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Quality, Access, and Diversity: Inextricably Linked

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Diversity in higher education matters in more ways than one.

There is an inextricable link among the higher-education values of “quality, access, and diversity.” Messages linking these three values have captured ink space, airtime, and cyberspace, and also have been trumpeted from plenary-session podiums across the country during the fall annual meeting season.



The [College Board maintains](#) that “No greater imperative faces higher education leaders today than that of providing access to higher education for all students and maximizing the educational benefits of diversity in enhancing higher learning outcomes.”

The need for all US citizens, regardless of demographic category, to have access to quality education is well articulated. President Obama made it the key higher-education initiative for his administration. The [Lumina Foundation](#) put its full weight behind it. The College Board calls it a “21st Century Imperative.” And, on an [early post for this blog](#), I referred to it as a key civil rights issue for the 21st Century. We get it.

We need the same level of collective buy-in to the idea that a diverse student population enhances the likelihood of quality learning outcomes for all students, including those who represent the majority — whether defined by ethnicity, race, gender, age, country of origin, religion, etc. — in their specific institutional environment. That is, taking deliberate action to enhance access for diverse students obviously increases opportunities for those students and brings about all of the associated individual and societal benefits. In addition, the diversity these students bring to their learning communities also magnifies the essential learning outcomes for all students.

Student success upon graduation depends, in part, on their intercultural competencies. Colleges and universities that successfully encourage students to develop these skills will prepare them for careers (not just their first job) in a global economy and also for democratic citizenship in a global society.

To this end, the entire list of [Essential Learning Outcomes](#) is important. However, the intercultural competencies required for the 21st Century are specifically addressed in outcomes under two headings: 1) “Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical World,” which involves engaging big questions; and 2) “Personal and Social Responsibility,” which includes knowledge and skills acquired through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.

The need for student engagement with people different from themselves was driven home by Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini during a plenary session I attended at the recent [Council of Independent Colleges](#) Institute for Chief Academic Officers and Chief Advancement Officers. In reviewing “Some New Evidence on What Matters in Student Learning,” these renowned scholars emphasized that their meta-analysis supports the notion that interacting with diverse others brings about stronger academic and cognitive outcomes and also aids in psychosocial development and moral reasoning.

So one key element differentiating conventional higher education from quality higher education is whether or not an institution provides opportunities for students to learn how to collaborate with people whose experiences and ideas are different from their own. A diverse student body makes this easier. Diversity in the faculty and staff makes it even easier because these professionals help establish a culture in which diverse students are comfortable and where diverse ideas are openly shared.

For all our institutions, the diversity imperative should mean both modeling diversity and articulating reasons for its importance — among them, that immersion and engagement with diversity produces critically important outcomes for both individuals and society. Some institutions have made substantial progress on this goal.

Others are struggling. Others give lip service to it but don't put their money where their mouth is. And, of course, geography sometimes hinders the best of intentions.

But even for many of the most sincere institutions, realizing the vision of a diverse learning community requires taking the long view. While we struggle with increasing the actual diversity among students, faculty, and staff in higher education, we can and should adopt programs and initiatives that encourage intercultural competencies, despite a lack of diversity on some campuses.

Active involvement with diverse communities can be assessed by the interaction with diversity scales in the [National Survey for Student Engagement](#). NSSE helps answer the questions:

- Do students think their institution emphasizes diversity?
- Do students have opportunities to interact with others from diverse backgrounds?
- Do students feel, because of their experiences at the institution, that they have developed in their understanding of diversity?

Regardless of the amount of diversity in their student, faculty, and staff populations, institutions should develop programs that would cause students to respond "quite a bit" or "very much" to these kinds of items. Those who do will be advancing the higher education agenda.