Original Paper

Creating Supportive Community for Minority Students in Higher Education – Review on Current Issues and Opportunities for Change

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Abstract

With the growing diversity of student populations in higher education, faculty and staff must thoughtfully consider how cultural and community contexts shape students' well-being, academic success, and professional development throughout their campus experiences. This paper examines the importance of community building particularly for minority students and offers practical strategies for implementation.

Keywords: higher education, student support, community building

1. The Importance of Building Community for Minority Students

The growing population of minority students in higher education underscores the importance of re-examining current educational practices to better address their diverse needs and to support their personal and professional development. University faculty and staff will need to be well prepared to effectively and appropriately deal with issues of diversity and to be more responsive to the needs of this growing segment of the student population (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

As Kayes (2006) noted, despite institutional efforts to diversify, approximately 80% to 90% of faculty and staff at most colleges and universities remain White. This widening demographic gap between a multicultural student body and a largely monocultural faculty and staff team complicates recruitment and retention for underrepresented groups, while simultaneously hindering the development of community and belonging among minority students.

To a certain extent, the underrepresentation of diversity in faculty, staff, and student populations also creates an environment for minority students that result in cultural and identity discontinuity (Leibold & Chen, 2014). This gap between minority students' home culture and the academic culture in universities and colleges would result in the "marginalization of minorities" (Postiglione, 2007, p.99). It can decrease faculty, staff, and students' cultural awareness and sensitivity towards students from multicultural and minority backgrounds. Consequently, minority students encounter challenges of bridging home-university differences and cultural gaps and to develop a sense of belonging.

While minority students are shifting between degrees of comfort and discomfort with their own culture and the university culture, faculty, staff, and the majority students need to rethink how to bridge cultural and identity gaps between minority students and their peers, faculty, and staff who are from the majority cultural group. Recognizing multiple cultural and identity differences among minority students and their White counterparts, building community would contribute to reducing cultural clashes and better facilitating minority students' learning and identity development (Villegas, 2008).

The significance of community building is demonstrated in the view of education as a social process rather than individualistic process (Osterman, 2000). The research indicates that being included or welcomed in a community leads to positive emotions while the lack of belongingness is associated with incidence of mental and physical illness and a broad range of behavioural problems (Osterman, 2000). Studies also links the experience of relatedness or belongingness to the "positive academic attitudes and motives, social and personal attitudes, engagement and participation, and academic achievement" (Osterman, 2000, p.327).

Recognizing that building community for minority students enhances their learning experience, identity formation, and personal development, faculty and staff need to adapt their approaches to instruction, advising, mentorship, and programming. Educational excellence and developmental success for minority students are unattainable without the incorporation of pluralism in the educational system and community creation. Building supportive cultural communities can play an essential role in reducing institutional racism, decreasing the social and identity isolation and discomfort between minority students and their peers, as well as improving minority students' cultural recognition, self-esteem, identity validation, learning engagements, and academic outcomes.

2. The Role of Community Building in the Success of Minority Students in Higher Education

Minority students' need for belonging in community has been well demonstrated in support of increasing their opportunities for social involvement, improving understanding of their community, enhancing development of their culture and identity, building supportive network, and personal well-being and academic success (Osterman, 2000). In the study of 25,000 college students, Astin (1993) illustrated that "diversity and multiculturalism affected students positively on students' cognitive and affective development" (p.48). Building a community among minority students creates an influential network of support among its members. As such, community building among minority students who experience cultural underrepresentation and/or cultural misrepresentation cannot only support them but also provide incentive for new students to join the community.

This promotes recruitment and retention of minority students, especially in predominantly white institutions (Welch, 2009). Community members can share their experiences and advice, support their peers through academic and personal challenges, offer internship opportunities and career suggestions that can greatly contribute to students' personal development and well-being, as well as lead to their academic achievements and career preparedness.

Traditionally, campus-based community and cultural centers in higher education focus on meeting students' needs for inclusion and community building (Welch, 2009). To become "a home away from home", cultural centers make efforts on building the supportive network, providing involvement and leadership opportunities, creating identity developmental programs to establish the inclusive sense of community and familial atmosphere to help minority students successfully navigate the institutional culture and campus environment, and to overcome the daily difficulties they experience as a minority student.

Community building requires that staff engage with minority students in intentional and culturally responsive ways. Maintaining positive and cooperative interactions play an essential role in creating an inclusive and welcoming community. Staff and faculty enact with students as they strive to accommodate the needs of students and engage them with rigorous content can improve academic, cognitive, social, and attitudinal outcomes for students (Cohen & Lotan, 2004). This also promotes cultural pluralism in academic environments and the identity development of minority students. Thus, it is directed towards the building or enhancement of a sense of community among individual students. When minority students engage in positive interactions in their community, they will feel a sense of togetherness and validation.

3. Navigating the Challenges of Community Building for Minority Students

As previously noted, a relatively homogenous university system coupled with potential institutional resistance can hinder the integration of diversity into community-building efforts for minority students. To address this issue, the creation of diverse and supportive communities needs to be prioritized within the university's strategic plan. Beyond merely increasing cultural representation through hiring, the long-term recruitment and retention of diverse faculty, staff, and students are of equal importance. Without explicit, systemic actions to address these disparities, the isolation experienced by minority students will likely persist.

Despite growing institutional claims of support for minority student communities, there is still a long way to go. More robust training is needed to help faculty and staff debunk the misunderstandings and biases that affect minority students. Without specific multicultural awareness and cultural competence, staff interactions often remain inequitable. Many institutions also find it difficult to diversify their team when current members report a lack of cross-cultural knowledge and experience. To become culturally

responsive with minority students, faculty, staff, and students from the majority group need to develop a better sense and knowledge of themselves and of their minority students as well (Darling-Hammond, 2002).

Limited funding and resources that are allocated to faculty, staff, departments and cultural centers to address the importance of building community for minority students can pose challenge for promoting the sense of community building. Efforts to recruit and develop qualified staff and create physical space for minority students to build their communities can be difficult. Resistance and lack of policy reinforcement and financial support to develop cultural centers for minority students can create practical obstacles to promoting communities for minority students as well. Institutional support is much needed in the establishing and developing of programs and communities for minority students.

4. Fostering Supportive Communities within Higher Education

A significant void remains in the spaces and encounters where minority students feel truly heard. Schug, Alt, and Klauer (2015) expanded on the concept of intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008), demonstrating how gendered race leads to social identities being either overlooked or misrepresented. To counter this, supportive programs for diverse and multicultural populations must function as social anchors, fostering identity development within an intellectual framework. The success of these community-building initiatives depends on the sustained, collective support of faculty, staff, and higher education administrators.

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