

# Invoking a University's Mission Statement to Promote Diversity, Civility, and Free Speech

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*The author explores the debate on diversity, clarifying how the positive effects of diversity activities outweigh the potential problems associated with them and explains the role of student affairs administrators in invoking the university mission statement to concurrently promote diversity, civility, and free speech.*

Few will argue that diversity has become one of the most discussed phenomena in modern education (Brown, 1988; Kuh & MacKay, 1989), but little else regarding diversity is agreed upon by members of educational communities. Educators in general and student affairs administrators in particular have listened to and engaged in escalating debates that pit diversity and civility against freedom of speech. This article seeks to (a) clarify how the positive effects outweigh the potential problems associated with diversity activities, (b) explain the role of student affairs administrators in invoking the university mission to concurrently promote diversity, civility, and free speech, and (c) look beyond the First Amendment when setting the parameters of the normative culture. Despite the

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fact that higher education's diversity programs and multicultural aspirations have been scrutinized, questioned, and, in some cases, discredited (Auster, 1994; Chavez, 1994; Lynch, 1994), this article reaffirms the need for such programs on college campuses.

## The Diversity Debate

Diversity is not a goal relentlessly pursued on all college campuses, and is, in fact, one of the most controversial issues in higher education (Astin, 1993). Because student affairs administrators are predominantly responsible for diversity programs (Brown 1988), they must be aware of the complexities inherent in multiculturalism and the concerns voiced by both its supporters and critics.

For some supporters of diversity, their primary concern stems from a belief that although institutions verbally support diversity efforts, they are unwilling to change the institutional structure to make it more inclusionary. Because educational leaders hesitate to share their power with less privileged groups, a genuine commitment to diversity entails too many risks for those who lead our colleges and universities (Barr & Strong, 1988). Thus, many educational leaders only promote superficial changes that overtly appease the requests of diversity advocates while covertly maintaining the status quo of the original power structure. According to Barr and Strong, genuine diversity efforts will succeed only when university leaders change the power relationships and the institutional structure by appropriately altering faculty and staff hiring and promotion practices, student admission and financial aid procedures, curriculum development, library acquisition policies, and institutional budget decisions. Without such changes, multicultural programs will have little impact on the organization or the function of the university.

In addition to these institutional barriers to multiculturalism, Terrell (1988) believes that the defensive posture and reactive stance of some university administrators have hindered the goals of diversity. Consequently, he suggested that student affairs administrators, recognizably the experts in proactive programming, student development, and diversity (Brown, 1988), should take the lead in encouraging their institutions to make a firm commitment to multiculturalism.

Critics have voiced their own strong objections to diversity initiatives in higher education. First, they allege that diversity efforts have politicized the curricula, divided the campus, compromised academic integrity, and

threatened freedom of speech and academic freedom (Astin, 1993). Second, they make much of the perceived relationships between diversity and its "disreputable twin," affirmative action (Lynch, 1994), and between diversity and the increasingly questionable political correctness (PC) movement (Painter, 1994). Finally, critics accuse multiculturalists of engaging in erroneous teachings, such as equating race and ethnicity with culture, and then presuming that race and ethnicity determine values and mores (Chavez, 1994), and encouraging "minority" students to think of themselves as "members of oppressed groups entitled to special treatment" (Chavez, 1994, p. 30).

### Critical Reasons to Support Diversity Programs

According to Astin (1993), people on both sides of the diversity debate have been arguing in the abstract. When examined quantitatively, however,

the weight of empirical evidence shows that the actual effects on student development of emphasizing diversity and student participation in diversity activities are overwhelmingly positive. Clearly the dire claims about the detrimental effects of emphasizing diversity are not supported by the data. (Astin, 1993, p. 431)

One reason, then, that institutions should emphasize diversity is because students benefit dramatically from both curricular and co-curricular diversity activities. Studies indicate that students' enrollment in "diversity" classes (i.e., women's studies, ethnic or Third World courses) coupled with their participation in co-curricular diversity activities (i.e., cultural awareness workshops, racial and ethnic discussion groups, and socializing activities that encourage multicultural interaction) increase their gains in cognitive and affective development, their level of satisfaction with the overall college experience, and their commitment to multiculturalism (Astin, 1993).

Further, the contribution such programs make in fostering student development directly enhances the institution's image and reputation. Because student development is one of the most important goals of a university (Astin, 1985; Bowen, 1977; Boyer, 1987; Clark, 1972; Pace, 1974), the true measure of university excellence depends upon its ability to affect favorably the lives of its members (Astin, 1985). Hence, the best institutions are those that significantly advance both the students' knowledge and their personal development (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991).

Given that student development is associated with an increased commitment to multiculturalism, it is important for colleges to create multicultural communities. In this sense, a multicultural community can be described as one that

is genuinely committed to diverse representation of its members; is sensitive to maintaining an open, supportive and responsive environment; is working toward and purposefully including elements of diverse cultures in its ongoing operation; and . . . is authentic in its response to issues confronting it. (Strong, as cited in Barr & Strong, 1988)

Finally, as student affairs administrators observe the "recoloring of campus life" (Steele, 1989, p. 47), they must position their institutions to meet new challenges. As demographics shift, it is not only the college's reputation, but, more important, its institutional well-being that depends upon its ability and willingness to articulate and act upon a diversity commitment (Kuh & MacKay, 1989).

## Student Affairs and the University Mission

Although many factors link student affairs administrators to the goals of student development and multiculturalism, the most essential element in shaping this work is the institutional mission (Lyons, 1993). *Mission* is the articulated long-term purpose that sets the broad tone of a college and directs its policies, priorities, and practices (Welzenbach, 1982). The importance of the mission statement to student affairs is paramount not only because it conveys the educational priorities (Lyons, 1993) and sets the overall tone for the campus culture (Welzenbach, 1982), but also because it determines "the shape and substance" (Lyons, 1993, p. 14) of the entire student affairs program.

A mission statement that clearly articulates an institutional commitment to diversity allows educators to reorient the policies and practices that move a campus from tolerance for diversity to interactive pluralism (Kuh and MacKay, 1989). On most campuses, the goals of the mission statement are realized by the programs and services of the student affairs staff, who, in terms of diversity, serve as catalysts for change (Kuh & Mackay, 1989). Institutions must, then, rely on the experience and expertise of the student affairs professionals who, as a group, have done more than any other group of college personnel in meeting the challenges of diversity and in advancing its objectives (Brown, 1988).

## Creating a Diversity Forum

Educators who are serious about meeting the challenges of diversity should not promote an exclusionary diversity agenda, substituting their own disguised "catechism" for the intellectual inquiry of a university (Chavez, 1990). The most enlightening diversity programs foster inquiry and the free exchange of ideas by providing a forum to speakers who espouse many views (Hentoff, 1994).

To elevate the level of inquiry and simultaneously promote campus diversity and free speech, student affairs administrators should keep the following points in mind:

(1) A professional obligation exists to sponsor a variety of speakers and programs that run the gamut on the diversity spectrum (Hentoff, 1994). Diversity programmers should neither "define which blacks, Hispanics and women are acceptable role models" nor prescribe "who among them may be heard and under what circumstances (Chavez, 1990, p. B2). A diverse forum will feature both popular and unpopular opinions, including the voices of speakers like Khalid Abdul Muhammad, even though their words may push the boundaries of protected speech, or offend and embarrass some listeners (O'Neil, 1994).

(2) Diversity programmers should refute the misconceptions that members of the same race, gender, or ethnic group all share the same experiences (Chavez, 1990), so students clearly understand that while race, gender, or ethnicity may influence a person's world view, it does not singularly define him or her.

(3) Students should also be reminded that notions of "outgroup homogeneity"—the tendency to perceive outgroup members as the same (Smith & Mackle, 1995)—are inaccurate.

(4) Student affairs professionals themselves should participate honestly in the examination of beliefs, values, and conflicts without being "ethically neutral" or "ethically prescriptive" (Lyons, 1988).

Given that student affairs administrators encourage diversity efforts through the programs and services they offer and that their activities have a positive impact on individual students and the communities they create (Astin, 1993), it is imperative that the institutional policies and practices that guide their programs promote a genuine inquiry instead of a contrived conversation.

## The Legal Limits of Free Speech

The unfettered exchange of ideas that is typically associated with American universities has thrived amidst a legal system that has repeatedly struck down content-based prohibitions (Paterson, 1994; Pomerantz, 1993). Although free speech is not unqualified, it can only be regulated if it falls into one of these categories: (a) "incitement to imminent lawlessness"; (b) "fighting words", that is, words that are likely to provoke the average person to retaliation; (c) certain types of defamatory speech, that is, the publication or utterance of false statements causing injury to another; (d) obscenity, as defined in terms of whether "the average person applying contemporary community standards would find that the work appeals to the prurient interest or the work depicts or describes in a blatantly offensive way sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law" (Tatel, Michaelson, & Kohrman, 1990, pp. 2-5). *Content-based* restrictions must fall into one of these categories, but case law also supports the notion that First Amendment activity can be regulated in regards to time, place and manner, as well (Paterson, 1994); (e) As evidenced by *Perry Educational Association v. Perry Local Education Association*, 1983, the regulation of "nonpublic" forums (classrooms and residence halls) is constitutional. Institutional policies may govern access and thereby determine who may and may not use these spaces as a forum for speech (cited in Paterson, 1994); (f) In another notable case, the court upheld speech restrictions by addressing time, place, and manner. In the 1970 case, *Bayless v. Martine*, the court upheld the university's right to suspend students who demonstrated without securing reservations for the demonstration area (cited in Paterson, 1994).

As delineated above, the constitutional regulation of speech is real but limited. Consequently, educators should look beyond the First Amendment when they use a diversity forum as a mechanism to elevate the level of inquiry within a pluralistic but civil campus community.

## The Simultaneous Promotion of Diversity and Free Speech

The simultaneous promotion of diversity and free speech is difficult but not impossible (Hentoff, 1994; Lyons, 1988; Pomerantz, 1993). Seeing that university mission statements often articulate the importance of both, educators should keep the following points in mind when invoking these missions:

(1) In terms of speech, more is not necessarily better. As student affairs administrators and their academic colleagues strive to stimulate free inquiry and the unfettered exchange of ideas, the emphasis should be placed on both free and informed speech. Informed speech is a continual process that cannot be explained in its entirety here. An institutional commitment to the following is more likely to facilitate the process: (a) diverse and integrated curricula that dismantle the stereotypes associated with certain academic disciplines, cultures, and methodologies (Boyer, 1987; Kuh, 1993); (b) real and effective placement, promotion, and empowerment of faculty and staff who are not used as tokens to represent a traditionally "underrepresented group," but who are willing and able to appropriately examine policies, practices, and traditions (Barr & Strong, 1988); (c) co-curricular programs that include "teachable moments" (Kuh et al., 1991) such as before and after group processing of speakers, debates, concerts, exhibitions, readings, dining experiences, and religious ceremonies that celebrate diversity.

(2) Student affairs administrators should not only be responsive and sensitive to diversity issues, but practical and realistic when creating, recreating, and challenging policies (Kuh et al., 1991). In other words, clearly stated, straightforward, and realistically enforceable policies serve the community better than those that are either too vague (in an effort to protect everyone all of the time) or too restrictive (in an effort to mandate the types of speech that are permissible).

(3) Student affairs administrators should focus their attention on changing their campus' normative culture rather than trying to redefine the legal parameters of the First Amendment. "Normative culture" refers to the informal codes that govern group members' behavior (Hess, 1994). It relates to the behavior to which a person is expected to conform in a given situation (Hess, 1994), regardless of the formal policies that exist. Proponents of diversity and of freedom of speech can invoke college mission statements, the most significant directives of faculty, staff, and student behavior (Kuh, 1993; Kuh et al., 1991; Lyons, 1988), to (a) make a positive impact on the normative culture of the campus community and (b) facilitate the concept of dialogue that many mission statements articulate.

Although many definitions exist for the concept of *dialogue*, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire uses it in an illuminating sense. For Freire, dialogue is grounded upon mutual trust and respect, where individuals come to re-examine their own perspectives based on personal and collective experiences rather than relying on hearsay. By engaging the world in such a

manner, they realize the incongruity between what they experience by conversing and interacting with "others" and what they thought they might experience based on their initial stereotypical beliefs (cited in Pomerantz, 1993).

(4) While a proactive administration can often buffer potential harm, it is also necessary to be responsive and reactive at times (O'Neil, 1989; Terrell, 1988). This is especially important before and after a highly controversial speaker visits the campus. Before such an event occurs, it may be prudent for student affairs administrators to: (a) Discuss the potential hazards of such a visit with the sponsoring organization or academic department. Are the risks of allowing such speech worth the possibility of destroying or reducing civility and tolerance? (O'Neil, 1994); (b) Provide appropriate, timely, and specific direction or advice to the college and local media. If administrators want to make disclaimers regarding the alignment of the university with the message, do it before the message is even heard (O'Neil, 1994); (c) Make proper arrangements for campus or local security, or both (O'Neil, 1994). Immediately following the event it may be necessary to: (d) Publicly condemn abhorrent views. Freedom of speech demands only that the speaker be tolerated; it should not compel the audience to be silent if they disagree (O'Neil, 1994); (e) Create discussion or support groups, or both, to engage in group processing and to mitigate any mounting resentment.

## Beyond the Legal Perspective

As recent history reveals, most racial, sexual, and sexual orientation harassment policies that attempt to control speech (as opposed to those that attempt to control behavior related to speech) have been overturned by the courts (White, 1994). *Doe v. the University of Michigan* (1989), *UWM Post v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin* (1991), and *Iota Xi Chapter of Sigma Chi Fraternity v. George Mason University* (1991) all suggest that the problems of bigotry and discrimination will not be eliminated by speech codes or other university policies established to regulate the First Amendment.

Despite the fact that "social inequality is substantially created and enforced—that is, done through words and images" (MacKinnon, 1993, p. 13), educators cannot rely solely on the legal system or on campus codes and policies to promote civility. In many cases, the offensive words and expressions are protected forms of speech (MacKinnon, 1993), but even when speech is not protected, campus codes and policies meant to regulate speech fail to change student attitudes or foster a code of ethics



(Pomerantz, 1993). To effect change in either of those areas, educators must cultivate a normative culture that stimulates interaction and dialogue instead of one that manipulates behavior.

Laws, amendments, or policies are not the only important determinants of students' behavior, but the expectations held for them and the reinforcement provided by the normative culture are also significant. By invoking university mission statements, holding diversity forums, and promoting dialogue, student affairs administrators can create a normative culture where the collective shaping of norms and beliefs "recapture the values that promote civility" (Strenski, 1993). In this way, student affairs professionals can look beyond what is simply "legal" and "illegal" to what is "expected around here" (Hess, 1994). Although it is legal to call somebody an offensive name, invite a controversial speaker to campus, or continue an oppressive tradition, there is a presumption that university members will internalize the values and beliefs that ensure some level of decency and civility. Such a culture will empower all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, to engage in meaningful and illuminating dialogue and interaction.

## Conclusion

As this review indicates, the First Amendment is neither a "vehicle of liberation" nor an "instrument of domination" (Lawrence, 1989). Rather, the First Amendment represents a starting point that sets the minimum parameters for the normative culture on university campuses. What student affairs administrators must do is look beyond the First Amendment in an effort to shape a campus community that promotes diversity, civility, and free speech.

Like most worthwhile conversations, the freedom of speech and diversity issue is not an either-or debate. Student affairs administrators should reaffirm their commitment to diversity by leading the way. If their programs and services invoke the college mission statement to create healthy normative cultures that elevate the level of intellectual inquiry, maintain tolerance and civility, and increase the cognitive and affective development of its members, then they will serve as role models for other members of educational communities. Universities that institutionalize such programs and services may "transcend the egoistic and clannish tendencies" (Strenski, 1993) that divide many university communities.

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