Building Diverse Classrooms: A Literature Review on Diversity Policy
in Higher Education

Charlie Lewis

This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2014.

Abstract

Recent experiences on college campuses like Cornell University and the University of Michigan demonstrate the effectiveness of intergroup dialogue in higher education outcomes and long term civic engagement. While diverse college campuses already exist, research shows that improved diversity exposure and understanding requires a hands on approach to intergroup relations. By creating either credit granting courses or extracurricular programs, institutions of higher learning can take overall diversity policy and turn it into a programmatic success. Providing resources—like space, classrooms, teachers, and funding—result in bringing together different identities for long term benefits to the individual, institution, and nation.
The United States – at least if the Census Bureau is correct – is becoming more diverse. Minority groups are better represented within the population and fulfill roles once left to white males. This variety of person and identity in the United States progresses naturally to the point where the typical classroom is now full of diversity. A teacher today enters the classroom and can see a multicultural, mixed gender and race, and different socio-economic status student body. While many teachers are concerned with diversity in educational background and learning style, other factors, like race, gender, religion, sexuality, values, and socio-economic status, play a large role in how students interact, learn, and succeed in their educational life. To a teacher observing only from the front of the room, two components of diversity are obvious – race and gender. The rest, however, require more in depth involvement and an understanding of how to best promote diversity as a success multiplier in the classroom.

In an address to the American Society for Higher Education in 2007, Sylvia Hurtado recognized that discussions on diversity and race issues are “conspicuously absent from discussions about learning and civic education.”¹ To Hurtado, diversity can alter undergraduate education to prepare leaders to face the multicultural world they will soon enter.² Moreover, the increase in classrooms filled with people of different races, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic background is already occurring. According to the National Science Foundation, undergraduate enrollment will increase 16 percent from 2008 to 2019. Much of this increase is due to minority enrollment, with blacks and Hispanics rising one to three percent over the period. Even the diversity in science and engineering programs is increasing. In 2010, one third of white, black, and Hispanic freshmen wanted to major in science and engineering, while 28 percent of Native Americans and 49 percent of Asian Americans desired the same. Throughout this same period, female enrollment in schools increased as well.³
These swells in varied populations in classrooms – especially science and engineering – change how teachers must approach their instruction and develop teams. Building an effective classroom requires incorporating all students into the discussion and ensuring each has an equal opportunity to succeed in the course or major. In addition, the value of diverse backgrounds leads to distinct approaches to problem solving, decision-making, and critical thought. The value of time in a diverse class is greater than in one where all students think and act alike.

Numerous schools are finding ways by which to foster discussion between people of diverse backgrounds. The Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR) at the University of Michigan blends both theory and experience to facilitate learning about identity, inequality, and intergroup relations. The program, founded in 1988, has expanded to other universities, including Syracuse and Cornell. These programs do demonstrate effective facilitation of increased understanding of multicultural environments and success within those environments. Beyond teaching courses, various events, research, and conferences broaden the scope of the education.4

Actively engaging in discussions about identity, promoting diversity, and incorporating methods to facilitate the success of all students in class provides positive outcomes in and out of the classroom. While programs like IGR demonstrate effectiveness, their reach is small. Even the research on intergroup dialogue and diversity is limited to a few academics at the institutions with programs. Each student interacts daily with teachers and classmates. Taking the lessons learned from programs like IGR and the research presented later in this paper provides opportunities to expand the role diversity plays in daily lives. This paper will conduct a literature review that focuses on what diversity in the classroom is, the value diversity provides, creating intergroup dialogue, and how to teach in a diverse environment.
Literature Review

Diversity in the classroom:

To understand diversity, it is first important to understand the various elements that make up discussions of this topic in the literature. First, Lynn Spradlin and Richard Parsons break down definitions of culture, race, social class, sex, and gender in “Diversity Matters.” Culture refers to how a group’s common beliefs - language, values, and traditions - shape behavior. These beliefs are not obvious upon first glance but require interaction and discussion to learn about and appreciate. Race is the next component of diversity. A social construct, the idea of race is based upon the physical characteristics of a group of people from a certain area. Unlike ethnicity, which focuses on groups defined by nationality and culture, race’s emphasis on physical characteristics sometimes makes it difficult to discuss in classroom environments. Social or socioeconomic class defines a person’s place in society relative to others. Many in America might put this off due to the country’s emphasis on equality, but differences do exist and teachers ought to be aware of those variations when teaching. Most people think of sex and gender as the same thing but they are actually different. Sex is assigned at birth by chromosomal structure, while gender is a learned aspect (psychological, social, and cultural) of a person. Beyond the differences in gender and sex, sexual identity adds a layer of complexity based on orientation and identity. One may appear as a man, but identify as a woman. California lawmakers passed a bill that allows K-12 students to participate in sex-segregated activities.
based on how they sexually identify, allowing another element of diversity to move to the front of the conversation in those classrooms.⁶

These definitions play an important role in initiating conversation about diversity. It is important to know the terms and meanings behind each word prior to opening up a conversation between people of different identities. Moreover, teachers can more readily see potential areas for conflict if they know basic definitions and the backgrounds of each identity. Facilitators can mediate potential conflicts and emphasize the value of collaboration and how working together outweighs any utility from harm done through negative actions.

*Diversity Difficulties:*

After definitions, one must understand the negative components of diversity and their definitions. Marginalizing those of different statuses ends up oppressing individuals based on cultural characteristics through racism, classism, and sexism.⁷ The thought of limiting educational opportunities due to stereotypes instead of actual potential not only hurts those against whom the educational institution discriminates but also other students who might benefit from diversity. In addition, structured interaction raises anxiety amongst both majority and minority students. Nervousness, group concerns, and pressure might affect the success of a program according to Nicholas Sorensen.⁸ A.T. Miller also addresses social dynamic concerns and instruction types in his “Multicultural Lab.” A teacher who fails to understand the dynamics of the classroom might advantage majority students while harming others through instruction, poor group work, and similar ability assignments. Moreover, Miller recognizes that even outside the classroom interaction in the form of study groups provide an opportunity for increased
intergroup dialogue if done correctly or harm if not. These challenges can prevent the successful implementation of any program meant to promote diversity due the need for people of diverse backgrounds to participate in any element of diversity.

**Benefits of Diversity:**

Diversity programs work. Increased educational outcomes, collaboration, understanding of complex relationships, and confidence fit with tests conducted on various programs throughout the nation. Numerous reports demonstrate the correlation between positive outcomes in education and diverse classrooms with intergroup dialogues. A paper by Patricia Gurin, Biren Nagda, and Gretchen Lopez demonstrated the value of diverse classrooms when the instruction achieved the appropriate dialogue. The study looked at the IGR program at Michigan, along with surveys of minorities and white students to determine what type of classroom environment might improve outcomes. The authors found that the best outcomes resulted from educational programs, like IGR, as the “real” diversity from these programs facilitated growth throughout all in the classroom. Much of what Gurin discusses results from a comparison of data between a control not enrolled in a diversity class and those enrolled. In other words, the benefits of diversity do not occur naturally. There is a forcing function to ensure all involved comprehend and understand the value of the diverse opinions, diversity programs.

More broadly, the theme of civic engagement continues in another paper by Gurin titled “Intergroup Dialogue: Education for a Broad Conception of Civic Engagement.” Too often, we fall victim to equating civic engagement solely with PTA meetings, town councils, or basic participation. We fail, however, to understand the source of the engagement and the
understanding of the value of the networks we make. The ability to collaborate across groups and think critically about the complexity of culture and environment creates openness towards civic engagement and social interaction says Gurin. The process of intergroup relationship development provides students the skills to relate beyond differences across “race, social class, religion, and geography.” These skills translate to real-world interaction, allowing both collaboration and for students to broaden their understanding of the world in general. The structure of diverse classrooms provides value to any educational venture, with other readings furthering research of these outcomes.

In her article “The Next Generation of Diversity and Intergroup Relations Research,” Sylvia Hurtado applies data to the comments made earlier. Hurtado finds that students enrolled in diversity programs score higher on complex thinking skills, retention, cultural awareness, social issues, and were less like to see some social inequity as acceptable. Outside of required courses, extra-curricular programs also demonstrate increased educational and citizenship benefits. Those campuses with frequent interaction of diverse populations and opportunities to learn about various groups show faster rates of improved impact than other campuses. Craig Alimo writes that students who interact with historically conflicting groups see improved confidence in interactions outside of their social set. The diversity program first increases frequency of behaviors and interactions. This increased frequency ultimately leads to improved confidence in other interactions.

Deliberate diversity programs provide educational benefits to the students and long-term value to democratic values and outcomes, including increased civic engagement, as each article discussed. Campuses that assume exposure to diversity and the resulting positive outcomes will not succeed at fostering improved outcomes. A requirement exists for deliberate courses and
extra-curricular activities focused on developing diversity. Programs that promote intergroup
dialogue breed confidence, collaboration, improved educational outcomes, and continued civic
engagement outside of school and the classroom.

Implementing a Diversity Program:

Dedicating resources to create a program requires certain steps. An institution of higher
learning must understand the value of a diversity program to its long term strategic aims and how
it wants its graduates – its product - viewed once they cross the stage on graduation day. Three
layers of institutional policy development control any intentional diversity program and each
requires a “hands on” approach. The first level of policy focused on diversity programs is also
the umbrella for all policies concerning this topic – higher education policy. Sorensen begins his
discussion of this by addressing approaches at how those of any identity on a campus “will
benefit from diversity.”15 The higher education policy does not just want to spend resources
thought to help diversity. Libraries are only repositories of knowledge if students use them.
Diversity programs only open intergroup dialogue when students of various backgrounds choose
to interact.

Institutions must choose policies and programs that will work and understand how those
programs will work. Unlike the idea of general policy related ideas, institutions need to
implement programs that work for their specific student body according to Sorensen. The first
step in implementation says Sorensen is to develop a program, like IGR. The second is to
provide the resources to ensure the program can at least support the level it intends to achieve.16
Resources include space, tools, and time says Tasha Laman. Time, according to Laman,
“reinforces the need to engage in long-term discussion in order to cultivate learning and critical insight over time.”17 Time in or out of a classroom demonstrates the value of building relationships and working through issues instead of ending engagement at the first conflict. Moreover, the decision to make a course worth credit or in addition to all classes is also institutional. These different decisions, says Sorenson, are necessary to develop the correct program and begin its planning.18 No matter what kind of program, the course needs trained and devoted facilitators. Facilitators allow students to move freely within the intergroup space, but also ensure students meet learning objectives throughout their dialogue.19 Again, diversity programs require hands-on approaches. Leaders at all levels of policy must synchronize each step in the process to ensure there is consistent policy and that their school achieves diversity outcomes.

Teaching Diversity:

Creating a program that emphasizes intergroup dialogue requires trained facilitators. These facilitators must incorporate space and time to ensure proper group formation and in-depth discussion. Knowing the amount of time required for proper discussion and finding the neutral space is imperative in creating the appropriate dialogue. Moreover, filling the time and space with those interested in collaboration and of diverse identities helps spur growth.20 Facilitators must understand four communication processes as well. The first process, engaging self, invokes sharing amongst members of the class. The second, appreciating difference, promotes listening to others and learning about their experiences. Comparing views of different identities through reflecting critically begins shaping views. Finally, alliance building mediates conflict and finds
common ground. A facilitator in any intergroup process must foster each of the four communication techniques to build the collaboration and relationships many expect from diversity programs. During this process, facilitators must ask for clarity, pay attention to the group social dynamics, and support those struggling through the dialogue.

Promoting diversity does not just require intergroup dialogue sessions. Classrooms can also promote the development of lifelong collaboration and relationships. A.T. Miller focuses on STEM courses, but many of the concepts remain for humanities education. First, Miller suggests varying groups by either “mixed-achievement” or learning styles. Groups to Miller are in and out of the classroom and both types must receive hands-on guidance. This allows equity in-group work – teams must collaborate to earn a good grade. Learning style groups promote diversity outside of identity. New problem solving and decision-making techniques demonstrate to others value in diversity of thought. In assigning work to groups and individuals of different identities, designing benchmarks for all to achieve as opposed to tailoring it to specific demographics and learning styles promotes the belief that all can succeed in class. When instructing, a teacher must avoid “underteaching” – providing the answer to a female student when a teacher walks a male student through the problem – as it limits the value of any education. Overall, even an average credit-granting course must emphasize diversity and dialogue in the same manner as an intergroup program. Recognizing diversity in identity, background, and even learning style can promote better educational outcomes. Taking advantage of every opportunity to maximize the value of diversity can only improve all educational and civic outcomes.
Conclusion

A hands-on approach to diversity education provides increased education and civic benefits. We cannot expect diverse classrooms to result in diverse outcomes. There must be active steps towards promoting diversity and its successful outcomes. Looking at the multicultural identities of college campuses and the workforce today, developing programs to improve collaboration and understanding will reward both the institution and student for years. The literature review above focused on why diversity matters, how to implement improved diversity policy, and what to do in the classroom. The first step is to know how to recognize the value and the initiate the policy-making process to encourage diversity programs. Once programs begin, it is imperative that the institution makes the proper moves to build the right environment and encourage discussion, collaboration, and long-term interaction. Following these steps and creating dedicated diversity programs will lead to better outcomes for anyone involved.
Bibliography


Alimo takes a narrow approach and focuses on the role of relationships between black and white college students in the classroom. He effectively demonstrates the value of white allies in promoting diversity outcomes.


This article looks at the role of diversity in civic education outcomes. It is less data driven and provides a broad overview of quantitative and qualitative research results.


Taking the value of diversity outside the classroom, Gurin’s article on democratic citizenship looks at the lasting impact of diverse educational experiences on political participation. This demonstrates increased value in outcomes.


Hurtado emphasizes the connection between education and civic activity resulting from diverse outcomes at the University of Michigan. Her research shows through data analysis results consistent with improved contributions to society by those who participated in her programs.


This article looks at the conduct of dialogue to promote diversity education and intergroup communication. Recognizing the need for time and space, Laman and her co-authors show how discussion must last beyond the prepared elements.


Miller takes a direct approach on improving outcomes in basic classes. Instead of focusing on diversity specific programs, Miller wants to include a focus on diversity in the regular
classroom to ensure students can achieve optimum educational benefits outside of intergroup programs.


This article confirms the need for a focused program in an institution’s approach to diversity. Each policy level requires involvement by members of the faculty and students to ensure proper programmatic implementation.
End Notes

2 Hurtado, pg 186.
4 The Program on Intergroup Relations. “About the Program on Intergroup Relations,” University of Michigan, retrieved from http://igr.umich.edu/about on April 13, 2014.
5 Lynn Spradlin and Richard Parsons, Diversity Matters: Understanding Diversity in Schools, (Thomas Wadsworth: California, 2008), pg 4, 8-9, 11-12, 15-17
7 Spradlin, pg 25.
13 Next Generation, pg 605, 607.
15 Sorensen, pg 27.
16 Sorensen, pg 28.
18 Sorensen., pg 28-29.
19 Laman, pg 213.
20 Laman, pg 213.
21 “Intergroup Dialogue,” pg 50.
22 “Intergroup Dialogue,” pg 50.
23 Miller, pg 451, 453-456.