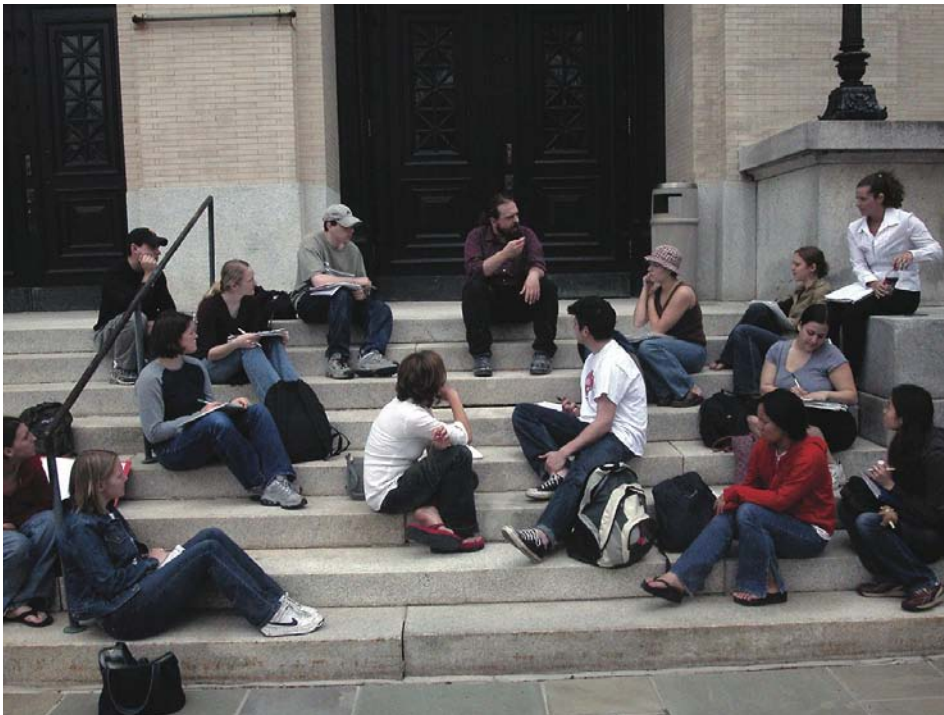
require these educators, especially those with tenure, to purposefully weave diverse content into their courses. One way to bring about a paradigmatic shift toward accountability among faculty colleagues within a particular program, department, college, or school is to engage them in conversations about the well-documented outcomes associated with infusing multiculturalism into curricula and pedagogy. Faculty are often motivated by evidence and results; therefore, providing empirical evidence to demonstrate the concrete student learning outcomes achieved through exposure to classroom climates of cultural inclusiveness can compel faculty members to hold themselves more accountable for rethinking their pedagogical philosophies and practices. Regardless of the various reasons faculty do not employ culturally inclusive content and teaching methods in their courses, accountability must be constantly reinforced and given greater importance within various academic units.

Faculty who endeavor to respect diversity in their courses and teach students about content that might be unfamiliar to them are often placed at the margins of their institutions

differences. Doing so challenges the "business-as-usual" approach and validates the unique knowledge that members of other cultural groups possess. Likewise, department chairs and deans should engage faculty in dialogues and exercises that illuminate the urgent need to diversify curricula within their departments and schools. More specifically, by engaging in collaborative peer review, faculty can receive feedback on the readings and other materials they select for their courses. This practice can enable faculty who struggle with identifying multicultural literature to build on the expertise and knowledge of their colleagues, thus enhancing their own knowledge. Moreover, soliciting input from students of all backgrounds regarding their affective dispositions toward selected content and readings is vital to holding oneself accountable. Students are best positioned to confirm that readings and materials reflect perspectives about which they are unfamiliar and that would afford multiple, sustained opportunities to learn from and about others.

Curriculum and course content

The curriculum itself communicates important messages about the importance of diversity (or the lack thereof). On the first day of classes, when students browse the syllabi created by their professors, do they see readings that mainly reflect white, conventional perspectives? Including works by diverse authors is essential to maximizing student learning outcomes, such as critical thinking, perspective-taking, and appreciation of differences. Only acknowledging the experiences of African American students during Black History Month and compartmentalizing underrepresented student experiences into one "diversity course" or single class unit treats them as "add-on" topics to the curriculum. These practices tokenize students from different cultural backgrounds and diminish student learning.

Faculty cannot depend exclusively on the course content to which they were exposed during graduate school. Instead, they must hold themselves accountable for introducing new literature to which they might be unaccustomed in order to enable students to understand

Pedagogy and classroom practices

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, author and activist bell hooks describes a dilemma that frequently arises in postsecondary classrooms:

> Often, if there is a lone person of color in the classroom she or he is objectified by others and forced to assume the role of "native informant." For example, a novel is read by a Korean American author. White students turn to the one student from a Korean background to explain what they do not understand. This places an unfair responsibility onto that student. (1994, 43)

Julian's story depicts the "native informant" role that is all too familiar for many underrepresented students. Relying entirely on racial and ethnic minority students to provide the "multicultural viewpoint" is problematic because it disengages these students and does not afford white students the opportunity to challenge their own preconceived notions while striving to learn about differences. In addition to engendering feelings of embarrassment and tokenism among minority students, this culturally insensitive practice does not

enable white students to connect their cultural backgrounds to the readings and materials presented in the course. Inviting all students to bring their unique cultural experiences and perspectives to classroom discourse is a more productive way to help students achieve the diversity-related learning outcomes. If professors purposefully employ pedagogical techniques that empower white students to also reflect publicly on their cultural similarities and differences, perhaps racial and ethnic minority students would not feel that they are being singled out and pressured to offer the multicultural perspective.

Texas A&M professors Christine Stanley and Yvonna Lincoln stress the importance of cross-race mentoring in order to retain minority faculty and facilitate their success as educators:

> To demand that a marginalized faculty group conform to conventional research agendas serves only to create the impression that non-mainstream research is without value, that diversity is respected only insofar as it conforms to majority interests, and that faculty of color are to some degree incapable of laying out research agendas of their own. (2005, 48)

Like the students who are expected to serve as "native informants," faculty who endeavor to respect diversity in their courses and teach students about content that might be unfamiliar to them are often placed at the margins of their institutions. As Stanley and Lincoln maintain, it is important that professors from dominant groups hold themselves accountable for learning new culturally inclusive pedagogical techniques. This form of accountability ensures that responsibility moves from the student to the professor, particularly among faculty members from dominant groups whose contributions are already provided ample space in curricula.

Self-reflection

It takes honesty and self-reflection to admit that one's courses do not currently incorporate non-mainstream perspectives. Similarly, facilitating opportunities for students to learn through different views, content, and pedagogy will fail unless faculty members examine their own assumptions, biases, and knowledge

When espoused and enacted values are disconnected, student learning is stifled

insufficiencies and assume responsibility for learning how to infuse diversity throughout the curriculum. According to Marcia Baxter Magolda, "students perceive education as 'not made for them' when it does not acknowledge, respect, and connect to their experience and perspectives. Hostile learning environments created by marginalization of particular students interfere with learning" (2001, 234). Baxter Magolda calls upon educators to reflect on their teaching practices and how they contribute to placing certain student groups on the fringes while privileging others. Because white, normalized standpoints routinely receive attention within the classroom, faculty who do not regularly examine the types of readings and content they use are prone to reproduce the dominance of white values and beliefs, which stifles learning among white and minority students alike.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) refers to a self-reflective pedagogy as culturally relevant. Educators who subscribe to this type of pedagogy, Ladson-Billings claims, value the knowledge that students already possess and invite students to share that knowledge within schooling contexts. When students learn that their own experiences and viewpoints are valuable, perspective-taking, appreciation of differences, and self-confidence are likely outcomes.

Self-aware professors pose the following questions to themselves: What biases, prejudices, and assumptions do I bring to the classroom? What did I not learn in graduate school about culturally different persons? What evidence do I have to verify that my current pedagogical practices are inclusive, empowering, and appropriate for the multicultural era in which we live and the diverse settings in which students will someday work? How do I hold myself more accountable for advancing the multicultural agenda of contemporary American higher education? Faculty members who consistently ponder these kinds of questions are uniquely positioned to construct culturally relevant and affirming learning environments. Had Julian's professors asked themselves these questions, they likely would have enhanced his learning and not made him entirely responsible for identifying multicultural resources on his own.

In addition, department chairs and administrators from across the campus should engage in collaborative reflection about the ways the espoused values of the institution are enacted. Campuses that espouse an appreciation for diversity on Web sites and in mission statements, while taking passive and insufficient measures to ensure that students from all backgrounds feel valued and respected within their courses, pose a tremendous contradiction. When espoused and enacted values are disconnected, student learning is stifled. Faculty can transform the multicultural infrastructure by collaborating, modeling effectiveness for each other, promoting a spirit of shared accountability, and taking an honest look at how their work affects learning and engagement among diverse groups of students.

Conclusion

As he reflects on his past four years at the university, Julian realizes he has learned a great deal about himself and his culture. However, it becomes clear to him that most of this learning was self-initiated and empowering, despite being invalidated in his courses. Taking some of the criticisms of his African American peers into account, Julian admits that he assumed an unfair share of the responsibility for his education. That is, he recognizes that he was his own most influential teacher, although professors were hired and rewarded to play more important roles in ensuring his growth and enhancing his learning. Julian wonders what his experience would have been like, and more importantly, what he would have learned had he not undertaken such self-guided cultural exploration. Even though Julian willingly accepted responsibility for learning about cultural differences outside of class, faculty cannot expect that other students will do the same.

Accountability for culturally inclusive curricula and pedagogy is necessary in order to shift the onus from students to faculty. The form of accountability described in this article is not regulatory, but is instead collaborative and self-imposed. Institutions where faculty continually neglect the cultural assets that diverse student populations bring to the classroom will continue to come up short and receive "incomplete" grades concerning educational effectiveness. For the sake of students like Julian, his African American peers

who gather at the black culture center, and their classmates, faculty members must devote attention to curriculum and course content, pedagogy and classroom practices, and self-reflection. Diversity, learning, and engagement are cyclical and largely dependent upon accountability, collaboration, and multicultural consciousnesses among faculty. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

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NOTE

For a fuller description of the study, see Shaun R. Harper, "Reconceptualizing Reactive Policy Responses to Black Male College Achievement: Implications from a National Study," *Focus: Magazine of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies* 34, no. 6 (2006): 14–15.