

Rethinking Cultural Competence

The Integral Role of Strategic HR Practices

By Edna Chun and Alvin Evans

In the fall of 2015, student demonstrations calling for more inclusive campus climates and learning environments swept college campuses across the nation. Student demands identified the need for enhanced cultural competence learning and expanded diversity education. And while many colleges and universities have adopted inclusive excellence as a framework for addressing diversity and inclusion, institutions have struggled with how to coordinate and integrate the realization of cultural competence throughout the many dimensions of the campus ecosystem.

Little agreement exists on who is responsible for the attainment of cultural competence or how it is to be attained. Even the notion of cultural competence is often seen as a kind of politically correct jargon, outside the rigors of the disciplinary canon and beyond the dominant mainstream discourse. The vagueness of the term causes further confusion due to its overlap with similar terms such as “intercultural competence” and “multicultural competence.” The definitional waters are further muddied when cultural competence is stripped of its uncomfortable social and historical implications of inequality, privilege and social stratification.

Yet in today’s interconnected global society, cultural competence is a critical skill needed by students to pursue careers in a diverse workforce. Cultural competence enables students to work collaboratively across differences, participate as citizens in a diverse democracy and bridge demographic boundaries to develop new knowledge and innovative solutions to intractable problems.

What Is “Cultural Competence?”

What does “cultural competence” mean? Following an extensive review of research in this area, we paraphrase the definition offered by Pope, Reynolds and Mueller in their 2004 book *Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs* — “cultural competence” is the awareness, knowledge and skills needed to effectively communicate, collaborate and

engage with others who are different from oneself in meaningful ways through interactions characterized by reciprocity, mutual understanding and respect.

Moving a step further, in our new book *Rethinking Cultural Competence: An Ecological Framework for Student Development*, we propose an alternative term — diversity competence — to address the range of educational experiences and multilevel interactions that occur on college campuses, as this term offers a more nuanced perspective that brings social identity to the forefront and overcomes views of membership in cultural groups as fixed rather than fluid and evolving.

Students’ Experiences With Diversity on Campus

In a survey we conducted of recent college graduates now working as professionals, most respondents reported that their experiences with diversity on campus were accidental or that they had to seek them out. For example, “Marjorie,” a white female graduate of a Midwestern undergraduate college, recalls the limited conversations or discussion of diversity she encountered as a student. In her words, “I don’t know if as an undergrad we really talked about it a lot. I can’t think of anything that we really discussed in any of my courses or my positions. I know in the job I have now I am learning more and more about diversity in the workplace.”

Or consider how “Tanya,” an African-American graduate of a large Midwestern public research university, described her own identity formation due to the role of a faculty member in her cross-cultural psychology course: “[The class and my professor] helped me become more aware of racial identification ... I never really [thought about it] before I took this class. [The class and my professor] helped me become more confident in my own identification.”

These observations underscore the ways in which recruitment of diverse and talented faculty and staff from a global community impact the educational experience. As

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Tanya's narrative illustrates, during the formative developmental period during college, faculty can play a critical role in the process of students' identity formation and cognitive growth. Faculty often serve as mentors and role models for students from diverse groups. Through the curriculum and in classroom settings, faculty can promote intellectual perspective-taking that strengthens intergroup learning and diversity competence.

HR's Contributions to Cultural Competence

Given the centrality of cultural competence to the educational process, how can human resources contribute to its attainment? In the paradigm shift from a transactional to a strategic HR function, HR professionals in higher education are uniquely positioned to strengthen the development of both organizational capabilities and individual competencies that contribute to cultural competence. Though often relegated to more traditional, operational silos, HR represents a key leverage point in the value chain that originates with the need to create a welcoming campus environment that supports student learning.

HR can help institutions close the gap between espoused values of diversity and inclusion and culturally responsive processes in the areas of faculty and staff recruitment, total rewards strategy, organizational learning and employee relations. Indeed, HR is poised at the dynamic nexus of an institution — between its organizational strategy and its talent. In this strategic location, HR can work with diversity leaders to connect the dots between what an institution says about diversity and inclusion and what it does.

Despite the potentially significant contributions of HR to workforce development and campus climate, HR's role has often been confined to staff and administrative functions without recognition of the benefits of partnership with the academic enterprise. At the same time, the proliferation of approaches to diversity and cultural competence on college campuses has often resulted in redundant, overlapping and piecemeal programs. In an era of shrinking resources, consolidated diversity planning by the academic and administrative sides of the house will enable colleges and universities to capitalize on HR competencies and expertise in realizing the educational benefits of diversity. A focus

on the needs of students preempts more narrowly focused administrative objectives and places HR squarely on a broader organizational playing field aligned with academic mission and institutional values.

Recruitment and Talent Management

Due to the centrality of the faculty role in students' experiences around diversity, HR, in alliance with academic units, can help build a winning faculty talent strategy that addresses the needs of students from diverse

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backgrounds and learning styles and provides students with the diversity competencies necessary for success in a global society. In addition, with the rapid growth of the new majority of contingent and part-time faculty, HR can forge leading-edge workforce strategies that enhance an institution's diversity talent pipeline.

Total Rewards and Organizational Learning

In the development of a comprehensive total rewards strategy, HR's expertise in the design of innovative direct and indirect compensation programs will strengthen the employee value proposition and promote the attainment of competencies that reflect institutional values and mission. Further, working in collaboration with diversity leaders, HR professionals possess the knowledge and skills to facilitate comprehensive organizational learning programs that build diversity competence across the institutional spectrum.

In these concrete ways, HR processes and programs will contribute to the long-term processes of cultural change and help foster a welcoming institutional culture characterized by dignity, fairness and respect. However, to accomplish these integrative aims, HR leaders must themselves possess the strategic competencies that enable

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them to facilitate the attainment of organizational diversity capability. As agents of culture change and talent management specialists, HR leaders will have optimal impact when the structure and design of their role transcends traditional administrative silos and supports synergistic contributions to institutional goals.

Following are three key recommendations from our study of cultural competence that pertain to HR's strategic role:

- 1) **Build an overarching academic and administrative structure for diversity competence.** This holistic infrastructure requires the active engagement of HR in helping to build multilevel support for the development of diversity competence across administrative and academic domains. Such institution-wide efforts involve agreement on a common definition of diversity competence and its articulation in the mission statement and strategic planning documents. Identification of the value of diversity competence will then necessarily be reflected in HR programs such as recruitment, retention, total rewards strategy, organizational learning and employee relations.
- 2) **Draw upon the conceptual principles of inclusive excellence as the driver of diversity and cultural competence.** The four tenets of the inclusive excellence change model focus on student intellectual and social development, consideration of the cultural differences students bring to the educational experience, purposeful use of institutional resources to support student learning, and the importance of a welcoming campus community engaged in the processes of diversity organizational learning. In each of these areas, HR can provide expertise in the organizational change process through the design and implementation of practices that address equity, enhance intergroup relations and promote a culture of inclusion.

- 3) **Strengthen faculty and staff recruitment, hiring, rewards and recognition and evaluation processes to identify the importance of diversity competence.** The inclusion of diversity competence in position descriptions and job postings will ensure that faculty and staff have the knowledge and skills needed to engage across difference through meaningful interactions characterized by respect, mutual understanding and reciprocity. Similarly, rewards and recognition programs that specifically recognize diversity contributions reinforce the value of diversity through best practices and role models that support institutional goals. By including diversity competence in evaluation criteria, performance expectations can be further calibrated with institutional objectives.

Collaboration and Integration

The attainment of diversity competence by faculty, staff, administrators and students will benefit from the strategic contributions of HR professionals working as partners across the institutional continuum. As colleges and universities give increased attention to the importance of diversity learning outcomes, HR can make a significant contribution to the educational value chain through integrative processes and programs that contribute to the creation of inclusive working, living and learning environments. 

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