

# HR's Role in Leading Diversity Change Through Organizational Learning

By Edna Chun and Alvin Evans

**T**he slow pace of culture change as it relates to diversity and inclusion in higher education has been accelerated by student demonstrations calling for more inclusive campuses. The killing of unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, by a white police officer in August 2014 ignited student demonstrations regarding race relations at the University of Missouri at Columbia and led to administrative upheaval, including the resignation of the system president and campus chancellor. A subsequent tidal wave of student protests swept the nation, with students demanding changes in the campus racial climate and enhanced diversity education programs and funding.

Despite these pressures, diversity culture change remains a challenging proposition, and requires courageous and sustained leadership at the helm of the nation's universities and colleges. Major diversity initiatives and efforts to improve campus racial climates have recently been launched at a number of institutions across the nation. Consider, for example, the recent resource commitment at Brown University of \$100 million for new endowed faculty positions, with a commitment in the university's "Pathways to Diversity and Inclusion" plan to hire 25 percent of these positions from diverse groups. Or Yale's commitment of \$50 million over a five-year period for exceptional faculty who enhance diversity or other areas of strategic importance.

At the same time, conservative state legislatures in some states have pushed back against diversity change, as exemplified in the defunding of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville's Office for Diversity and Inclusion for fiscal year 2016-17. The national political climate of divisive rhetoric and anti-immigrant, sexist and racialized messages has further polarized the climate for diversity.

Given the dramatic collision between the microsystem of college student demonstrations and the macrosystem of a divisive political climate, what promising leadership

practices will activate the diversity change process? We argue that systematic organizational learning is essential to transmit diversity across the decentralized contours of the campus landscape. "Organizational learning" is focused on how an institution learns and changes. It is specific to organizational context and identity and requires a critical mass of stakeholders to engage in ways that will shift organizational culture, habits and norms. Yet organizational learning requires psychological safety to create an environment that will promote individual risk-taking and incentivize action.

### Diversity Officers Shouldn't Be the Only Change Champions on Campus

On college campuses, the continued evolution of the chief diversity officer (CDO) role has led to the expectation that diversity officers will lead the process of change. Some campuses have established diversity officers in the larger colleges and schools. In many instances, however, CDOs lack the authority, resources or leadership support to impact the status quo. Many serve "at will," lack tenure status, and face the risk of introducing programs perceived as too progressive or controversial. Furthermore, the CDO role is frequently the only top leadership role in which the majority of incumbents are diverse. The apparent symbolism of a minority presence in upper administration can signal the relative isolation and marginalization of this position.

In the context of strategic diversity transformation, the role of human resources leaders in the process of change management has frequently been overlooked. HR's expertise in organizational learning can assist in the creation of professional development initiatives calibrated to the work responsibilities of faculty, administrators and staff. Working with departmental leadership, HR can provide approaches that facilitate the creation of more inclusive departmental cultures. In concert with institutional stakeholders, HR can redesign institutional processes and policies to ensure greater equity and inclusiveness.

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## How Is HR Leading Change?

A leading example of HR's strategic contributions to the diversity change process is the work underway at Princeton University. Under the leadership of the university's vice president for human resources and vice provost for institutional equity and diversity, HR has worked collaboratively with stakeholders over a one-year period to create a diversity and inclusion (D&I) planning framework for over 4,000 administrative and staff employees.

The D&I planning framework consists of five pillars: recruitment and employee branding; retention (including performance management and professional development); leadership and accountability; building an inclusive culture; and learning and development. Committees have been formed within each organizational unit for diversity planning. Following the development of a common terminology, HR helped identify a baseline, metrics and goals for each area. As Debbie Bazarsky, HR manager of diversity and inclusion at Princeton, explains, "I feel like we are doing a lift institutionally. In my experience, when it comes to diversity and inclusion matters, most institutions put a Band-Aid on whatever is hemorrhaging. But Princeton is doing a lift — really investing the time, money and resources to address diversity."

In another prominent example of strategic HR diversity work, the first chief organizational learning officer position has been created at the University of Michigan. The position is situated in HR and has an institutional focus on building the capabilities (including around diversity) of leaders, managers and staff throughout the university.

## Appreciative Inquiry as an Approach

Human resources can play an important leadership role in overcoming barriers faced in the process of implementing systematic diversity education programs. Common barriers include: 1) stand-alone, piecemeal programs or celebratory events without a cohesive organizational development framework; 2) the absence of an iterative process with assessment of the transfer of learning to workplace settings; and 3) failure to include faculty in the diversity development process.

In addition, diversity fatigue and backlash may result from programs that elicit blaming or guilt. As one chief diversity officer at a private Catholic university put it: "When you make people feel guilty and blame them, it is not conducive to learning. I have been to a few of those kinds of sessions.

They were uncomfortable for me. You have to bring people along with you. Shaming doesn't often work. And you have to [bring people] to that a-ha moment."

Models such as appreciative inquiry (AI) can replace deficit-based approaches to diversity and inclusion with strength-based approaches. As Robbin Chapman, associate dean for diversity, inclusion and belonging at Harvard University's Kennedy School, explains, "Appreciative inquiry is a framework I often use. With AI, I solicit from whatever constituency I'm working with things they think they do well and that they are particularly proud of. I then compile a list of all those things and, without fail, there are a number of things on that list that help increase equity and contribute to a welcoming and inclusive campus. Often, when individuals are doing these things, they're not necessarily thinking about diversity and inclusion; they're just doing their jobs. So I help them see that some of the things they do as 'just part of my job' helps to advance diversity and inclusion at the university."

## Strategies for HR

In our new book *Leading a Diversity Culture Shift in Higher Education: Comprehensive Organizational Learning Strategies*, we draw on the findings from an extensive survey and interview a sample of chief diversity officers, institutional leaders, faculty, administrators, staff and students to identify positive diversity learning strategies. Coupled with insights from five case studies of public and private universities, we offer the following recommendations that specifically pertain to HR leadership:


- HR should work with diversity officers to develop an iterative diversity organizational learning plan with gap assessment, benchmarking, outcomes assessment (including evaluation of transferability of learning), and designated accountability.
- HR should promote a research-based approach to diversity learning.
- HR should participate in mapping of diversity learning initiatives in terms of content and objectives to promote coordinated programming across all divisions and units.
- HR should create rewards and incentives that recognize contributions to diversity learning at all institutional levels.

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- HR should address barriers in institutional processes such as hiring, promotion, compensation and termination in terms of equity and the ways in which stereotypes and homophily can affect outcomes.
- HR should analyze climate studies to develop specific organizational learning programs that support the creation of more inclusive departmental and divisional cultures.

## HR and the Diversity Office as Partners

In the process of systemic cultural change, the contributions of HR leaders to diversity organizational learning are urgently needed. HR can work in concert with chief diversity officers to develop strategic diversity education plans that ensure the synergy and intersectionality of HR and diversity programs. Together,

HR and diversity officers can promote research-based practices that mobilize, implement and institutionalize diversity learning throughout the campus ecosystem. These collaborative efforts will help close the gap between institutional mission and day-to-day experiences on campus by the creation of welcoming living, learning and working environments where diverse talent can thrive. 

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In their article “Rethinking Cultural Competence: The Integral Role of Strategic HR Practices” in the Winter 2016-17 issue of CUPA-HR’s *The Higher Education Workplace* magazine, Alvin Evans and Edna Chun examined three ways HR leaders can strengthen the development of organizational capabilities and individual competencies that contribute to cultural competence on campus.

- 1) Build an overarching academic and administrative structure for diversity competence.** This holistic infrastructure requires the active engagement of HR in helping to build 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, including 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 recruitment, hiring, rewards and recognition, and evaluation processes** to support 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 through meaningful interactions characterized by respect, mutual understanding and reciprocity. Rewards and recognition programs that specifically recognize diversity contributions reinforce the value of diversity through best practices and role models. By including diversity competence in evaluation criteria, performance expectations can be further calibrated with institutional objectives.