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Rethinking Cultural Competence in Higher Education: An Ecological Framework for Student Development

EDNA CHUN
ALVIN EVANS

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Executive Summary

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IS arguably one of the most critical skills that college graduates need for careers and citizenship in a diverse global society. Its importance is reinforced by the emergence of a minority majority American nation by 2042 and by the global nature of much professional work today. As a result, the urgency of the mandate to prepare college graduates for careers and citizenship in a diverse society requires focused efforts by colleges and universities to address the multiple, interlocking dimensions of diversity in the undergraduate educational experience. At stake is the relevance of a college education to students' ability to successfully navigate the complexities of multicultural working environments.

A number of colleges and universities have adopted inclusive excellence as a student-centered paradigm that addresses the synergy between diversity and quality in the intellectual and social aspects of the educational experience and fosters an inclusive campus environment. At the same time, however, most institutions have struggled to develop integrated and intentional approaches to addressing cultural competence in the curriculum and cocurriculum. The operationalization of cultural competence within the undergraduate experience remains an elusive and often neglected goal.

A key reason that colleges and universities have struggled with the attainment of cultural competence is the lack of a clear definitional framework that clarifies the meaning and implications for educational practice of such competence. Overlap with similar terms such as multicultural competence and intercultural competence has caused further confusion. Faculty steeped in an

environment driven by disciplinary expertise may perceive cultural competence as a kind of "jargon" laden with politically correct overtones. The complexity of defining culture also poses a substantive challenge in moving from the predominant focus on nation states to an emphasis on the integral connection between culture and identity. Common conceptualizations of culture often fail to recognize the fluid, evolving nature of culture as it is redefined and contested by cultural members. In addition, the notion of "competence" itself is often disputed as a desired disciplinary outcome. As an example, the recent battle over the incorporation of a diversity requirement in the undergraduate curriculum at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) referenced in this monograph reveals the contentious and ongoing nature of the academic debate relating to cultural competence and diversity learning outcomes.

By contrast, the helping professions including social work, counseling education, nursing, and medicine have identified the centrality of cultural competence in communicating with and working with diverse clienteles. A well-developed research literature in these fields offers substantive insight into how practitioners can operationalize cultural competence in their day-to-day work and has formed the basis of an emerging body of scholarship pertaining to the college or university environment.

Within the realm of higher education, cultural competence shares the inherent irony of the diversity rationale that has emerged from the legal reinterpretation of affirmative action by the Supreme Court. This reinterpretation requires that institutions of higher education demonstrate that white students receive educational benefits from policies that during the course of American history have reinforced white preference (Orfield, 2001). In fact, over the past 35 years, the court has moved from remedial, disparate-impact affirmative action designed to address historical discrimination to a nonremedial diversity rationale that establishes the educational benefits of diversity as the sole, acceptable legal basis for race-conscious admissions practices in higher education (Leiter & Leiter, 2011). From this perspective, cultural competence tends to focus on how white students grow and learn about other cultures while leaving unanswered the larger questions of what it means for students from underrepresented minority backgrounds on predominantly white campuses

who may face assimilation pressures or pressures to conform to the dominant culture.

More often than not, the notion of cultural competence is stripped of its uncomfortable sociohistorical implications of inequality, social stratification, oppression, and privilege. The result is a bland and watered-down concept of cultural competence that often refers to international study, celebratory potlucks, and getting to know people from other nations.

In unpacking the meaning of cultural competence, we suggest an alternative term, namely, "diversity competence," that is more congruent with the range of educational experiences that occur on college campuses as well as the multilevel characteristics that make up the diversity spectrum. We offer a definition of diversity competence that encompasses the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to communicate and engage with others who are different from oneself in interactions characterized by reciprocity, mutual understanding, and respect (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004).

The lack of intentionality in campus diversity programs and practices is synonymous with "magical thinking" or the assumption that the attainment of a diverse student body automatically leads to realization of the educational benefits of diversity (Chang, 2007; Chang, Chang, & Ledesma, 2005). The monograph integrates a review and analysis of the literature coupled with the observations of 43 recent college graduates now engaged in professional careers or graduate study in a survey conducted for this monograph. The survey findings vividly illustrate the common disconnection between institutional diversity mission and the lived experiences of students on campus. For the most part, these graduates from different types of institutions had to seek out the diversity experiences they had and some of these experiences were purely accidental.

To address such disconnection, the monograph explores the application of a holistic, integrated ecological model to the development of cultural competence in the undergraduate experience. In this exploration, we note the frequent collision between macro-level, unequal social structures, and the everyday microcosm of student experiences that perpetuate systems of inequality through normative structures and social networks (Feagin, 2006). We introduce two prominent holistic environmental models for diversity learning

outcomes: the Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) (Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013) and the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model of student success (Museus, 2014). These nuanced models offer significant promise for systemic approaches to diversity learning outcomes.

The monograph then examines the common ground and points of connection between democracy citizenship learning outcomes and diversity competence. Studies confirm that democracy outcomes include a pluralistic orientation or the ability to view multiple perspectives and work cooperatively with diverse others as well as civic engagement and leadership skills. The goals of a liberal education provide a framework for developing democratic citizenship. Ideally, such an education provides a progressive learning continuum that moves from the self to others, culminating in cooperative work to achieve the common good (Musil, 2009).

The monograph offers an overview of the educational terrain for diversity through the development of a cohesive institutional approach across curricular, cocurricular, and service learning domains. Leading-edge examples of rubrics for the attainment of diversity competence provide ways to measure diversity awareness, knowledge, and skills. We also address the pivotal relationship between regional accreditation criteria and diversity competence. In this regard, the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) developed under the auspices of the Lumina Foundation presents a learning framework that includes the need for broad, integrative knowledge that addresses intercultural issues as well as civic and global competence that engages diverse perspectives.

Based on the research literature that substantiates the cognitive dissonance or disequilibrium arising from encountering difference, the monograph discusses the critical impact of diversity experiences on identity formation during the undergraduate years. This impact can be experienced by members of dominant groups and nondominant groups alike. Because of the critical time period for identity formation during college, we highlight approaches to structured intergroup interactions such as the Intergroup Dialogue Program (IGD) developed by the University of Michigan. IGD facilitates efforts to communicate across different social identity groups in the classroom, within

the campus community, and in preparation for work in culturally diverse societies.

From an overall perspective, the monograph will serve as a resource for institutions seeking to provide an organizing ecological framework for the attainment of diversity/cultural competency in the undergraduate experience. The models and examples provided are applicable to a broad range of institutional types and settings. As a result, the monograph focuses on the ways in which colleges and universities can accelerate their progress in the development of an integrated campus ecosystem for diversity competence. The concrete recommendations for practice that conclude the book will assist institutional leadership, faculty, and administrators in developing systemic approaches to diversity competence during the undergraduate college years.

Foreword

AS STUDENTS PREPARE for life in an increasingly complex and global world, it is vital for colleges and universities to facilitate student development related to positive and productive interactions with people from a broad array of social and demographic contexts. In spite of the importance and even agreement that preparing students for operating in a diverse world is key, what is not always as clear is how to actually go about the work.

In this monograph, *Rethinking Cultural Competence in Higher Education: An Ecological Framework or Student Development,* authors Edna Chun and Alvin Evans provide readers with clear and thoughtful information about why cultural and diversity competence is important, how it can be integrated into the curriculum and other aspects of higher education, and how it contributes to student development. The strength of the monograph is in its specificity and comprehensiveness. Readers will find clear roadmaps to create programs and develop curriculum in addition to learning more about the importance of endeavors related to cultural competence. The authors provide clear definitions of different aspects of diversity that are informative.

The monograph is also helpful to readers in terms of providing different perspectives and a broad-based approach that looks at campus systems overall as well as societal contexts. Chun and Evans offer different views on diversity and cultural competence and tie them to different outcomes (e.g., democracy). The book goes beyond the "how to" of cultural competence by providing foundational information about why, in what ways, and to what end.

Chun and Evans take a unique approach in the writing of the monograph. Unlike many other editions in the series, the monograph relies on a combination of data from the authors' research in addition to an analysis and synthesis of the literature. The authors also integrate examples from institutions across the country. The result is a comprehensive volume that integrates theory, research, foundations, data, and practical approaches.

The monograph is sure to be of use to faculty, staff, and administrators looking for specific ideas on how to implement more intentional approaches to developing cultural competence. Too often a commitment to diversity is stated but not enacted. Some of the lag in action is from lack of clarity about how to develop students related to diversity outcomes and lack of support to pursue systematic approaches to developing cultural competence. Chun and Evans provide sage advice and multiple perspectives for how to garner institutional support to advance diversity education programs in addition to providing readers with multiple approaches that can fit different institutional contexts.

Throughout the series, as editors, we have been committed to pursuing topics related to diversity. The volume reads as a companion piece to Guthrie, Bertrand Jones, Osteen, and Hu's work on *Cultivating Leader Identity and Capacity in Students from Diverse Backgrounds*, as well as Museus' monograph on *Race and Racism* and *Critical Race Theory* by McCoy. Read together, these monographs provide a range of foundational information, critical perspectives, and strategies for a more intentional approach to developing diversity competence.

Kelly Ward
Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel
Series Editors

Acknowledgments

THIS MONOGRAPH IS dedicated to the memory of Alexander David Chun who exemplified in every way the attributes of diversity competence in embracing, valuing, and transcending all forms of difference in his relationships and professional work in the medical field. Alex designed the online survey of recent graduates that underpins the ethnographic research conducted for this monograph and brought his finely honed, critical research skills to the process. Alex taught us to question and refine our research assumptions and his nobility, courage, generous spirit, poetic creativity, and passionate sense of social justice will always serve as a compass and guide for us in our own journeys.

We especially thank Professors Kelly Ward and Lisa Wolf-Wendel for their foresight and encouragement on the need for a monograph on this important topic as well as their supportive guidance. We would like to express our gratitude to Professor Joe R. Feagin, Ella C. McFadden professor of sociology at Texas A&M University for his invaluable insights and suggestions that have immeasurably strengthened the monograph. We greatly appreciate the continuous, inspirational help of Professor Charles Behling, codirector of the Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan (retired), and his proactive outreach to recent graduates. We also would like to thank the peer reviewers for the many helpful and insightful suggestions that they provided.

We would like to express our appreciation to the dedicated professors who assisted us in contacting recent graduates and the survey participants who generously shared their time and perspectives related to recent college

diversity experiences. We also thank Kimberly Thompson Rosenfeld for her responsive and skilled research assistance.

Finally, we express our deep gratitude to all the family, friends, mentors, and colleagues who have inspired us throughout the writing of the monograph and who continue to offer hope for a changed world.

The Politics of Cultural Competence in Higher Education

I realized that, although the university advertises diversity, diversity is still seldom seen on campus. I also realized that as a transracial adoptee, my checkbox says "Asian" while culturally, I am Scandinavian. My ideas and decisions are influenced by the Scandinavian culture. What does "diversity" even mean to the university?

Miranda, a transracial teacher and graduate of a private Midwestern liberal arts college

MIRANDA, A TRANSRACIAL teacher who recently graduated from a small, predominantly white liberal arts college, questions the extent to which her institution's espoused commitment to diversity has been translated into reality. As a minoritized student, Miranda found the absence of faculty, administrators, and staff from nondominant groups at her college to be a matter of serious concern[1]:

I think that that's where the college struggles, to be honest. You can advertise that you have this percent of students of color . . . but when it comes to putting it into practice, the administration and all the higher ups were all Caucasian and the majority of my professors. I had two professors who were not. I am looking at our