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Re-envisioning multicultural education in diverse academic contexts

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Abstract

The authors, who respectively represent a large research institution and a small Liberal Arts college located in different geographic and sociocultural contexts, compare and contrast institutional multicultural education policies and practices. Drawing from their current research and the vast literature focusing on equitable and inclusive education, they articulate recommendations for re-envisioning multicultural education to enhance teaching and learning in all subject areas and across diverse academic contexts.

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1. Introduction

Multicultural education is conceptualized as a philosophy and a movement that was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's in the United States to chart the course of inclusive educational policies and practices and to affirm the narratives of culturally diverse students and educators at all educational levels. From its emergence, multicultural education discourses have focused on improving access and the academic achievement of traditionally underrepresented populations in academic and socioeconomic positions of leadership. While most academic institutions in the United States seem to support the ideal of a society founded in the premise of equity for all, the practice of multicultural education, as a philosophy that frames policies and principles of equity and social justice, vary greatly across units within institutions and across institutions. The classroom environment is an important space for diversity to thrive, and can potentially affect all dimensions of campus climate. Peterson et.al (1990) have demonstrated the positive impact that a classroom engaged with diversity has on student outcomes, particularly when faculty, course content, and pedagogy are considered in conjunction with the compositional diversity of the students. Institutions can be proactive in fostering the educational benefits of diversity in the classroom by developing policies that address diversity and multicultural education issues.

2.

The authors, who respectively represent a large research institution and a small Liberal Arts college located in different geographic and sociocultural contexts, compare and contrast institutional multicultural education policies

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and practices, and examine their impact on underrepresented student populations' access to and achievement in Science, Technology, and Mathematics. Drawing from their current research and the vast literature focusing on equitable and inclusive education, they articulate recommendations for **re-envisioning multicultural education** to enhance teaching and learning in all subject areas and across diverse academic contexts. History, goals, and progress of multicultural education

Sleeter (1997) and Banks (2004) place the origins of multicultural education within the civil rights movement, and particularly the Black Studies movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States of America. These leading scholars of multicultural education credit African American scholars such as Williams (1882-83), Woodson and Wesley (1922), and DuBois (1935, 1973) for creating knowledge about African Americans that could be integrated into the school and college curriculum, hence expanding the roots of multicultural education deep into the American historical struggle for emancipation and freedom.

Multicultural education specialists, scholars, and practitioners agree that a major goal of multicultural education is to reform the schools and other educational institutions so that students from diverse socio-cultural groups, particularly those from traditionally marginalized groups, will experience educational equity (Banks, 2004; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter, 1997). This means that education that is multicultural entails a holistic restructuring all instructional processes, including curriculum, teaching strategies, instructional materials, classroom management, assessment of student performance, school-community relationships, as well as educators' attitudes, dispositions, perceptions, and behaviors (Banks, 2004; Bennett, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 1999; Sleeter, 1997). Banks (2004) summarizes the goals and process of multicultural education into five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture.

As Hayden et al. (2011) argue, increasing the educational access and academic achievement of traditionally underrepresented populations is more than just a moral imperative. It is the cornerstone of national and global economic development and social cohesion. Hence, Hayden et al. (2011) indicate that in order to meet the challenges associated with the current economic crisis, it is essential for all educational agencies to help enhance the underrepresented populations' potential to become professionals with sophisticated skills in areas that are critical to the United States' competitiveness in the global marketplace, specifically in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). We concur with the authors and add that equitable access and high performance in all fields are key to individual, family, community, and national advancement. It is with this understanding that we examine multicultural education policies and practices in at our respective institutions in the following section, and conclude with recommendations for re-envisioning multicultural education to enhance teaching and learning at our institutions and in other educational contexts.

3. Multicultural education policies and practices at George Mason University and Hastings College

Located in the north east of the U.S., George Mason University (Mason) is a large public research university that prides itself for being one of the most culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse institutions of higher education in the United States. Mason's mission statement highlights its commitment to diversity and global education. Hastings College (Hastings) is a small private liberal arts institution located in central United States, with a predominantly white student population and faculty. The core of Hastings' mission highlights its commitment to liberal arts, Christian faith, and high academic standards. Both institutions strive to enhance their students' and faculty's cultural competence through a variety of programs and activities and work diligently to diversify their student and faculty diversity, albeit with differing success.

What is Mason doing do affirm and enhance diversity, and to further equitable educational access and performance in all academic fields, including STEM? Mason has a number of relevant programs which are grounded in its commitment to diversity. The Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Multicultural Education (ODIME) leads the university in creating an inclusive learning environment through identity development and cultural competency. The Office seeks to assist the university in retaining, actively engaging and successfully graduating students with specific attention to historically underrepresented and marginalized groups. To this effect ODIME creates opportunities for student engagement and retention; conducts research and implements emerging trends in

the areas of multicultural education and social justice; increases cultural competency and multicultural relations within the Mason community; implements programs which critically examine social justice issues within and across identity groups; and expands the number of diversity training models utilized at Mason.

One of ODIME's ongoing initiatives is the Student Transition Empowerment Program (STEP) which was established to enhance the recruitment, success and retention of an intentionally diverse array of undergraduate students. The program runs over five weeks throughout the summer, typically leading up to the beginning of the school year and gives participants a jump-start to their scholastic endeavors through academic preparation, cultural awareness and identity development programs, and personal empowerment services. To participate, students must be Virginia residents accepted and committed to attending Mason. STEP students are also first generation college students, and/or members of under-represented groups.

In addition to sustaining a supportive environment for its students, Mason also supports faculty diversity in policy and practice. For example, through its Office of Equity and Diversity Services (OEDS), Mason provides equal opportunity and an educational and work environment free from any discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, age, marital status, pregnancy status or genetic information. The OEDS monitors the university's continuing commitment to equal opportunity in its employment and educational practices. The OEDS reports to the president of the university and is responsible for the implementation of all equal opportunity policies, including the disability reasonable accommodation policy and the administration of the discrimination grievance procedures. Through educational workshops, the OEDS ensures that members of the campus community understand their rights and responsibilities, specifically with regard to maintaining a learning and working environment free from illegal discrimination. It works collaboratively with other campus entities and the surrounding community to ensure physical and program access for persons with disabilities and to create, design, and disseminate programs that bring diverse people together in an encouraging and welcoming environment.

What is Hastings doing to affirm and enhance diversity, and to further equitable educational access and performance in all academic fields, including STEM? Located in a predominantly white community, Hastings was a predominantly white institution for many decades since its establishment. It was not until the last two decades that Hastings began the active recruitment of students from other demographics besides the whites. For many years, the school had no policies in place to promote diversity on campus. It can then be inferred that the college only found the need to recruit students from other demographics following the Supreme Court decisions on affirmative action within the last couple of decades. This is also obvious from the goals outlined in the mission statement of the College: "Develop intellectual, critical, creative, and communicative skills that provide the basis for learning, personal growth, and expression; Acquire a knowledge and understanding of the history and the cultural achievements of humanity, as well as a sense of values reflected in a responsible commitment to God and society; Respect and appreciate the achievements and identity of each human being; Prepare for a life of creativity, curiosity, and change" failed to clearly address diversity related issues on campus. Generally, affirmative action policies indicate that diversity must be carried out in intentional ways in order to accrue educational benefits for students and for the institution. This suggests that every institution must engage diversity in service learning, ranging from recruiting a compositionally diverse student body, faculty, and staff; to developing a positive campus climate, transform curriculum and pedagogy to reflect and support goals for inclusion and excellence.

Within the context of this paper, diversity may be defined as engagement across racial and ethnic lines comprised of a broad and varied set of activities and initiatives. Against this background, we here discuss the policies or initiatives that have been in place in recent years to engage diversity at Hastings that will lead to inclusion and excellence of the college. In 2006, when co-author Moses Dogbevia joined the faculty of Hastings, the composition of the student body on campus was still 95% whites and 5% all other racial and ethnic groups. This environment does not promote engagement of diversity in any meaningful way. Being the first underrepresented faculty member on campus, Moses took the initiative to advocate for institutional policies to encourage diversity on campus, which will then lead to the creation of the environment needed for all students to develop feelings of belonging. To this effect, he assumed sponsorship role for the campus student organization that represented underrepresented groups of students. The original name of this organization was Minority Students Union (MSU), whose connotation implied stereotyping the underrepresented students on campus. He called for immediate change of the name to Multicultural Student Union to reflect the inclusion of students of all demographics instead of

underrepresented groups. He sought the help of two colleagues from the Sociology department to conduct a survey across the student population in order to obtain feedback from the student body on what initiatives and activities could promote diversity on campus and enhance inclusion and excellence for all. The survey yielded helpful responses that continue to inspire and shape multicultural education programs and activities at Hastings.

The student feedback included important suggestions for Hastings to create and sustain a culture that affirms diversity and inclusiveness both among students and faculty. The feedback information obtained from the students body also included suggestions like: hanging at highly visible locations, such as the library or the Admissions Office, international flags for all nationalities represented among the student body; that an effort be made to increase the presence on campus of the art work of different cultures; include international music among the songs played at the coffee shop on campus and at other places where background music is played; increase the variety of foods offered in the cafeteria to include recipes from different cultures, as well as developing more meals that would appeal to foreign students or students of color; and monitor minority representation in photos used to represent Hastings on its website.

As a follow up to information gathered from the students' feedback Hastings administration instituted a number of policies that called for the revival of a number of organizations on campus such as, committee on "Team against Bias" which addresses issues related to victimization, discrimination, and bullying that are racial, gender, gay-lesbian, trans-gender, and socially oriented. Being a liberal arts college, the policies called on all faculty to design the curriculum of the liberal arts courses to reflect diversity in social life, and students are expected to take two classes that are diversity related as well as a class that requires students to travel off campus to experience other cultures or social institutions. The College administration promotes and encourages the celebration of history months of various ethnic groups, such as Native American, Hispanic, African American as well as Martin Luther King's birthday on campus. Visiting professors of different cultural backgrounds are invited to campus to give all campus talks and to visit with classes and student organizations. Every first year student in the college is assigned an advocate who will serve as a counselor to the student within the first two years. The advocate is to support the student's adjustment process to the new environment and to ensure the students feel like they belong to the Hastings community as a whole.

To promote diversity within their department, Hastings Chemistry Department instructors explore teaching strategies that will help students become successful in the introductory chemistry class and be motivated to enter into the chemistry major as their program of study. They explore how to combine contemporary approaches to science education with classroom feedback information to develop strategies to motivate students of diverse backgrounds in science learning at the undergraduate level. In the process they implement explicit instruction in the nature of science and gather regular feedback from students in freshmen chemistry classes serving students from diverse backgrounds. As a result of these efforts, Hastings currently enjoys an increasingly diverse student population and enhanced academic achievement among traditionally underrepresented student groups.

4. Re-envisioning multicultural education to enhance teaching and learning

Our professional and personal experiences in U.S. academia indicate that while most institutions of higher education are committed to diversity and multicultural education, relevant policies and practices continue to be limited in two major ways. First, policies, programs, and activities designed to affirm diversity tend to aim for cultural competence as the ultimate goal. Second, integration of multicultural education perspectives tend to be limited to specific programs with the diversity mandate. Kumagai (2009) argues in similar fashion that multicultural education must be expanded beyond the traditional notions of cultural competence and seek to develop the kind of social critical consciousness that would empower students and educators to more intentionally contribute to the enduring quest for social justice. Therefore, we propose that multicultural education should be re-envisioned to help build bridges of caring critical social consciousness (Ndura, in press). This re-envisioning of multicultural education rests upon three main premises: multicultural education is every educator's responsibility; critical self-reflection is central to teaching and learning (Kumagai, 2009); and service learning must be integrated in all areas of the curriculum to encourage both students and educators to engage in transformative social action.

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