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Larry H. Ebbers and Shirley L. Henry

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# Cultural Competence: A New Challenge to Student Affairs Professionals

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The authors argue for a prominent student affairs role in increasing the cultural competence of staff.

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The greatest challenge for America's colleges and universities in the 1990s may be to create a climate in which the student body not only accepts and appreciates diversity but learns to celebrate it as well. Historically, societal changes have heralded the advent of new expectations and responsibilities for the student affairs professional. The current movement to more actively recruit minority students is no exception to this historical model.

Wright (1987) cautions that the continued growth of predominantly white higher education institutions will depend on their ability to respond to the "developmental, academic, and social needs of minority students" (p. 97). Wright believes the future reputation of student affairs professionals as innovative leaders will be judged by the quality of programs and services provided to these students. With the advent of the nationwide emphasis on minority recruitment, it seems that a role for student affairs is to increase the cultural competence of staff.

The term *cultural competence* is familiar to persons in the field of social work and is defined by Cross, Friesen, Mason, and Rider (1988) as "the effectiveness of a helper's work with someone of a different ethnicity, culture, or race." The authors further suggest that cultural competence not only applies to individual professionals but that "it is an agency, local, state, federal, and ultimately global issue" (P. 5).

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According to Cross (1988), a culturally competent system of care "acknowledges and incorporates-at all levels-the importance of culture, the assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance toward the dynamics that result from cultural differences, the expansion of cultural knowledge, and the adaptation of services to meet culturally unique needs" (p. 1).

Culturally competent professionals do not attempt to conduct themselves as though they were members of a culture different from their own. They do, however, reflect an internalized awareness of specific cultures and an ability to "carry out professional activities consistent with that awareness" (Green, 1982, P. 52).

Pounds (1987) attributes the success of programs developed for black students to well-defined program goals and regular evaluation. She cautions that "whether services are separate or mainstreamed, intra-instructional cooperation is necessary" (p. 37). It is time that student affairs administrators, their staff, and representatives from academic departments become involved jointly with evaluating the cultural competence of campus programs and personnel.

What are the necessary components of services for minority students and how should personnel be trained to become more competent in dealing with cultural diversity? An evaluation of current knowledge, values, and program purposes can aid in determining the answers to these questions (Northern, cited in Lum, 1986).

Fleming (1984) found that black students on predominantly white campuses face the problem of faculty expectations of assimilation without the benefit of program changes to assist that assimilation. This problem of adjustment may be common to other minority groups as well.

The knowledge base for this issue has grown in the past decade under such terms as multicultural nonsexist education, human relations training, and cross-cultural awareness. Literature from the mental health profession is more abundant in the area of understanding the role of cultural difference (McManus, 1988). Mental health models such as "ethnic competence" (Green, 1982) and "ethnic minority practice" (Lum, 1986) may serve as guides to professionals in other fields.

In addressing the issue of cultural competence, it is important to consider specific training needs for the profession. Answers to the following questions must be found.

*What is cultural competence?*

*What level is desirable?*

*How is it attained?*

*How is it measured?*

*Should this training become an integral part of the preservice program experience?*

*Should it be included as an intensive segment of on-the-job inservice?*

Cross (1988) suggests a continuum that might be used by student affairs administrators to understand and evaluate the current level of staff and institutional cultural competence. The continuum moves from the most

negative-which destroys a culture, toward the most positive, advanced level of competence-an agency actively involved in adding to the knowledge base by research, publishing, program development, and dissemination. By assessing the current status of cultural competence, administrators can determine institution and staff competence, identify deficit areas, and develop program goals and objectives for improvement.

Most college and university student affairs programs promote cultural awareness and acceptance. Training efforts that include experiential simulation activities such as Bafa-Bafa and programs to promote acceptance such as Programming for Diversity (University of California at Davis, 1987) help increase awareness. Although these traditional approaches are important program components, they do not address the deeper understanding involved in cultural competence as defined here. An intensive study of attitudes, policies, and program practices must be undertaken if cultural competence is to be achieved (Cross, Friesen, Mason, & Rider, 1988).

The need to increase minority representation in our profession must be addressed. Merely adding more minority professionals may not, however, sufficiently address the problem of cultural competence for staff. Adding minority representation to our ranks is an imperative first step. To assume that this automatically leads to better understanding of all minority groups and develops cultural competence may be erroneous. In order to extend the cultural competence of student affairs staff, it may first be necessary to identify areas in which individuals are bound within their own cultures. It is important to extend this individualized search of personal cultural binding to all staff members, including those who represent minority cultures.

McManus (1988) suggests that it is necessary for professionals to be cognizant of the influence their own culture has had in determining how they think and act: "A purposeful self-examination of cultural influences can lead to a better understanding of the impact of culture on one's own life. Only then can the complexities of cross-cultural interactions be fully appreciated" (p. 2). Green (1982) supports McManus' position by suggesting that "the first step in ethnic competence is to become aware of the limitations of one's own culture" (p. 54). This understanding of personal culture leads to an appreciation of how cultural differences shape thinking and behavior.

Typically, student affairs programs target expanding awareness and acceptance of minority cultures on the part of the majority culture members. It is important, however, to expand the cultural awareness and acceptance of all staff and students. How individual mannerisms, speech, values, and behaviors are bound by culture is important learning for minority personnel as well as those from the majority culture. A culturally diverse staff, although a vital element, does not facilitate this learning or guarantee cultural competence.

A fallacy is inherent in the expectation that minority professionals automatically relate with understanding to other minority cultures; it is unreasonable to expect exposure to and an understanding of all minority cultures. Minority and majority culture professionals are products of their cultural experiences. In developing staff cultural competence, all staff members should be given the benefit of training to increase their skills.

King (1986) suggests that the promotion of cultural diversity should emphasize the meaning and nature of groups, development of images, differing perspectives of reality, and the value of cross-cultural communication. This range of

understanding seems an appropriate beginning for the development of cultural competence and essential to both majority and minority staff persons.

If cultural competence is to be achieved it will be necessary for involved professionals to assume postures of mutual help and learning, and establish an environment that facilitates this exchange. Through such "helping-seeking behavior" an individual of a different cultural background is identified as someone with much to contribute to mutual learning and is not perceived as merely dependent in the relationship. Probable outcomes of such an environment are an increased climate of trust, mutual effort, and staff cultural competence (Green, 1982, P. 28).

Certainly, it is unreasonable to assume that complete understanding of all cultures is possible. However, to maximize staff competence, microculture simulation activities might be included with acceptance/awareness training. These preservice and/or inservice training models would include the development of microcultures in which persons are placed in the planned environment to experience a diverse culture. This segment of training could encompass a day or several days and would be planned to involve the norms, values, and behavior patterns unique to the culture being studied.

A study of the Peace Corps model of culturalization by immersion might assist in the development of microculture simulation training efforts. Community leaders representative of the local minority group can be recruited to assist in the development of each cultural experience.

The work currently being done by Northern Illinois University and the University of Florida are exemplary of cultural awareness activities. Northern Illinois hosted the Region IV-E Drive-in Conference on Racial Discrimination on Campus. The intent of this one-day workshop for campus teams and advisors was to plan ways to combat discrimination and promote appreciation of racial and cultural diversity. The University of Florida sponsors a weekend retreat involving faculty, students, and student affairs personnel; its purpose is to explore issues of common concern, especially racial understanding and cultural awareness.

These models can be expanded to include a microcultural simulation experience in which participants are not only involved in discussions about diversity or "told" about cultural differences, but are given the opportunity to "live" the difference. A national cross-campus network of student affairs professionals could emerge to exchange campus presentations of culture simulation experiences. Sharing training events will facilitate broader understanding and increase staff cultural competence, at minimum cost.

The promotion of regional and national cultural simulation experiences, similar to a case-study approach to learning, could become an important activity for professional organizations. The nationwide involvement of university and college personnel in such programming is limitless and exciting.

In summary, further research needs to be conducted by student affairs professionals to analyze staff development and preservice programs in order to determine the development of cultural competence. The expansion of programs to address identified deficit areas should include personal culture assessment and microculture simulation training events. Program plans should also encompass cultural enrichment for all staff members regardless of their ethnic/racial background.

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