

Diversity Equity and Inclusion and Student Services within Higher Education

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1 Introduction

New York University's (NYU) data shows commitment to increasing diversity and inclusion by exposing the raw and necessary facts and figures of our student population, administration, faculty, and the breakdown of identities. For starters, the class of 2023 will be NYU's most diverse group of students. NYU's Office of Institutional Research and Program Evaluation (2020) stated, the undergraduate class of 2023 is the most diverse in history, where no one major ethnic group represents more than 22%. Additionally, first-generation students represent over 18%, and over 22.2% of students are international (2020).

Underrepresented student groups are a vital part of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) conversation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), 19% of post-secondary education students report having a disability. An institution's staff should train in Assistive Technology, and students should be made aware of services available at the time of admission. Students are not required to attend colleges, but they should be treated with equity and provided the necessary services to succeed if they choose. An underrepresented group that data does not reflect is the growing number of formerly incarcerated students. Innovative programs such as The Prison Education Program and changes to university admissions processes reflect the University's growing need to serve formerly incarcerated students better at NYU.

NYU understands that for DE&I to work, there has to be accountability from everyone in the community. It was not always the case in higher education. There has been a historical bias when serving students in America's colleges and universities not too long ago. NYU's StudentLink Center (SLC) welcomes the task to further expand or improve the best practices on DE&I when interacting with the student body. DE&I within higher education has been (and still) is an essential topic across colleges and universities throughout this country. While there are diverse student populations on some of our campuses, equity and inclusiveness are equally concerning. The concern is especially true for underrepresented students. The research shows colleges and universities see an increase in diversity within the student body; however, diversity lacks a non-teaching administration staff. The goal is to increase DE&I awareness to the team when interacting with students from diverse backgrounds with multiple identities.

Moreover, DE&I within the workplace is an essential part of how a diverse student body can see representation on all campuses. The following literature reviews will discuss the history and 21st Century of student services. Also, campus climate assessment has been utilized successfully by many private universities to address various student populations and staff's needs and concerns through objective data. Understanding student

and staff perceptions of their overall campus climate determines areas of improvement and further creates a healthy and safe space for the campus community.

2 History of Student Services

Lerner, C. and Sanford K. have done well in explaining the historical bias of student services and servicing the student's needs in the 21st-century. Between the late 50s and the late 80s, student services featured the traditional, financially dependent parents as undergraduate students in predominantly white 4-year institutions. As the years progressed, the student population has shifted toward being diverse in some colleges and universities. However, the question remains how equipped is student services for the non-traditional student and whether students can maneuver the access offered. (Lerner & Sanford, 2019) For example, non-traditional students do not feel connected to their colleges or universities' services because they are either commuter students, working full-time but attending classes part-time, or first-generation.

Student services should benefit not only the traditional student but all students. The authors have captured the essence of the 21st-century student in their data. According to the data, between 1976 and 2015, white students that enrolled in colleges or universities dropped from 84% to 58%. While overall white students increased by 11 percent overall, black students increased by 72 percent. As the decades grew, so did diversified student bodies, particularly the different identities, such as low-income, more senior students, commuter or part-time students while raising children. The data has stated 37 percent of students over 25, 64 percent employed and enrolled in a college, and 24 percent are raising children (Lerner & Sanford, 2019). One of the concerns discussed was the disconnect of student services for the traditional student who would be aware of the supported services and know how to access them.

The disconnect in student services needs to be restructured by colleges and universities to understand that the 21-century non-traditional students from diverse backgrounds may not have access and awareness to support services. An example is parents of first-generation students and underrepresented groups faced with the surmounted cost of college. The authors have emphasized that for colleges and universities to understand the growing diverse student population, there needs to be redesigning support services that bring awareness and access, and equity to all students.

Milem et al. (2005) mentioned the concept of diversity over a few decades had increased access, gender equity in a majority of white campuses. Still, the lingering concern amid diversity is equitable access and awareness that students of color will have while achieving their full potential in higher education. Colleges and universities are seeing an emergence of an increasingly diverse student body than in prior years.

3 Campus Climate Assessment

Colleges and universities have made continuous efforts to offer inclusive campus environments for students. Many campuses have used the term defining Campus Climate to grasp the complexity of diversity issues, and it has proven that they interconnected with one another (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). According to Griffin (2016), students' perceptions of hostility, conflict, and marginalization on campus can harm their development. Concerning diversity issues, Campus Climate defines as the "current patterns of behavior in a campus community and how those behaviors are perceived" (Griffin, 2016, p. 76). Also, Griffin (2016) asserted that students of color report more direct and indirect experiences of racism than their white peers, leading to more negative perceptions of their campus environment. The question becomes, how do institutions and their departments create a welcoming environment for students from all backgrounds, and what role can professionals play in this process? Professionals in higher education play critical roles in creating more welcoming campus climates because they closely engage with students and are well-positioned to assist them.

Based on theory and research, multiple strategies were recommended to improve diversity and navigate inclusion issues successfully. Campus Climate Assessment can help further examine these areas within the institution. Hart and Fellabaum (2008) pointed out that conducting and reporting Campus Climate research should serve as a foundation for institutional change. Members of the campus community should be studied; however, many departments lack objective data and have limited knowledge on Campus Climate studies. Thus, a full assessment of Campus Climate can provide insight and serve as a comprehensive tool to address the needs and concerns of various student populations, staff, and faculty across the system (Griffin, 2016). The purpose of a Campus Climate Assessment is to gather a wide variety of data related to institutional climate, inclusion, and work-life issues so that the University is better informed about the campus community's living and working environments. Brown University is one example where different studies understand each individual's overall perception and experience on campus.

In 2015, Brown University provided an online survey to the community collecting 162 submissions and 720 comments (Paxson, 2016). Analysis of the community's input revealed a substantial conversation focusing on issues of diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, comments from the Brown community gave essential suggestions to make their campus genuinely diverse. According to the survey, the most significant number of comments focused on support services for students, with a total of 125 comments (Paxson, 2016). The feedback highlighted the challenges facing international, first-generation, and undocumented students who struggle to overcome cultural, economic, linguistic, and academic barriers in unfamiliar settings. They also emphasized the difficulties these students face when understanding financial aid, health insurance, or other essential support services. Moreover, undergraduate and graduate students from historically underrepresented groups encounter these challenges while experiencing trauma from constant discrimination and lack of awareness by fellow students, faculty, and staff at Brown (Paxson, 2016).

Requests for more resources and additional staff to better meet the diverse student community's needs were a

frequent suggestion among the comments received. Cornell University conducted another Campus Climate Assessment in 2013, and these results gave important context for planning policies and practices to improve the climate for diversity on campus. A total of 6,190 students participated in the survey, with an overall response rate of 45% (Cornell University, 2013). Overall, students consistently reported high engagement levels in academically-oriented activities with a rating of 89% and have positive perceptions of their local campus environments. However, the climate for diversity at Cornell varies significantly for students from various backgrounds or social identities. Thus, underrepresented groups have more negative and less favorable perceptions of their climate, especially in the broader campus context (Cornell University, 2013).

The most considerable differences were associated with students' disability status and race and citizenship, in which Black and Asian-American students gave lower ratings than white American students. They were also less satisfied with the administration's responsiveness to student concerns at 74% rating and unsatisfied with the campus community as a whole at 73% (Cornell University, 2013). The survey data were analyzed to compare various groups' responses and were calculated by salient group memberships (i.e., gender identity, racial identity, etc.).

To improve the climates students' experience, Griffin (2016) also suggested that all professionals must possess great knowledge about Campus Climate and diversity to provide holistic support and foster inclusive communities. They should explore and learn about communities that they are less familiar with through conferences and workshops on marginalized populations' experiences. Learning about a community can often begin with authentic conversations with students about their experiences. Professionals should also acknowledge their role in student services because they may be unintentionally marginalizing students on campus (Griffin, 2016).

Another recommendation is to facilitate engagement across differences. Creating opportunities for intergroup dialogue among diverse student groups may heighten racial understanding and reconciliation. However, students and staff may be hesitant in engaging in these dialogues for fear of conflict, attack, and vulnerability (Griffin, 2016). Professionals should be ready for these dialogues to help students navigate challenging situations while dealing with conflict.

4 Underrepresented Groups

As higher education administrators, when we hear the phrase, underrepresented student groups, some thoughts are first-generation students, low-income, minority students, and LGBTQ+, which makes up a small fraction of the college total population. As colleges and universities are learning, other underrepresented groups may be under the radar or receive minimal services within student services. Underrepresented groups, such as those with disabilities, benefit from Assistive Technology when implemented correctly. Assistive Technology (AT) is "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of a child with a disability" United States of America. (2004b) Assistive Technology Act 2004.

When implementing assistive technology, many factors must work together. Implementation strategy includes cost, availability of the technology, ensuring updates and maintenance provided for the devices, training staff and students, and awareness of availability (Chambers, 2019). These factors must work in unison for a student with a disability to have an equitable experience. In continuing to serve students through Zoom and in person, we create a more inclusive environment for students in obtaining student services. SLC should also actively promote AT available through NYU.

During the transition to colleges, some students with disabilities report feeling "ignored, insignificant, misjudged, and overlooked at their university" (Fleming et al., 2017). These feelings stem from interactions students are having with professors and administration. This emphasizes the importance of higher education professionals being as accessible as possible to students who may be struggling. As a student services-based office, the responsibility is to ensure we offer students equitable services regardless of ability. Using Zoom as an AT is a cost-effective way to reach students who may otherwise not visit us in-person.

Successfully implementing AT in a student services-based office requires more than funding. Often when thinking about the technology, we may think of something expensive, and when thinking about the word assistive, we may think of special or signaled out. Assistive technology in a student services department should be seamlessly integrated. "The assistive technology must not present the student developing skills that they would otherwise have acquired, had the assistive technology not been available" (Chambers, 2019). AT's purpose is not to give students an unfair advantage but rather to have students be on a level playing field with students who can physically come in-person to our centers.

When AT is implemented properly, it improves the students' well-being, promotes academic performance, and increases learning engagement. In a college or graduate school classroom, students expect to participate in group discussions, and AT can assist students in being able to voice opinions. Courses offered or taken online offer opportunities for all students to utilize AT. In the Open University of Israel, a student receives multiple formats to attend class (Heiman & Shemesh, 2011): "OUI students may choose attendance at face-to-face tutorial sessions in student centers close to their area of residence, online interactive courses with instructors and peers via the Internet, or individual at-home study from specially prepared written materials mailed to the student."

The utilization of AT for each student to choose their intended study methods is inspirational and proven to create an inclusive environment for all students, including students with a disability. When the available technology was made to all students in the class, more students utilized the technology regardless of ability. The flexibility of how students can learn and blend could translate to Zoom classes students have been forced into. By offering a different type of learning environment, some students may thrive.

This same strategy can be applied not only to classrooms but to student services as well. Our goal at SLC is to create a quality student-centered and technologically rich service model that delivers accurate and efficient student services in a comfortable and supportive environment. Continuing to offer Zoom services supports our goal and our university.

To further our outreach of Assistive Technology to students, SLC should promote the NYU Community services through affiliated departments. At Augsburg University, a list of AT resources is available for utilization. Many of the resources published are free or under thirty dollars. These resources are not limited to the students' academic pursuits but also daily activities. For example, free Dictation/speech-to-text/speech recognition software exists for students writing emails through Gmail. This is a service we as a department could promote as we now have a department e-mail, we respond to daily. One of the paid services listed on the Augsburg University website is for Hearing and auditory support, an "on-the-fly closed captioning for what is said around the user 24/7." This could prove useful in Zoom meetings, although a price of twenty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents is associated with the service. The NYU, the Moses Center, provides some free Assistive Technologies for active students, including Read&Write, a Text to Speech Conversion tool, and a Document Conversion tool that converts documents to be more accessible to students.

In many aspects of on-campus life, formerly incarcerated students are consistently driven further away from, rather than drawn to, the benefits of pursuing higher education. Developing friendships with different backgrounds is a central component to one's academic and social collegiate development. However, it is not uncommon for students to seek like-minded social circles, such as affinity groups, to create a sense of community. Formerly incarcerated students are no different, seeking friendships with students – and even faculty, who have been incarcerated (Strayhorn, Johnson, and Barrett 2013). It is a catch-22: if caught fraternizing with other persons with criminal histories, this qualifies as a parole violation, hindering social cohesion (Halkovic et al., 2013).

On-campus isolation amongst this student group is also racially skewed. While the total prison population has declined 2% between 2018 and 2019 (Carson 2019), Blacks and Latinos are disproportionately represented in the prison system. Compounding these issues is housing segregation: persons usually obligated to reside in "three-quarters" homes upon release. Privately operated, for-profit accommodations, three-quarter homes provide formerly incarcerated individuals with housing but operate without oversight or regulation (Riggs, 2013). Unable to reside in University housing, they are further removed from the student population, making it harder to integrate and create issues commuting to campus after long nights of studying, in direct conflict with imposed curfews.

5 Conclusion

The costs of pursuing higher education are burdensome for many regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or geographic origin. Upon release from incarceration, persons face uphill battles in re-socializing, from securing a job to pursuing education, a means of reducing higher recidivism. They have limited federal financial aid eligibility if their conviction stemmed from a drug-related offense. They are ineligible if the offense occurred while they were receiving federal aid, according to Federal Student Aid, an office within the United States Department of Education (n.d.). Federal investments in higher education to increase affordability have risen in recent years. Still, federal funding has not been explicitly earmarked for post-incarceration, as reflected in data from the National Center for Education Sciences (2009).

Institutions have taken it upon themselves, increasing

investments in prison-to-education programs for formerly and currently incarcerated individuals, such as NYU'S Prison Education Program (PEP). PEP offers up to full tuition, a monthly stipend, and assists with housing accommodations and transportation costs for those transitioning "[...] from Wallkill Correctional Facility to the Washington Square Campus to pursue their Associate's or Bachelor's degrees" (University Resources & Initiatives n.d.). NYU also offers the Horizon Grant, which is a full-tuition scholarship to two formerly incarcerated students.

Significant changes in accommodations for formerly incarcerated students have honed in on student affairs, neglecting administrative services. As a public-facing entity in which students seek guidance regarding myriad issues, SLC should incorporate training on assisting formerly incarcerated students, similar to the acclaimed Zone Trainings. While the department has accomplished much to increase cultural competencies to assist first-generation, undocumented, and low-income students, more can be done to help formerly incarcerated students.

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