

A Movement, Not a Moment: A College Level Approach to the Development of an Inclusive Learning Environment

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the process of inspiring change for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion by describing the efforts of a College of Nursing and Health Sciences at a 4-year, public institution in Louisiana. Motivated by recent campus conversations, the college has established a collective effort to establish new strategies to create a more inclusive academic environment for students, faculty, and staff. These efforts build upon recent successes and are in support of the university's campus-wide Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence. The lessons learned include: (a) the impact of intercultural engagement on inspiring culture change within an academic college; (b) the importance of getting broad buy-in and engagement from students, faculty, and staff for making process; and (c) successful strategies for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion at the college level.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, higher education, nursing

Introduction

Nursing has a long history of being structured and uniform in relation to education and practice. Although the profession has made strides in preparing practitioners who are able to provide holistic care within complex and challenging health care settings, much work remains in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Health care agencies and educational institutions have an obligation to create unbiased and respectful working and learning environments regardless of gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, and culture. Over the past year, this academic college that prepares nurses and allied health professionals in a public, 4-year university in Louisiana has

developed strategies to create a more inclusive academic environment for students, faculty, and staff. The purpose of this article is to describe the plan that was implemented by the college to develop the infrastructure for a learning space that meets the needs of all stakeholders in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

University and College Overview

Today, there are approximately 16,000 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in eight academic colleges at the university. The university is classified as a doctorate-granting institution with very high research activity by the Carnegie Foundation and is committed to the core values of helping others, research for a reason, taking learning beyond the classroom, and bringing people together. As the leading provider of the professional registered nurse workforce in the local region, the College of Nursing and Health Sciences is committed to educational excellence in patient care and health care management. The two departments within the college offer the following programs: pre-licensure Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), Registered Nurse to BSN, Master of Science in Nursing (Family Nurse Practitioner and Nursing Education), Post Master's Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), BSN to DNP, Cardiovascular Nursing Graduate Certificate, Health Information Management, and Health Services Administration. There are approximately 1,600 students enrolled in the college, with 1,400 in nursing and 200 in allied health (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, n.d.).

By the Numbers

The full-time undergraduate student population at the university is made up of 56% women and 44% men. Sixty-four percent of the student body is white, with 21% being Black or African American. Six percent of students are Hispanic. The graduate student population is made up of 53% women and 47% men, with 57% white, 10% Black or African American, and 21% classified as international. College statistics closely resemble those of the university, with 62.68% being white, and 22.59% Black or African American. Consistent with gender distribution in the profession of nursing and health care, 86% of students are female, and 14% are male (College Factual, n.d.).

From a faculty perspective, 45% of full-time university faculty are female and 55% are male. Seventy-five percent of full-time university faculty are white, with 5.5% Black or African American, 11% Asian, and 3.4% Hispanic. Of the faculty within the college, 91% are female and

9% are male. In terms of race, 94% of college faculty are white, and 5% are Black or African American (College Factual, n.d.).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University

The Office for Campus Diversity serves as the hub for diversity, equity, and inclusion support, programming, and collaboration for the university. Established in 1993 as the Office of Minority Affairs, the Office for Campus Diversity reports directly to the University President and provides strategic direction for campus-wide efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion for students, faculty, and staff. The Office for Campus Diversity hosts programs such as the Courageous Conversations workshop series to develop inclusive teaching practices, the Project ALLIES training session to promote inclusion for the LGBTQ+ community, and an annual Women's Leadership Conference to advance gender equity in leadership.

***INSIGHT Into Diversity* HEED Award**

In 2018, the university received the *INSIGHT Into Diversity* Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award for the first time. The HEED Award, open to all colleges and universities across the U.S. and Canada, measures an institution's level of achievement and intensity of commitment in relation to broadening diversity and inclusion on campus through initiatives, programs, and outreach; student recruitment, retention, and completion; and hiring practices for faculty and staff. Applications are comprehensive, covering all aspects of campus diversity and inclusion. One of the goals of the application process is to help institutions of higher education assess their diversity efforts in order to build on their success and improve. The university's successful application for the 2018 HEED Award served as an impetus for envisioning the next phase of institutional progress related to equity, diversity, and inclusion work. The university also received the HEED Award in 2019, 2020, and 2021 (*INSIGHT into Diversity*, n.d.).

Diversity Advisory Council

The Diversity Advisory Council (DAC) is a university committee which reports directly to the President and serves as a catalyst for change and an advocate for diversity and inclusion within the campus and surrounding community. The DAC provides support for programming, education and resources to university students, faculty, staff, and community stakeholders. The DAC also supports the mission of the Office for Campus Diversity in cultivating an inclusive campus culture.

The Diversity Advisory Council consists of community and campus leaders who are committed to promoting the values of diversity and inclusion on campus. Membership on the DAC is reflective of the diversity within the campus community, based on a variety of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, geographical region, religion, and nationality.

Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence

During the 2018-2019 academic year, the Office for Campus Diversity led an effort to create the university's first Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence. Based on a nationally recognized model for equity and inclusion in higher education, the Strategic Plan was created through the guidance of the Diversity Advisory Council, with broad stakeholder engagement including students, faculty, staff, and community members.

In October 2018, the DAC met to begin the strategic planning process. After reviewing the Inclusive Excellence framework, each member of the DAC selected one of the five dimensions of the framework on which to focus. These groups comprised five subcommittees of the larger DAC. Throughout the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters, members of the DAC engaged in a structured process for assessing the existing landscape; identifying leverage points and challenges; constructing the plan's key objectives, tasks, and action steps; developing metrics to measure the achievement of the objectives over time; and finalizing/releasing the plan.

The DAC met monthly from October 2018 to May 2019 to complete the strategic planning process. The Fall 2018 semester consisted of an introduction to the planning process, assessing the existing landscape, and identifying leverage points and challenges. This included the completion of a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis of campus-wide resources, curricula, and policies that support the advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The DAC also conducted an assessment of institutional data such as the compositional diversity of students, faculty, and staff; an audit of current courses that include diversity, equity, and inclusion content; and the analysis of surveys and evaluations for current programs.

The Spring 2019 semester involved setting objectives, tasks, and action steps, developing metrics for assessment, and preparing the plan for approval and dissemination. In applying the framework on an institutional level, the objectives outlined in the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence focused on five key dimensions: (a) access and success, (b) education and

development, (c) community engagement, (d) climate and intergroup relations, and (e) organizational infrastructure. In each of the five dimensions, Diversity Advisory Council members identified key objectives to advance campus-wide efforts to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives throughout the institution to advance the educational mission and align with the university's strategic plan. These objectives included: cultivating a diverse and inclusive student body, faculty, and staff; broadening access to education and professional development related to diversity, equity, and inclusion; promoting intercultural engagement; developing and promoting inclusive policies and practices; and engaging community partners to broaden the impact of campus initiatives. The Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence was reviewed and approved by the university president in August 2019, was released to the University community shortly thereafter, and will be in place until 2022.

Current College Initiatives

In 2019, the dean and associate dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences began to examine the climate of the college in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Meetings were held which included nursing leaders from the community who were alums of the program, as well as faculty and students, to assess their impression of the program in relation to feelings of belonging, acceptance, and fair and impartial treatment of all students. In March 2020, as plans were being put into place to develop strategies for addressing these issues, the onset of COVID-19 resulted in a shift in the priorities and resources to deal with the emergent pedagogical needs of the students. During the Summer of 2020, following the tragic death of George Floyd and the resulting civil unrest, college administrators recognized the need to reach out to students, faculty and staff and expressed support for those experiencing hardships. At that time, administrators offered an opportunity for dialogue with staff and faculty in relation to the intense emotions surrounding race and inclusion. The response to this offering was overwhelming, resulting in a plan to move forward with a more formal mechanism for engagement of students, staff, faculty, alumni, and community stakeholders in discussions regarding the creation of a more inclusive learning environment.

After several informal meetings with a small group of faculty who were interested in discussing diversity issues within the college, a meeting was held in early September 2020 and all faculty and staff were invited to attend. The response was very positive, with rich and engaging dialogue and exchange of ideas. Under the direction of the associate dean and as a

result of this initial meeting, three collaborative workgroups were formed to focus on student engagement, curriculum considerations, and faculty initiatives and resources.

Initially, the decision was made to include only staff and faculty in the workgroups, with plans to invite students and alumni after a more formal structure was developed. All faculty and staff were invited to join, and initially there were four to five members in each workgroup. The associate dean met with nursing colleagues from two large universities outside of Louisiana who were heavily invested in moving their colleges forward in this area and received valuable advice and direction as plans were laid out. Also, the associate dean engaged in a brainstorming session with the university's chief diversity officer to ensure that the mission of the college's efforts were in alignment with those of the university.

During the initial meeting, the associate dean stressed that the direction of these efforts was going to be focused on creating sustainable strategies for creating a more inclusive learning and working environment, so plans needed to be well thought out, intentional, and long lasting. Everyone present embraced the concept of "a movement, not a moment" and expressed their commitment to identification of long-term initiatives which could impact the college long past the foreseeable future.

In Fall 2020, each workgroup conducted an assessment of the status of their respective areas in relation to diversity, equity and inclusion, which were reported to full faculty in December 2020. The Student Engagement Workgroup examined recruitment and retention strategies on campus for minorities. This workgroup also conducted a thorough literature review to determine best practices of nursing programs in this area, as well as recommendations of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), National League for Nursing (NLN), Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management (CAHIM) and other professional organizations.

The Faculty Initiatives and Resources Workgroup compiled a list of campus organizations and resources for faculty, including training initiatives for screening committees and faculty development opportunities provided by the Office of Human Resources. Based on an assessment of activities implemented by other nursing programs, this workgroup provided suggestions for college level strategies that could increase the representation of minorities among faculty and staff.

The Curriculum Considerations Workgroup was tasked with identifying existing content related to diversity, equity, and inclusion among undergraduate and graduate programs. This “deep dive” into all program offerings resulted in a comprehensive overview of course content, with recommendations for areas in which curricular revision may be considered.

During Spring 2021, each workgroup conducted a SWOT analysis in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion in their respective areas. These analyses were presented to full faculty at the end of the semester, and the associate dean then compiled an overall SWOT analysis which included content from all workgroups. This was presented to faculty at the beginning of the Fall 2021 semester.

The college maintains a faculty resource site on Moodle, the learning management system used by the university. All workgroup reports are uploaded onto the faculty resource site, which provides access to all reports to all faculty and staff. Other relevant resources are also included on the site, providing quick access to websites, white papers, and other publications that may be of use to faculty.

Additionally, members of the workgroups collaborated with the department heads, associate dean, and dean to develop a statement to be included in all syllabi and on each course Moodle site as a clear indication to students of the college’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The posted statement is:

The college embraces diversity, equity, social justice, and respect for all. Administrators, faculty and staff are committed to creating unbiased and respectful learning environments regardless of gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, and culture. We celebrate individual uniqueness and ensure inclusive learning spaces in which all can thrive, and we encourage and welcome student suggestions and feedback.

Each week, the dean sends out “Announcements and Accolades,” an electronic newsletter, to all faculty and staff within the college highlighting achievements and important information. A special section on diversity, equity, and inclusion has been incorporated into the newsletter, providing a method of communication related to publications, podcasts, and professional development opportunities specific to this area.

Future Plans

The Office for Campus Diversity is currently compiling data on the initiatives and progress in each of the five strategic imperatives of the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence. In the academic year 2021-2022, the Diversity Advisory Council will assess the success of the strategic plan as a foundation for updating the plan in the following year. At the same time, the university is undertaking a campus-wide strategic planning process led by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. By engaging with the campus-wide strategic planning process, the goals outlined in the Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence will be infused into the university's next strategic plan, which provides an opportunity for increased engagement, visibility, and commitment to achieving its goals.

From a college perspective, plans for upcoming semesters are to actively recruit students to participate in each workgroup. Several more faculty and staff have expressed an interest in joining the workgroups. With the addition of students and more faculty and staff, a reorganization of the current structure may be considered. Also planned is a detailed examination of the SWOT analysis, with collaboration with the dean and other administrators to determine next steps.

Work on the development of a strategic plan for the College of Nursing and Health Sciences will begin in Spring 2022. At that point, the College's efforts in this area will be sufficiently mature to provide a foundation for the development of a strategic plan for diversity, equity and inclusion that will be in alignment with the Office for Campus Diversity's Inclusive Excellence Strategic Framework.

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Author Biographies

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