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Higher Education and the Higher Calling

B. R. MARTIN

As my brothers and I sat on the front row of chapel, as was our custom every Monday, a man approached us and sat behind us on the second row. Now this was not unusual—it was chapel and people come late and make their way to the front. Just like any other chapel day the singing was average and the message, while acceptable, seemed to lack a certain cadence that appealed to many students. It was just another typical chapel day until this man leaned forward. No, he was not readjusting his seat. He leaned forward to deliver us a message. It had to be important because only important things were said during chapel. Leaning forward, he placed his hands on the smallest member of our group, Little B. That's what we called him. He was only about 5'2" tall and about one hundred and thirty pounds. What the man said to Little B changed an ordinary day into one of the most painful memories of my college career. The man's generalization was one we had heard many times before, but never in this context and never with so much prejudice. He whispered, "After your sports team is acknowledged, for whatever you've done, make sure you show a little respect and stay in chapel. Pass it down."

In most cases this would not be a problem. However, this man was white, and we were a group of black men that did not play sports for our university, especially Little B. As mentioned, this was not the first time we had heard such a strong generalization, but we could not believe that in a chapel setting we would experience such a stereotypical, culturally ignorant mistake. It occurred while we were worshipping God at a Christian institution of higher education. It was done not by a white student who perhaps didn't know better. Instead, it was done by a middle-aged faculty member. In retrospect it was not the assumption that all black males on the campus were here only for athletics that shocked and hurt us. Rather, it was that such an ignorant perception could be held by a person who was supposed to lead and train students in Christian morals and teachings. If the goal of our Christian institutions is to train the Christian leaders and work force of tomorrow, there is definitely something grievously wrong. To train the global leaders of tomorrow today, Christian higher education has to holistically equip students to work in and engage the multicultural world in which they are required to live, work and produce. As for the church and other Christian institutions, we are failing when it comes to multiculturalism for three reasons: multiculturalism is not a strong hiring requirement, it is not embedded in the institution as a whole, and it is often not taught in the curriculum or in major university settings.

NOT A STRONG HIRING REQUIREMENT

Multiculturalism is a state of being in which an individual feels comfortable and communicates effectively with people from other cultures, in different situations, because that person has developed the

necessary knowledge and skills to do so.¹ When we use this word we naturally think about a number of multimillion and billion dollar corporations. For many CEO's and industry leaders, multiculturalism is both a business and a moral imperative, because it is required for a corporation to be competitive in the global business environment. As we look more carefully at these globally competitive businesses, we see that multiculturalism is absent when there is a lack of appreciation for its value, a lack of buy-in on the part of those who make critical decisions.

Dennis Kennedy, founder and CEO of the National Diversity Council, makes three significant points about big business buy-in concerning the ideals of multiculturalism and diversity.² First, Kennedy says, "From a business perspective, when organizations are not inclusive and thus not making full use of their human capital the implications are detrimental: high turnover, low worker engagement and lower productivity among their employees." Without a commitment for multiculturalism in the workplace, the ability of workers to contribute to each other's work is significantly diminished and the opportunity for growth is quickly depleted.

Second, Kennedy maintains, ". . . a work environment with artificial barriers has the potential to lead to a class action law suit. Such a suit would impact both the bottom line and the corporate brand. In addition all organizations have a responsibility to create a work environment in which all individuals have equal opportunity to develop and compete based on merit and not on gender or ethnicity." Devaluing a person based on ethnicity and gender is a dangerous mentality for corporate business. Laws and ordinances demand more of these institutions. However, an even more dangerous consequence is that the corporate brand is associated with the injustice of artificial barriers that are imposed on non-dominant culture employees. A company's financial viability and existence may be threatened by a loss of revenue due to the cost of litigation or due to consumer disapproval of workplace injustice.

Third, and here I summarize Kennedy, our situation will never progress unless individuals are willing to work together for change. Making multiculturalism a reality takes more than the minority cultures talking together about the problem. It requires that the culture with the most power and the most influence make multicultural change a reality.

From a business perspective this is true and necessary, but a critical question arises: to what population does business look to gain fresh ideas, new energy and its updated work staff? Business seeks the students and scholars of today's universities and colleges to supply tomorrow's leaders and work force. The reality is that our future captains of industry and CEOs of Fortune 1000 companies are trained within the gates of over 10,000 institutions of higher education, many of which are Christian colleges or universities and/or are influenced by Christian morals and standards.

THE INSTITUTION AS A WHOLE

Therefore, to prepare students for the future, it is critical that we educate them about the moral and financial imperative of multiculturalism in our institutions of higher learning. It is impossible to produce a multicultural work force without a diverse group of college graduates. Further, people cannot graduate unless they are first granted admission to a college or university and given a fair opportunity to learn. But, as it is true for Fortune 1000 companies, universities need to stay afloat as they train students to penetrate the world and represent their learning to the best of their abilities. To ensure that our Christian universities stay competitive with their secular peers, they must follow the business example of hiring, institutionalizing and communicating on the basis of increased curricular diversity and greater cross-cultural appreciation and communication. Let us examine these ideas more carefully.

1. Susan R. Komives, Dudley B. Woodard Jr. and Associates, *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession* (Jossey Bass Higher and Adult Education Series) (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

2. Dennis Kennedy, "Welcoming Address and Charge" (Texas Diversity Conference, Houston, TX, May 15, 2008).

Hiring

Several articles and books address the notion that the faculty and staff hired by a university can either help or hinder the cause of multiculturalism. In many situations, schools choose to neglect the acquisition of external expertise. Grant M. Ingle states, “Unfortunately, campuses tend to have a silo mentality when developing diversity initiatives and don’t reach out to the world experts.”³ When trying to accomplish change within a university, it is vital to acquire professional assistance. Often schools believe, however, that if they have a faculty of color this reality alone automatically equips them to navigate the strategies necessary to build a multicultural university or college.

In the book *Toward the Multicultural University: Using Strategic Planning for Change*, Benjamin P. Bowser and Octave Baker demonstrate how using strategic planning and implementing steps of multiculturalism similar to the business world can achieve success. They also demonstrate the importance of making a strong faculty investment in multiculturalism. They state, “Students and administrations come and go, but faculties remain.”⁴ They further observe, “Ultimately, what is taught and what research and scholarship are produced come from faculty. Thus, the initial steps toward multiculturalism should come from faculty after extensive discussion, debate, and consensus building among students, faculty, administration, and communities.”

Bowser and Baker strongly believe that a push toward multiculturalism must come from the development and training of a diverse group of faculty and staff. It is difficult to build a large diverse student base without the faculty teaching and encouraging a wide pool of students to believe in the ideals of multiculturalism. In turn, faculty teaching must be supported by intentional staff programming that features the issues of multiculturalism. If this doesn’t happen, a mission to increase greater multiculturalism will be lost. A university must hire and recruit people devoted to this high ideal as a personal mission.

Institutionalizing

In many institutions of higher education, people wait on administrators or faculty to lead the revolutionary charge on behalf of multiculturalism, but the truth is that students many times beat them to the punch. David Yamane, *Student Movements for Multiculturalism*, quotes Frank Ellsworth and Martha Burns, “Student activism is as American as Apple pie.”⁵ American college students have been known for leading the charge for change as we witnessed, for example, in the social struggles of the 1930s and 1960s. Those efforts led to tremendous social advancements within our nation. Student activism since the 1980s, Yamane affirms, has not ceased but it has been transformed into more of a silent rebellion rather than a loud war.⁶ The task of students is to remain organized and to advance multiculturalism in every campus department and student-based initiative.

Similar to the business world, in the majority of institutions of Christian higher education there is a homogenous leadership structure that leads and directs an emerging diverse student body. Perhaps of even greater importance is that alongside the homogenous leadership structure, there is a monopolized viewpoint that controls what is on the table of curriculum change. Thus, altering curriculum and updating the choices of what is taught in many universities in the United States is controlled by a group of university leaders and faculty who have an unchangeable and undeniable similarity. This makes curriculum change a most difficult task.

3. Grant M. Ingle, “How Not to Diversify the Campus Work Force,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 29, 2006, <http://wiredcampus.chronicle.com/article/How-Not-to-Diversify-the/28617/> (accessed November 1, 2009).

4. *Toward the Multicultural University: Using Strategic Planning for Change*, Octave Baker and Benjamin P. Bowser (Westpoint, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1995), 126.

5. David Yamane, *Student Movements for Multiculturalism: Challenging the Curricular Color Line in Higher Education* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 10.

6. *Ibid.*, 87.

Understanding that phenomenon, Yamane states, “Curriculum is a cultural representation that will shape the ideals and values as well as the categories of analysis and understanding that will guide the next generation of American leaders.”⁷ The cultural canon that we refer to as the curriculum is prescribed by the academic leadership of every campus. What is important for students is that they learn a body of information, memorize it and demonstrate a mastery of the material. In that process the administration and faculty sway the thoughts and control the time of their students. It is what they deem to be important that is important and is transferred to the student body. This is true for both specific items as well as for the curriculum as a whole. Yamane further states that a “curriculum is a microcosm of the culture: its inclusions and exclusions are an index of what the culture deems important. A conflict over the ‘canon,’ over what books to teach and how to teach them, is a conflict of society’s vision of itself.”⁸ Constantly, it is the academic side of an institution of higher education that determines what type of light is to be seen. And this is based largely on curriculum choices. How diverse are those choices in meeting the needs of the university community?

Communicating

In many cases what the faculty/staff and student body communicate about multicultural issues demonstrates how they obtain and present the information from the curriculum. But more importantly it shows how the faculty and administration deliver the message of multiculturalism to the students. A major way that the student body speaks to these issues is by interviewing student leaders (and other students) and writing about what is learned in the school newspaper. The perceptions of multiculturalism vary, but what has been found is that there is an overwhelming need for multiculturalism to be advanced on college and university campuses across our nation and even the world. This is especially true in our Christian institutions.

Another avenue of a university’s communication is in its lectureships, guest lecturers and performers. These carefully selected and highly publicized events allow a university to truly express its beliefs. If a speaker is not in tune with university ideals or challenges the university too extensively, that person will not be invited back. Who speaks often depicts how diverse a school wants to be. It also shows the institution’s willingness to be challenged.

The final form of communication I would mention involves where a Christian university does its recruiting. Like our churches, there are some neighborhoods and high schools where Christian universities are not willing to go. But if the goal is to have a diverse student population composed of different cultures and backgrounds, it seems prudent to recruit in and from diverse cultural settings.

CONCLUSION

There are a few things that might be done to help our institutions of Christian higher education develop more multiculturalism and cross-cultural communication skills. First, bring in a permanent consultant who is highly experienced in cross-cultural communication. A consultant would provide continuing education for all faculty and staff and provide a constant base for critiquing university policy and practices. A consultant would teach and encourage cross-cultural communication, as well as help the university faculty and staff relate better to the different cultures that are present in their classes. A consultant would also help shape the attitude of a university for long-term transformation.

The second recommendation would be to create a curriculum that is gender and culturally inclusive. A university’s canon of literature should never be dominated by a single culture’s view. By implementing this change students might gain more insight into the world in which they will work and the people with whom they will labor.

7. Ibid., 6.

8. Ibid., 6.

The last and final recommendation would be to provide courses in cross-cultural communication and multiculturalism for each academic major and minor. Students would learn the necessary skills, terms and newest methods of sharing and informing others on this topic. This type of training makes students more valuable in the work force.

If we are to send our Christian graduates to work, evangelize and teach the entire world, then our Christian institutions must be accepting of students from all over the world. We must be willing and able to teach them and to walk with them on a path of growth.

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