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How We Diversified

Submitted by Armando Bengochea on March 10, 2010 - 3:00am

Intuitively, as senior administrators at a residential liberal arts college, we know that to deliver fully on our promise to prepare students for life, we must educate them in a microcosm of society. For four years, students live and learn on our campus, and we must graduate them to be citizens of a world rich in racial, ethnic and other kinds of socially salient diversities.

Social science research, too, provides clear evidence of the importance of a diverse learning environment. National studies – including some using our own data – clearly link increased diversity (of faculty, students and curriculum) with improved learning outcomes. In a diverse learning environment, students' critical faculties and even cognitive abilities can improve; their so-called "reflective thinking" advances; they often report greater engagement with learning; and they are more likely to pursue graduate studies. One [recent study](#)⁽¹⁾ even probed the extent to which diverse college environments impact the abilities of students to more easily form cross-racial friendships. The latter is as clear a social and political "good" for a multiracial democracy as anything we can imagine.

Further, it certainly is the case that diversity and excellence have grown together historically at the most successful of institutions. Certainly, in terms of top private colleges and universities, the most prestigious institutions are also among the most diverse.

But how do we get there?

The models for successful diversity hiring from large research universities simply won't work on small liberal arts campuses. It would be folly at our type of institution to hand a senior diversity officer a large budget, several faculty lines and a mandate to hire a diverse cohort of new professors. The faculty would never accept something so imposed from the outside.

Connecticut College is one of those liberal arts colleges, with all the attendant idiosyncrasies, including the extraordinary premium we place on collaborative and inclusive decision making. We often will not rest until all pertinent voices are heard about any important matter, and even then we are prone to continue discussion until the broadest consensus is achieved. Successful initiatives must therefore involve a careful partnership of faculty and administration.

The path to success for this type of institution is certainly less clear, but success is nonetheless possible. With a mix of intentionality and serendipity, new policies and practices, collaboration and support, and, above all, determination, Connecticut College did achieve success. Of 11 tenure-track faculty hires in 2009, 10 were faculty of color, representing a broad range of experience, cultures and backgrounds.

A Framework

Connecticut College began talking about the strategic and purposeful diversification of our campus several years ago. Those conversations, which included all campus constituencies, focused not only on diversity within the faculty, but also diversity within the student body and the curriculum.

One organic result of the many conversations was a clear, campus-wide recognition that the college needed a new structure for achieving these goals. One element of that new structure, proposed by the faculty, was the creation of a new position of senior diversity officer.

At many institutions of our type, the diversity officer role is filled by a mid-level director. Diversity, therefore, is rarely a factor in senior-level decisions; the diversity officer is not regularly involved in daily conversations about the operation of the college.

To avoid this, Connecticut College assigned the duties of diversity officer to the dean of the college, a well-established and respected position on the senior administrative team with a broad institutional portfolio. This change moved all diversity issues to the most senior management level at the college without changing the traditional and widely accepted form of governance. In the role of chief student affairs officer, the dean – now called the dean of the college community – sits on all major committees; when the dean does raise matters of diversity, the discussion becomes by definition collegial and institutional.

Shortly after the restructuring of this position, the college president and the newly appointed dean of the faculty teamed with the dean of the college community in a focused effort to make diversifying the faculty a leading institutional priority.

As dean of the faculty — the chief academic officer, with direct faculty hiring authority — and dean of the college community — in this newly restructured role of diversity officer — we knew we would have to work as partners, with the president's unflagging support, and in concert with the faculty's priorities. We also knew we could succeed because we were now working within the framework of a newly evident institutional mandate for diversity.

The partnership we forged was a very important first step toward achieving our goal. It helps that we actually like each other. We happen to share institutional history and our relative backgrounds make sense to one another, in part because both of us typically see matters through a faculty lens. Our partnership is therefore natural, not forced. Our friendship allows us the freedom to challenge each other without fear of offending one another. And, by chance, our offices are in very close proximity. Even seemingly irrelevant spatial organization has served to create endless opportunities for collegiality and consultation.

Taking Action

During the first year under this new structure, we took things slowly. We were open and transparent about our commitment to diversity. We discussed ideas. And we continued to work with faculty leadership by talking with them frequently about the benefits of and need for diversity.

In the fall of 2008, 28 of our full-time faculty members, or approximately 17 percent, were faculty of color. This past year, with 12 open faculty lines – a significant number for a college that averages 155 full-time professors – we knew we were looking at the ideal opportunity to make a major impact.

This required a new philosophy for faculty searches. With our new policies and procedures, our goal was to replace passive search techniques with active recruiting of qualified candidates. We made three major changes:

- We required search committees to write advertisements in a way that signaled much more forcefully the institution's intentions to diversify, and we did this in some instances by avoiding the mostly pro forma and expected language that our institution "welcomes women and minority applicants." Many of our advertisements directly referenced our diversity initiative and included wording like, "Recognizing that intellectual vitality and diversity are inseparable, the college has embarked on a significantly successful initiative to diversify its faculty, student body and curriculum."
- Every search committee had to develop a "diversity plan" with specific details as to how they would go beyond usual search protocols to diversify their pools. These plans included new hiring strategies, like mining our own alumni network to bring diverse candidates to campus, contacting caucuses within disciplines that serve graduate students and scholars of color and reaching out in a very personal way to directors of graduate study at institutions with large populations of students of color.
- The dean of the faculty would only approve a short list of candidates that was truly diverse, meaning in most instances there would be multiple, not single, diverse candidates.

Additionally, because we now had a more comprehensive understanding of recruitment as it relates to retention of our candidates over time, all hiring plans had to include a very specific set of actions linked to easing the transition of new faculty to the college. We wanted to know, for example, who was going to be the first person to take the new hire to lunch, who was going to accompany her to the first faculty meeting, and who was in charge of introducing her to three other colleagues outside of the department.

Standing Ground

Major tests would come when the search committees submitted their short lists of candidates for review. In most cases, the lists were remarkably diverse. In just a few instances, however, search committees came forward with lists that did not meet the new criteria. With the support of the president, these committees were told to continue their searches, a necessary step to signal the strong institutional determination to achieve diversity. (This kind of decanal authority had not been used in the past at the college as a matter of course, and was itself the subject of year-long negotiations with faculty leadership.)

It worked. A strong sense of momentum developed as one search committee after another reported diversity success; nearly all had hired their first or second choice candidate.

The college still has significant diversification work to do, but we have already made a great impact. Indeed, after a new-faculty orientation dinner, our president, Leo I. Higdon Jr., remarked, "This class of faculty is bound to influence this institution for decades to come."

Throughout our search processes, it was important to all our constituencies that complete fairness rule the day in advancing candidates for hire. Diversity is advanced at Connecticut College in its association with excellence and we were especially delighted that in every instance this past year department search committees were able to land their first or second choice candidates in a crowded field of aspirants. We have never felt so confident that the scholars and teachers we hired as a result of the college's rethought search processes represented the best individuals available from a broadly national and international field pool of candidates. This is as it should always be in American higher education.

Going Forward

Challenges remain. Already this year, the faculty and administration are working tirelessly to keep the momentum strong. There is always a temptation to give way to satisfaction or fatigue, yet the desire for continued progress is overwhelming. One year of successful hires at a college of our size makes a significant impact, and two in a row could transform the face of the faculty. As the president seemed to indicate, another year's success could come to register a permanent change in the college's culture.

We recognize that there is simply no getting around how labor-intensive it is to ensure ourselves of diverse faculty pools. Yet we have established a model that works within the unique confines of our type of institution. It has been a long and often difficult road, but a road on which liberal arts colleges have an obligation to travel. Despite the sometimes overwhelming odds, we can, and we must, have success.

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[1] <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/120780685/abstract?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0>