

# **Integrating Multicultural Competence in Practices of Student Affairs Professionals: Meeting Expectation**

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## **Introduction**

Institutions of higher education recognize their responsibility to both the individual and to the greater community. According to Marcy (2004), it hopes to produce educated citizens that can actively take part in a democratic society. In addition, higher education contributes and influences changes in the American culture.

The cultural dynamics of students on college campuses have increasingly become complex, making the work of student affairs professionals ever more challenging. Issues and concerns that include significant variables such as race, gender, physical ability, age, income, and other social variables contribute to the difficulty in creating an environment that is "welcoming for all students..." However, despite higher education's efforts to develop methods of responding to a diverse student body, the results, "at best," are "inconsistent" (Pope, Reynolds & Mueller, 2004, p. 4).

Student Affairs professionals play a vital role when addressing multicultural issues on the campus. This position calls for integrating multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skill into practice. King (n.d.) noted such skills contribute to broader campus awareness of the significance of multicultural competencies in our diverse community. However, Pope et al, (2004) reported that many student affairs practitioners receive very little training in multicultural issues. In addition, work performance evaluation very rarely includes multicultural criteria.

## **Ethical Issue**

This poses an ethical dilemma with what Beckner (2004) stated as short-term versus long-term values of higher education. The immediate needs or desires for developing multicultural competent professionals are contrary to an institution of higher education's value to support an ever-changing American culture. Ethical standards as presented by The American College Personnel Association (1992) include professional responsibility and competence so professionals will be, "responsible for the consequences of their actions or inaction" (p.3). However, these standards are not being met. The responsibility falls upon the individual and goes unnoticed. This conflicts with the ethics of care for the community, fairness, and social justice to the students.

## **Discussion**

The ethical implication for the lack of training in this area leads to deficiencies in knowledge, skills, and awareness of unfamiliar cultures. As noted by Ruggiero (2001), critical analysis of an issue or concern is affected and decision-making is usually based on choices dependent upon personal and subjective moral standards. Every culture has etiquette that restricts and prescribes the manner for which people behave toward one another; it is based on culture ( Wikipedia, *Etiquette*, 2002). If a goal of student affairs professionals is to promote a diverse and inclusive environment on campus, how can decisions on programs, goals, and outreach be equitable if individuals in student affairs lack the knowledge, skills, and awareness of a diverse student body?

Imagine a student professional in an advising role who lacks training with diversity-related issues. A Southeast Asian student discloses that she is failing courses due to her depressed feelings of being away from her family. Will the advisor blindly make assumptions based on social constructs designed to promote stereotypes? Is the advisor aware of family relationships in collectivist cultures? What consequences will the student face from the advice? Mills' Harm Principle weighs actions on the potential harm that may be done to someone, in this case, the student and at a macro level, the institution and greater community.

In contrast, an advisor competent in multicultural issues is skilled in addressing students' needs while seeking collaborative intervention with support initiatives, programs, and decision-making processes. Hamrick, Evans & Schuh (2002) asserts that validation is a method used to assure students that they belong in the campus community through various supportive structures. It is prevalent with contributing to the student's self-confidence and self-esteem, particularly in first-generation students.

Menzel (2003) noted that there is a greater likelihood of higher stage of reasoning "when a person is familiar with the content of the problem situation, and there has been considerable discussion and analysis of the issues" (p. 4). The common-good approach assumes that individuals' own good in a society interconnect to the overall good of the community. This approach focuses on the policies and systems that benefit all. It advocates self-reflection as members of the same community, what kind of society we aspire to become and how to achieve this goal ( Markkulla Center for Applied Ethics, 2003). According to Papalewis (1988), "ultimately, one's ability to lead effectively and efficiently is based on the ability to understand and respect individual differences: to be ethical, one must be respectful" (Papalewis, 1991, p. 3).

## **Conclusion**

This dilemma prompts the need for establishing alternative courses of action. First, student affairs professionals must be committed to multicultural-learning incentives. Dialogue is a strong learning venue to discuss diversity issues on a regular basis. It is essential that strategies for self-awareness allow individuals to reflect on "inaccurate or inappropriate views of a particular culture in the form of stereotypes, biases, or culturally based assumptions" (Pope, et al, p.15).

A multicultural development objective can be set as a job performance goal during evaluations. This will allow assessment for professional development and support toward the goal. Individuals can participate in committees and campus activities to expose professionals to diverse groups. A common means of career development is to attend workshops and/or conferences relating to multicultural awareness.

Institutions committed to this endeavor can sponsor training sessions available for employees. Developing an online diversity-training module that provides a certificate after completion of the session is a good alternative for meeting busy schedules. In addition, the creation of a series of training modules that focus on specific topics of issues related to diversity can support continued learning. As an example, a training series can focus on narratives or story-telling experiences of non-traditional students. These training modules can stimulate integrative discussions with colleagues and possibly students.

The recommendations suggested will provide balance between the conflicting values mentioned earlier. Addressing this dilemma is critical for student affairs professionals to become effective advocates and leaders with multicultural issues along with providing the necessary supportive structures for student success.

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