Organizational context for promoting diversity in higher education

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The organizational/structural component of diversity in higher education recently has been described as a central aspect of the campus racial climate. This dimension refers to the core structures, the policies, and the decision-making processes that guide the day-to-day business of colleges and universities. Examples of the organizational/structural dimension of campus climate include institutional definitions of merit; decisions regarding the curriculum, faculty hiring, and tenure policies; admissions policies and practices; budget and resource allocations; and other organizational decision-making policies and practices. This entry provides a broad overview of the organizational context for promoting diversity in higher education and the importance of considering these issues in striving to create inclusive campus racial climates.

The Campus Racial Climate and Organizational/Structural Diversity

Discussions of campus diversity tend to focus on the racial composition of institutions (i.e., the numerical and proportional representative of students, faculty, and staff from different racial/ethnic groups). While this aspect of the campus climate is important to consider, it is necessary to frame diversity more broadly and holistically. Recent work on the campus racial climate considers compositional diversity, but also the historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion on campus; an institution’s psychological climate (how diverse constituents perceive and experience the campus environment); an institution’s behavioral climate (the nature of campus intergroup relations); and the organizational/structural context for diversity on campus. This framework extends definitions of diversity beyond numeric representation by recognizing that the campus racial climate is characterized by the interplay of these different dimensions.
The Organizational/Structural Context for Diversity

The organizational/structural context for diversity was recently added to the campus racial climate framework first posited in 1998 by Sylvia Hurtado and colleagues. The original formulation was a critical review of empirical research that examined how different aspects of campus diversity influenced student learning and development. The initial framework did not include the organizational/structural context for diversity because this dimension did not have a similar empirical foundation in the existing literature as the other four. Thus, the organizational/structural dimension of climate was initially conceptualized as part of a campus's historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion.

Jeffrey Milem and colleagues later argued that the original conception of the campus racial climate could not account for several of the day-to-day operations of institutions of higher education such as tenure decisions or budget allocations. To this end, they offered a conceptually grounded addition to the campus racial climate that encapsulated the organizational/structural features of a university and the extent to which these practices do or do not utilize diversity as integral to their function. There is a small but growing empirical basis examining the organizational/structural dimension of campus diversity. For example, racially homogenous faculty search committees tend not to hire candidates who are of a different racial/ethnic background. Types of financial aid awarded differentially impact college choice patterns by race. Whether or not admissions policies are race conscious directly impacts an institution's ability to recruit, admit, and retain racially diverse cohorts of students. Ultimately, institutions have evolved over time in ways that privilege some groups to the detriment of others.

Organizational Culture and Institutional Racism

The organizational/structural dimension of the campus racial climate derives from scholarship on organizational theory and behavior. The culture of an organization can
be understood as the consistent, collective historical and contemporary organizational behavioral patterns that become self-replicating. Thus, institutional cultures are usually stable and tend to reinforce the status quo. A form of institutional inertia exists, especially regarding issues of diversity and inclusion, that makes it extremely difficult to institute changes in these areas. The climate of an institution tends to be more malleable and is understood as involving perceptions of the organizations' behaviors. Culture and climate are closely related; the stronger the organizational culture, the more consistent the institutional climate.

To the extent that a campus has not incorporated diversity and inclusion as key institutional values, it is more likely to recreate exclusionary practices that privilege Whites at the expense of people of color. These practices can then create a climate whereby people of color are not fully incorporated into the overall campus environment. Thus, institutionalized racism becomes embedded in the inner workings of colleges and universities. The interplay between organizational culture and climate can also support diversity and inclusion. To the extent that institutional agents pay close attention to the campus climate and make decisions designed to incorporate diversity as a core value, the more likely they are to affect the culture of the institution.

Implications

Mitchell Chang argues that creating inclusive higher education environments requires fundamental institutional transformation if colleges and universities are to be successful in making diversity central to their mission. This requires taking a multidimensional approach to diversity that enlists all constituents and conceptualizes diversity as a process engaged, as opposed to an end met. Too frequently, educational diversity and institutional excellence are framed as competing ideas where an increase in one requires a decline in the other. Research on the campus racial climate, and the organizational/structural context for diversity in particular, illustrates that inclusive educational environments promote increased levels of student cognitive and social development. However, the proper institutional conditions must be in place in order for these learning outcomes to be achieved. Within this framework, the organizational context for promoting diversity in higher education provides multiple avenues that can produce inclusive institutional environments which promote educational excellence.
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10.4135/9781452218533.n525

See also

- Educational Benefits of Diversity
- Diversity Course Requirements in Colleges and Universities
- Undergraduate Readiness for Diversity

Further Readings

