Multicultural Admission: From Paper Policy to Institutional Commitment

Michael J. Smith
Portland State University, mjsmith@pdx.edu

Citation Details

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.
Multicultural Admission:

From Paper Policy to Institutional Commitment

by Michael J. Smith

Michael Smith is an associate dean of admission at Claremont McKenna College (CA). He earned a B.A. in communication arts and Afro-American studies from Loyola Marymount University (CA) and a M.A. in higher education from the University of Michigan (MI). Smith will be pursuing a Ph.D in higher education and organizational change at UCLA this fall.
Throughout my career as a college admission officer (AO) I have been responsible for minority recruitment. After a considerable amount of time in the field, I have come to recognize that although minority recruitment may be the responsibility of an individual admission officer, composing a truly diverse student body is the job of the entire institution.

I have observed that many AOs of color become frustrated when a college or university’s diversity rhetoric is more substantial than its diversity commitment. These AOs are perplexed by plans that are constructed to increase minority enrollment through recruitment, but do not consider what many underrepresented students need to succeed. Institutional goals to enroll more minorities are placed in the forefront of whatever multicultural planning ensues. This paper will illuminate this dilemma and suggest possible approaches to help AOs of color resolve these issues in their admission offices and on campus.

In recent higher education history, changes toward diversity have been initiated for a variety of reasons to benefit several agendas. The most common reasons for minority recruitment initiatives have been legislative pressure and crisis response while the least common reason is progressive planning.

Legislative Pressure
In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s there were hundreds of examples in which minority admission programs were created to comply with federal mandates like the Higher Education Act of 1965. As a general rule, universities either complied or faced severe financial penalties through decreased federal or state funding. In the 1980s and 1990s, this trend reversed as the national political pendulum swung to the right, slowly reducing the federal government’s influence in education. As a result, the threat of local, state or federal government fiscal penalties has all but disappeared as a reason for beginning minority recruitment programs.

Crisis Response
The charge to increase minority enrollment often follows a racial crisis of some sort. A good example of this was the well-intentioned effort of the University of Wisconsin System in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Due to a rise in racial incidents and harassment on many of the system’s campuses, its Board of Regents adopted the “Design for Diversity” as an all encompassing plan to improve access, retention, financial aid and the campus environment (Magner 1991; Weinstein 1990). To the university’s credit, it was one of the first research institutions to aggressively address campus diversity issues at the onset of the 1990s.

The central goal of this blueprint was to double the number of African-American, Latino and Native American students enrolled in the University of Wisconsin System by 1998. At the same time, the University of Wisconsin at Madison (the system’s flagship university) unveiled its “Madison Plan” under the leadership of then chancellor and current Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala. The Plan was to double the number of African-American, Latino and Native American freshman from 261 in 1987 to 522 by 1992. The university enrolled 249 minorities in the Plan’s first year (1989) and 305 in the second year (1990). In 1991 the percentage of black undergraduates was 1.8 percent while only 2 percent of the undergrads were Latino or Native American (Magner 1991). By 1993 the undergrad population was 2 percent black and 2 percent Latino (Peterson’s 1993).

Although in 1996, African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans accounted for 9 percent of Wisconsin’s undergraduate population (Peterson’s 1996), it is easy to understand how students enrolled during the system’s “Design for Diversity” and its flagship’s “Madison Plan” were skeptical and impatient.
In 1991, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that students felt the two mandates were examples of rhetoric taking precedence over results. They complained that not enough faculty of color had been hired, that required ethnic study course offerings were of limited value and that admission efforts had not been aggressive enough. They called the plans' attempts to increase minority enrollment “vague” and lacking financial commitment in the form of increased grant/scholarship aid. One group of minority students issued a report called the “Madison Sham” that criticized the Madison Plan, claiming that good publicity rather than substantive progress was driving the university’s mandate (Magner 1991).

That Wisconsin’s progress has been deliberate but very slow speaks to the incredible effort required on all fronts to achieve an acceptable level of diversity. The university administrators cited a variety of reasons for the lack of success. Among these reasons were perceived unfriendliness, the inadequacy of local school districts in preparing minority youngsters, competition for a limited pool of minorities within the state, and institutional complacency and arrogance (Magner 1991). Although results have obviously been slow in developing, credit still must be given to Wisconsin’s use of a system-wide approach. The difficulties Wisconsin encountered are a valuable example of the gargantuan institutional commitment needed to develop and maintain a diverse student body, professoriate and staff.

**Progressive Planning**

Progressive leadership anticipates the long-term benefits of a diverse student body and alumni and then drafts plans for gradual and substantial institutional change. This kind of planning is seldom seen, yet is the most effective way to achieve diversity. National education think tanks have strongly encouraged universities and colleges to aggressively pursue pluralism in administration, faculty, curriculum and the student body. Unfortunately, the institutions have not been nearly as progressive as the think tanks. Therefore, models for progressive change are few. Progressive plans are outnumbered by ambitious programs, which transition into complacent efforts that preserve status quo. During times of ethnic crisis, the university/college typically moves diversity issues to the center of its concerns until progress has been made. Once this is accomplished and the mood stabilizes, institutions tend to retreat from their initiatives.

A mandate from truly progressive leadership would have no room for retreat. It would take into consideration America’s changing demography, its increasingly international economy and its history of racial conflict when constructing a diversity initiative. Further, the program would consider the student body and every academic, administrative and hourly labor unit. Finally, it would include a sizable, long-standing financial commitment and an instrument to evaluate effectiveness over the long term.

**The Response of the Chief Admission Officer**

Higher education is no different than any other enterprise: fundamentally, colleges are businesses that offer a service for which consumers pay. Like other businesses, colleges and universities typically change from the top down. When it comes to decisions about the composition of a college’s student body, pressure is first administered by the campus governing board or CEO (president/provost). This pressure is felt by the Chief Admission Officer (CAO) whose title may be Dean of Admission, Dean/Director of Enrollment Management, or Director of Admission. During a ten-year career in private college undergraduate admission, I have observed CAOs respond to this pressure in three ways: pushing the panic button and pursuing immediate solutions without involving other staff; engaging in short-term planning with the AO responsible for multicultural recruitment; and using the executive order to advocate for gradual, substantive and comprehensive institutional change towards diversity.
In my opinion, the easiest and often preferred response of many CAOs is to hit the panic button. This approach consists of hiring or assigning an AO of color to coordinate multicultural recruitment by increasing minority student applications. From an increased pool of minority applicants more are admitted, resulting in a larger campus population of color. This leads an admission office into the trap of "leaving such recruitment to one recruiter of color," which amounts to "giving lip service to such recruitment" (Pettigrew 1991). Shifting this monstrous responsibility to one AO relieves others within the institution of their responsibility to help achieve diversity.

Without retention apparatus fully engaged, this shift places an unfair responsibility on the multicultural admission officer in that he/she must shoulder a large part of a diversity commitment meant for an entire institution. These individuals are often the student of color's primary connection to the institution, playing a variety of roles from father confessor and big sister/brother to best friend and role model. These responsibilities are difficult to document, seldom recognized in performance evaluations, and practically invisible to CAOs. These invisible contributions are vital to the well-being of an important segment of the institution's student population (Mercer 1992). A single AO cannot make a campus more diverse, yet many multicultural recruiters are burned out every year attempting this impossible task.

An often used variation of the panic button approach employs short-term planning. This approach involves admission-driven proposals that are quite often drafted by the multicultural AO. This generally is presented as a three- to five-year proposal to increase applications and visibility within predominantly minority communities. In some cases, higher percentages of minorities are admitted; in others, financial incentives are offered to entice gifted students of color to enroll.

The key flaw in this approach is that it centers around front-end activities and fails to take into account whether the university/college environment is ready to service the diverse population it purports to desire. Admission officers are asked to recruit "the best" minority applicants yet the institution often is unprepared to service this influx of high-caliber minority students (Mercer 1992). As mentioned earlier with regard to the University of Wisconsin's diversity effort, faculty, staff, curriculum and financial aid strategies must accompany admission strategy. In addition to outreach and access to surrounding minority communities through summer school programs (assuming there are such communities), tutoring services or events for high schools also go a long way toward making a campus appear friendly and interested in maintaining a diverse population. An admission office or officer cannot do it alone.

Advocating for comprehensive change is the best response a CAO can make to the challenge of increasing multicultural enrollment. This kind of change would require agreement and coordination within several departments of an institution. The "Michigan Mandate," administered by the University of Michigan in 1988, is a good example of an aggressive, comprehensive approach to bringing about a multicultural campus. Created as a response to several ugly racial incidents in the mid-1980s, the university set about recruiting minority faculty, students and professional staff while improving the campus environment (Dines 1994). All components of the Michigan climate were considered. The school created the Intergroup Relations and Conflict unit (IGRC), which offered dialogue groups and minicourses, assigned minorities to important and visible positions, and created the Target of Opportunity Program designed to increase the university's number of tenure-track minority faculty. As of 1994, the program successfully doubled its minority student enrollment from 1988 (Dines 1994). The percentage of tenure-track minority professors and the number of minority staff have also increased.

A campus environment perceived to be unfriendly undermines multicultural recruitment.
Admission officers are asked to recruit “the best” minority applicants yet the institution often is unprepared to service this influx of high-caliber minority students.

In this scenario, the CAO can more confidently direct his/her office toward multicultural recruitment activity. Additionally, the multicultural AO can feel confident that the stated commitment to on-campus diversity is sincere and that success in this area will be rewarded. Long-term, institution-wide planning for diversity focuses on providing a richer environment for the student. Anything short of this kind of change benefits the institution in the short run but harms the student of color in the long run.

The Response of the Multicultural AO

In many instances, multicultural AOs represent the institution’s conscience. The relationship between this AO, the CAO and the institution often imitates the dynamic between a person’s ‘good’ conscience and his/her Machiavellian, pragmatic instincts. Although often frustrating, it is this person’s responsibility to keep the CAO and the minority admission operation focused on the needs of the student of color. His/her primary question to the CAO and others should always be, “is what we do in the best interest of the underrepresented student?” A second question could be, “do we have what is necessary to help this underrepresented student persist from freshman year to graduation?” In this environment, multicultural admission can be respected as a top institutional priority worthy of unqualified kudos for success and helpful criticism for failures; the results being a new found respect for the multicultural AO position.

With this primary focus, short-term approaches are inadequate and not in the student’s best interest. Short-term, panic-inspired actions lack consideration for institutional environment, and institutional fit. Long-term admission planning with full financial support from the university/college is the best approach. This kind of approach contemplates the best way to involve the student and include him/her in the campus family.

Scholars in the field of education have pointed out the importance of student involvement to retention. Vincent Tinto’s integration theory states that if a student is academically engaged, he/she will persist to completion of academic goals (1982). If a student is engaged socially, the end result will be institutional loyalty. Without both, withdrawal and disenchantment are more likely. In order to recruit students of color effectively, the academic and social apparatus of the institution should be examined and retooled to promote academic and social integration for minority students. Adjustments must be made to make their academic and social experiences worthwhile.

A campus environment perceived to be unfriendly undermines multicultural recruitment. Education researcher Alexander Astin created a simple instrument to evaluate the results produced by an institution of higher education (1993). This model, called the I-E-O Model (input, environment, output), considers a student’s personal qualities, his/her experiences in college and the variables that affected it, and the measurable end of college (graduation/withdrawal). I’ve learned from my contact with minority students and from discussions with other multicultural AOs that students of color often feel that they must justify their presence on campus more frequently than majority students; they often feel tolerated, unwelcomed and generally unwanted. Applying this to Astin’s model, the environmental component would be filled with negative experiences. These experiences would produce withdrawal or unhappy graduates who will exhibit little loyalty to the university or college.
The multicultural AO must ask if it is better to produce unhappy young people of color or attempt to find students whose personalities and goals are congruent with the institution. Achieving the best match between an underrepresented student and an institution often involves determining a minimum level of academic preparedness necessary to succeed and then comparing it with the school's desired selectivity. For selective colleges, standard quantitative criteria such as the SAT cannot be used as the sole criteria for admitting minority students right for a particular college. Solid grades in challenging academic courses, campus leadership, writing ability, personal responsibility given his or her family's socioeconomic status (e.g. working to support the family) and attitudinal fit with mainstream students of the college and university are all important criteria to be used in carefully picking minority students.

Unfortunately, admission offices and the multicultural AO are asked to bring in underrepresented bodies who quantitatively represent “the best” of their respective groups as if their presence alone will make a campus more diverse. In the drive to respond to a mandate for increased diversity, CAOs as well as other university/college staff overlook environment and shirk the necessary complete commitment while expecting underrepresented students to negotiate the campus like everyone else. In an article that appeared in USA Today several years ago, it was noted that “most colleges have done little to accommodate non-white students” (Johnson 1988). With this short-sighted approach still being utilized, it is no wonder that many minority students feel more like tenants than co-owners, taking from rather than giving to the college, then moving on with their lives (Brodie 1991).

Conclusion

Without attempting to change institutional climate so that underrepresented students can join majority students among the ranks of the successful, an institution’s commitment to diversity may ring hollow. Columnist Julianne Malveaux (1993) notes that she “knows too many campuses who make equal opportunity a paper mandate,” further stating that “there are paper policies, and there are good intentions; then there is the real world that says that good intentions aren’t good enough.” Multicultural AOs have to constantly remind institution staff that diversity rhetoric must be equaled, and preferably exceeded by, diversity commitment. They must also not allow others to relieve themselves of the many responsibilities of carrying out a multicultural initiative by placing the burden on his or her shoulders; everyone must pull their weight.

In conclusion, it must be understood that, however difficult, multicultural AOs must be the conscience of an admission office and, perhaps, of the institution by insisting that minority recruitment efforts represent only a part of an institution’s drive toward achieving diversity. Any effort short of this contributes to continuing underrepresentation of minority students and the perpetuation of homogeneity among our nation’s leadership. Changing institutional climate is a tremendous task that should be undertaken by trustees, alumni, executive administrators, faculty, student affairs and admission.
Multicultural AOs have to constantly remind institution staff that diversity rhetoric must be equaled, and preferably exceeded by diversity commitment.