

How Do You Create a Diversity Agenda?

It takes more than just a plan on paper

By Beth McMurtrie MAY 15, 2016 [PREMIUM](#)



Ruth Reyes, Emory U.

Students, faculty members, and administrators at Emory U. attended a retreat in February to discuss racial justice in depth.

C olleges have been roiled in recent months by students demanding more

diversity on campuses. Their concerns are far from new. Diversity has been a hot-button topic since federal desegregation efforts began more than 50 years ago. Yet efforts to increase the numbers of minority faculty, staff, and students on campuses, create inclusive communities, and infuse the curriculum with diverse perspectives have met with limited success.

It's not for lack of trying — on paper, at least. So how do colleges make sure they live up to their promises? In short, how do you create an effective diversity agenda?

Who Sets a College's Diversity Agenda?



True diversity remains a struggle for many colleges. This [special report](#) looks at who actually sets a college's diversity agenda, and what makes that agenda flourish or flop. These questions have taken on a special urgency as race-related protests have erupted on many campuses and as the nation's population grows more diverse.

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Scholars who study diversity in higher education say colleges keep making the same mistakes, even as they ramp up the rhetoric around diversity. From the civil-rights protests of the 1960s to the debates on affirmative action of the 1990s to the broadening of diversity to include sexual orientation and gender identity, colleges have often been reactive, not proactive, experts say. Planning is assigned to ad hoc committees, strategies are designed by small groups of people, and results are

expected of those who often lack the authority and resources to produce them. Meanwhile, most people on campuses are left out of the conversation. As a result, agendas are frequently disjointed, failing to connect different parts of a campus — from admissions to student life to human resources and beyond. Yet to diversify a campus means to transform it, experts say, and that sometimes also means throwing away long-held assumptions about how admissions, hiring, and curricular development function. And that is hard work.

If they continue to fall short on diversity efforts, colleges risk disconnecting from the larger culture. By 2020, minority students are expected [to account for 45 percent](#) of the country's public high-school graduates, up from 38 percent in 2009.

Many colleges fail to reflect those changing demographics. Nationally, three-fourths of full-time faculty members are white, according to [Education Department statistics](#). Only 5.5 percent are black, and 4.2 percent are Hispanic. Black women far outnumber black men in the professoriate, and faculty members across all minority groups are less likely than their white counterparts to be full professors.

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And while 40 percent of college students are minority-group members, they are more likely to attend two-year colleges. They are underrepresented at the most selective institutions, which is where many of the recent protests have taken place. Minority students there say they often feel [marginalized and isolated](#). They want colleges to put more resources into [recruiting and supporting](#) students and faculty of color, to provide [spaces and programming](#) for students from underrepresented groups, and to ensure that their complaints about racism or bias are [responded to swiftly](#).

Following are some methods diversity experts suggest to help overcome common challenges in designing an effective agenda.

Take ownership. Too many college leaders presume that their campuses operate well, until it becomes obvious that they don't. When student protests occur, presidents often seem stunned by the depth of anger. Timothy M. Wolfe, the University of Missouri system's former president, perhaps best embodied that dynamic when a student video captured him staring ahead as student protesters, disturbed by what they saw as the administration's ineffective response to racism on the campus, [blocked his car](#) during homecoming last fall. "I was caught off-guard in that moment," he later said,

explaining his reaction. "Nonetheless, had I gotten out of the car to acknowledge the students and talk with them, perhaps we wouldn't be where we are today."

Similarly, Purdue's president, Mitch Daniels, faced a backlash when he issued [a letter to the community](#) last fall saying the campus stood in "proud contrast" to Missouri and Yale University, both of which had been rocked by protests. Students quickly pushed back with [a list of demands](#), including that he apologize for minimizing their experiences.

A [recent survey](#) by Inside Higher Ed and Gallup brought home that widespread confusion: 84 percent of college presidents said race relations on their campus were "excellent" or "good." Yet only 24 percent said race relations on college campuses nationwide were good. In other words, these were other people's problems.

Why is that? For one thing, most college presidents are white and came up through predominantly white institutions. So it's no surprise that they may have little experience dealing with the complex problems of race and ethnicity, says Walter M. Kimbrough, president of Dillard University, whose research focuses on historically black colleges, like his, and black men in college. When diversity problems come to their attention, they may opt for the simple way out — hire a chief diversity officer and delegate responsibility.

"Presidents don't view being chief diversity officer as their job," says Mr. Kimbrough. "That's for some black person to do. That's for some person of color to do."

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Diversity leaders say that when you get endorsement from people at the top, longer-term commitment is more likely to happen. Gregory T. Vincent, vice president for diversity and community engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, has worked with two presidents since arriving there, in 2005. Each has supported the development of his division, which encompasses a broad array of programs, such as academic support for underrepresented and first-generation students and a campus-climate team that responds to bias incidents. "Everyone has to strap in," he says, "and say, OK, this is going to be at least a decade-long initiative to get going."

Involve the entire faculty, not just the usual suspects. Typically, a diversity plan is hammered out by a small set of people. It often includes a disproportionate number of minority faculty members, who may not have seniority, along with the same set of white faculty members who have championed this cause for years. The problem is that

this small group doesn't have the power to execute a campuswide vision. Yet the faculty as a whole probably has the most power on a campus to make changes, diversity experts say. Administrations change, and students come and go. Meanwhile, faculty members are the gatekeepers in hiring and, at the doctoral level, admissions. And they design the curriculum.

"Professors don't want to be racist," says Shaun R. Harper, executive director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. "Nor do they want to create classroom environments that are alienating to most people. But if the diversity agenda-setting doesn't involve most of them, they inadvertently do the things that students of color and faculty of color complain about for years."

That point hit home, he says, during a recent campus visit in which he held a forum with faculty members about diversity in recruitment, classroom culture, and a host of other issues. He found them "delightfully open" to what he had to say. Yet they told him this was the first time they had been given a chance to weigh in on the diversity discussion on their campus.

Late last year, Brown University released a comprehensive diversity and inclusion plan that involves all departments. Christina H. Paxson, Brown's president, says the decision to push responsibility for diversity down to that level came out of conversations about why certain diversity goals set in earlier years hadn't been met. "If faculty don't own an issue, it's impossible to make progress on it," she says. "If there's one lesson for college presidents, it's that."

Eduardo J. Padrón, president of Miami Dade College, a predominantly Hispanic community college, says buy-in to a diversity agenda should start during the hiring process and continue once faculty members are on the campus. As a result of that happening at Miami Dade, he says, the college has become increasingly diverse and has built stronger ties to the community. "There's a lot of dialogue and conversation and reaching consensus about what's best for students," he says. "It's been a very deliberate conversation, not because of my position, but because people have bought into my agenda."



Emory U.

At Emory's racial-justice retreat, attendees developed specific recommendations in response to protesters' demands.

Engage students. Presidents have sometimes avoided or dismissed student demands if they seem antithetical to how the college operates. Some student groups, for example, have demanded that their institutions fire or grant tenure to specific people, that faculty evaluations by students include open-ended questions about whether they had made racist remarks, or that tuition and fees be eliminated outright. But taking those lists at face value misses the point, says Ajay Nair, senior vice president and dean of campus life at Emory University. "Their demands are often jarring, but they're meant to force a conversation," he says. Unfortunately, he adds, "we are not very good as higher-education institutions at listening very carefully to our students' concerns."

Emory recently tried to [do things differently](#). After students issued a series of demands last fall, Mr. Nair established working groups around each point, to get students and others together to figure out how to address them. One thing he learned, he says, was to look at the underlying issues. For example, the demand for a mechanism to report bias in the classroom turned into a discussion about how to better prepare faculty members to handle controversial issues in teaching.

As Emory's experience illustrates, when colleges really listen to students, they often change or refocus their priorities. A recent American Council on Education survey, for example, showed that presidents are [putting more emphasis](#) on diversity-related curricular reforms because students say that is important to them.

Deborah A. Santiago, a diversity consultant and chief operating officer of Excelencia in Education, a nonprofit organization that supports Latino success in higher education, says that while black students' protests have highlighted their concerns in particular, a well-thought-out response can benefit all students, including Latino, gay and lesbian, and other groups. The real challenge, she says, is to juggle the quick win — changing the name of a dorm, for example — with more-significant plans. "The value-added of student voices, especially black students, is it's bringing media attention, which means institutions can't dismiss it as readily."

At the same time, it's unlikely that colleges can give minority students everything they want — especially if their demands involve a rapid increase in the number of minority students and faculty. Mr. Kimbrough, of Dillard, thinks some minority students on predominantly white campuses are being unrealistic. "It riles me when students say, I want black faculty, black curriculum, black living spaces. I have all that. It's called Dillard University."

Have the tough conversations. Fostering diversity and inclusion is not an act of celebration. It's hard work. Just look at some of the debates taking place on campuses today. If you create housing for minority students, does that [create safe spaces or promote self-segregation?](#) Where is the line between free speech and hate speech? If you want to recruit more minority students, should you change your admissions standards? And in hiring and promotion, are professors unconsciously biased toward institutions and activities that benefit white candidates?

Those are complex conversations, says Mitchell J. Chang, a professor of higher education and organizational change at the University of California at Los Angeles who studies diversity initiatives on college campuses. Yet too often, he says, the people charged with developing a diversity plan lack the expertise needed to direct those conversations. He recommends inviting in diversity experts, or hiring people

who have expertise in the field. There is a lot of good research out there, he says, if people know where to find it.

He also recommends conducting evaluations to help the campus determine where it needs to focus its efforts. A number of universities, including Brown and the University of Texas at Austin, have started campus-climate surveys that allow them to measure progress.

Hold people accountable. Too many diversity plans fail to achieve their goals, yet rarely is anyone held responsible for failure. "There aren't any other areas where you would establish the degree of effort we put forth without accountability, except for diversity," says William B. Harvey, a distinguished scholar at the American Association for Access, Equity, and Diversity. "We pat ourselves on the back, say we gave it a good try, and move on."

Brown has tried to avoid that endless cycle by building in review procedures and accountability processes without being overly rigid. "It's not set in stone, and we have a lot of things we think will be effective, but maybe they won't," says Ms. Paxson. "The broad goals will be the same, but the tactics might change."

Accountability will become increasingly necessary as the diversity agenda evolves, placing responsibility on a wider set of actors. Lorelle L. Espinosa, assistant vice president at the American Council on Education's Center for Policy Research and Strategy, says she sees colleges moving away from thinking of diversity strictly in terms of numbers. Colleges are now moving toward more structural changes, like curricular and pedagogical reforms, emphasizing the experiences students and faculty members have once they are on a campus.

While Emory is just beginning to craft its new diversity agenda, Mr. Nair says the university hopes to create a continuous loop of conversation and action. On a new website, Emory Campus Life Dialogue, anyone can respond to the working groups' suggestions. "We're creating an incubator," he says, where people "can feed ideas to us, for action and implementation.

"This is just the beginning."