

Inclusion: Diversity Reconsidered
From Islands of Excellence to Integrated Inclusive Excellence

William T. Lewis, Sr., PhD
Bridgewater State College
June 3, 2009

The conversation about diversity on college and university campuses is shifting from a central theme of racial representation to one of inclusive practices. This paradigm shift has not occurred by happenstance. It is a result of decades of U.S. citizens fighting for full access to the American Dream, a U.S. Supreme Court decision which placed a “sunset provision” of twenty-five years on affirmative action in U.S. higher education, a focus on the relationship between diversity and democracy, and a thrust for accountability of resources dedicated to such efforts.

Colleges and universities are responding to these factors by hiring chief diversity officers to lead their diversity and inclusion efforts, which has spawned the growth of the chief diversity officer (CDO) as a profession, and the creation of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) as a creditable professional organization. There are now national conferences dedicated to providing space for scholars, and practitioners in the profession to exchange ideas and promising practices. Publications such as NADOHE’s Journal of Diversity of Higher Education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)’s DiversityWeb, Diversity Inc. magazine and countless articles and books on diversity have provided relevancy and legitimacy to the field. Additionally, faculty are engaging in dialogue about the relevancy of structural diversity in the classroom, diversity content in the curriculum, and their pedagogical practices.

As a CDO, I have participated in many of these national conferences, I have subscribed to the national publications, and I have read many of the articles and books on diversity and inclusion. I am a member of many of the regional and national diversity related think tanks and associations, and I have held conversations with faculty about the intersection of diversity and their work. Moreover, my travels have led me to dozens of campuses across the nation. As I have scurried from coast-to-coast, I am invariably asked three perennial questions: (1) “When do you think we will achieve diversity on campus?” (2) “Do you do diversity because you are Black?” and (3) “What role does the faculty have in a diversity change agenda?”

These questions have compelled me to ponder the definition of diversity, as well as the best approach to implementing diversity on campuses, the ideal qualifications of the CDO, and the role of the faculty in an institutional diversity agenda. In this essay, I will respond to these questions situating them in a larger context of the paradigm shift noted above.

I will compare two paradigms regarding diversity:

Islands of Excellence: “Islands of excellence” is an approach to diversity where race central policies is the main focus to achieving structural diversity (racial representation). Programming is focused on helping students acclimate to the institution, and is usually not connected to the core mission of the institution.

Integrated Inclusive Excellence: “Integrated inclusive excellence” (promoted by AAC&U) is an approach to diversity which includes race as one of many criteria. It melds diversity and excellence. Structural diversity is a part of a larger effort. This approach focuses on inclusive practices, which strives to benefit every possible campus constituent. Programming is focused on helping the institution adjust to students, and initiatives are connected to the core mission of the institution.

Many conversations about diversity focus on student experiences within institutions. My statements will add to those conversations by focusing on institutions responsibilities to students along three dimensions: institutional approach to inclusion, the nature of the chief diversity officer, and the role of faculty in the diversity change agenda. Table 1 offers a brief overview of the paradigmatic changes from “islands of excellence” to “integrated inclusive excellence.”

Indeed there will be some who read this essay and think that these questions have already been asked and dealt with. I don’t disagree. There are also many faculty, staff and administrators just entering into the diversity conversation asking these questions anew and their interest deserves a fresh response. Moreover, I would argue that even veterans of the field should continually reconsider these questions as the profession grows, and as diversity and inclusion continue to evolve. I am hopeful that many more will join the dialogue.

Institutional Approach

I am often asked, “When do you think we will achieve diversity on campus?” My response is, “We will have achieved a respectable measure of diversity, when every academic and non-academic unit on campus includes diversity and inclusion in their budget and strategic planning conversations and sees diversity as its mission.” More to the point, diversity and inclusion should be the “way we do business.” Changing the status quo calls for a reevaluation in how we define diversity. For decades the word diversity has been used as a proxy for race. The “islands of excellence” paradigm defines diversity mainly in terms of race and establishes policies and practices central to race. As such, many diversity efforts have failed to move deep and wide into institutions. The results have been isolated efforts to recruit, assimilate and graduate Black and Hispanic students in our institutions.

Table 1: “Islands of Excellence” to “Integrated Inclusive Excellence”

	Islands of Excellence	Integrated Inclusive Excellence
<i>Institutional Approach</i>		
	Student focus	Institutional focus
	Race-Central	Race as one criterion
	Structural diversity (racial representation)	Cross-divisional collaboration
	Innovation driven by intuition	Innovation driven by data
	Focus on inequities	Focus on inequities <i>and</i> inclusion
		Integrate diversity and inclusion into existing campus structures
<i>Chief Diversity Officer</i>		
	Race-central policies	Policy where race is one of many criteria
	Shoulder bulk of responsibility	Empower others to be responsible
	Majority African American	Ethnicity/Race not as important
	Training in social justice, affirmative action	Training in organizational development
<i>Role of Faculty</i>		
	Starting point: Diversity-related material	Starting point: Inclusive epistemologies

I realize that the approach to diversity is contextual. There are many factors that impact how diversity is approached, when a diversity initiative is implemented, and whom the diversity initiative will benefit. Such factors include institution type, mission, and the needs of external constituents. Moreover, I acknowledge that many of the current diversity policies were established well before I was born, and were policies relevant to the times in which they were born.

Now the times call for us to reconsider those policies and our practices. I am not suggesting abolishment or abandonment, but rather, an amendment. The amendment should include a revised conceptualization of diversity with structural diversity (racial representation) as a key component, but not the driving force. From my perspective, the “integrated inclusive excellence” paradigm offers a national definition of inclusion that is neither race-central nor race-neutral, but rather, race is just one of many considerations. By uniting the Inclusive Excellence definition with four measurable anchors (access and equity, diversity in the curriculum, learning and development and campus climate) the

Inclusive Excellence Scorecard (see Figure 1) advanced by Williams, Berger and McClendon (2005)¹ provide an evaluative matrix which moves the definition of Inclusive Excellence from aspirational dialogue to sustainable organizational change.

The Inclusive Excellence framework is not the magic bullet, nor is it exhaustive. It is, however, what I believe best meets the needs of our institutions; it includes language and a framework that moves diversity beyond its current status of addressing structural diversity only and toward a better understanding of inclusion. It recognizes each campus's unique needs and allows for necessary adaptation. As my campus adopts the Inclusive Excellence/Inclusive Excellence Scorecard model, we have found that we have to adapt the framework to fit our unique institutional needs. The learning and development component of the inclusive excellence framework focuses primarily on student learning outcomes. On my campus we are equally concerned about faculty and staff learning and development. Therefore, we have adjusted the model to include those outcomes.

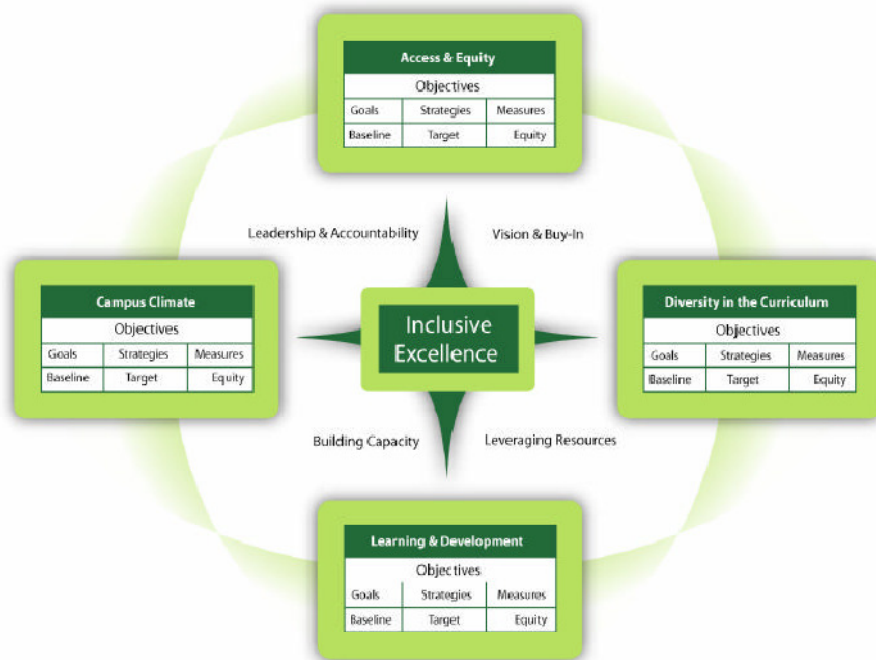


Figure 1

Chief Diversity Officer

As university communities wrestle with how to best approach diversity and inclusion on their campuses, they must also grapple with questions concerning the nature, role and race of their Chief Diversity Officer. I recall giving a talk about diversity and having been asked the question "Do you do diversity because you are Black?" This question acknowledges the big fat elephant in the room. Historically, in

¹ Williams, Damon, A., Berger, B., Joseph and McClendon, A., Shederick, Toward a Model of Inclusive Excellence and Change in Postsecondary Institutions.

the “islands of excellence paradigm,” diversity has been viewed as a racialized proposition. Publically diversity is broadly defined as an effort to achieve inclusion. Privately diversity is wrapped in a tacit agreement that race is the order of the day. As a chief diversity officer who is Black, I am faced with this dichotomous situation daily.

When I enter into a conversation about diversity I am cognizant that my race may color the conversation. With a Black person or audience, I often feel as if my role is viewed as one who will lift the veil of racism on campus. When talking to a White person or audience, I often feel as if my role is viewed as the administration’s champion for Black students, or in effect the token Black administrator. And when I am talking to a GLBT audience, I feel as if my role is viewed as a symbol of empty promises regarding their marginalized status on campus.

Underneath this first question lies in waiting a second question, often not asked but certainly felt: “What are the skills and credentials needed to be a CDO?” In their national study on the rise of the chief diversity officer, Williams and Wade-Golden (2006) distilled seven key attributes they believed most successful diversity officers should possess: (1) Technical mastery of diversity issues; (2) Political savvy; (3) Ability to cultivate a common vision; (4) In-depth perspective on organizational change; (5) Sophisticated relational abilities; (6) Understanding of the culture of higher education; and (7) Results Orientation.² I don’t do diversity because I am Black. Deeper still, my work is manifest from the “integrated inclusive excellence paradigm.” I work to advance an agenda of inclusion because I value the fullness of humanity. At my core, I believe that every person has the ability to reach his or her full potential, only when he/she is nurtured by an environment deliberately shaped to embrace and support that potential. From my perspective creating that environment is the role of every campus stakeholder, and facilitating the process for change is the role of the CDO.

I believe that being a member of a marginalized group may provide me a different perspective, my *personal* narrative, which is tied to a *group* narrative and may give me some advantage to readily notice the nuances of exclusion...but I have found that to be very limited. Being Black does not allow me to lay claim that I will be a better advocate or ally than a person who is White. In fact, it is my belief that as the profession of chief diversity officers grows so too should the diversity of personnel in those roles. Many White people who work for social justice and equity are often questioned (much the same way I was questioned) about their authenticity and reasoning for doing their work. Pondering the presence of Whites in the role of CDO allows us to reconsider diversity in a deracialized frame.

I would be remiss if I did not present the counterargument to my position, which is if a White person occupies the role of CDO the institution, to some, may appear to be disingenuous in its efforts to address diversity. If this is the case, then I argue that diversity is being viewed from the “islands of excellence” paradigm. To be clear, I realize that in America “race matters.” There is still racial unrest on our campuses, and the achievement gap between White students and students of color has not substantially closed. But I would argue that campuses must continue to address issues of race while simultaneously opening the conversation to include other forms of oppression. As we, know race is just one criterion by which one can be oppressed.

Recall for a moment Jane Elliot’s Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes experiment. In 1968 Jane Elliot, then a third grade school teacher in Riceville, Iowa conducted a social experiment on the effects of discrimination

² Williams, A. Damon, Wade-Golden, C. Katrina, (2006) *What Is a Chief Diversity Officer?* Inside Higher ED

with her students. Jane created an environment where discrimination against brown eyed peers was encouraged and accepted. As I watched this video I noticed the absence of “color” but the presence of oppression. Both the discriminators and those who experienced the discrimination were White. The message I take from this experience is that oppression transcends race or any other social location. It goes without saying that it will take more voices than just the Black voice to eradicate oppression. Put another way, the responsibility of creating an academic environment of equity, excellence and inclusion lies with everyone on campus. This is not a trite, symbolic statement, but rather a call to action: real and sustainable change hinges on the input, participation and commitment of all campus constituents.

Role of Faculty

“What role does faculty play in a strategic diversity agenda?” Historically, the diversity agenda has been rooted in the “islands of excellence” paradigm, which sought to recruit racially diverse students and “help them” to assimilate to the institution. Under the reconsidered diversity agenda, “integrated inclusive excellence,” we seek to “help the institution” to adjust to the wholeness of today’s students. The faculty is at the epicenter of this change. I recall the lyrics of the prolific, poetic and oftentimes problematic rapper, Tupac Shakur: “*Wars come and go, but my soldiers stay eternal.*” As I ponder this lyric, I find it very true for academic life. Administrators and students come and go but the faculty are eternal; the curriculum and pedagogical approach which are developed, owned and implemented by faculty, have eternal impact on the students whom they teach.

That being said, the role of faculty in an institutional diversity change agenda is critical to transforming the institution, is crucial to helping students understand their responsibility in a global economy, and is central to sustaining long-term change. If faculty are at the heart of institutional change, then the question we must answer is, “How are faculty engaged in a long –term campus-wide diversity and inclusion change agenda?” The answer is tied to the interplay between the values of the faculty, the values of the academic department, and the values of the institution.

We cannot, however, merely substitute inclusion for diversity and think that our jobs are done. In order to gain faculty as stakeholders in a strategic diversity agenda, academic leaders (department chairs and deans) and institutional leaders (presidents, chief diversity officers and senior administrators) must create and articulate a new message regarding diversity and inclusion which aligns faculty values with departmental and institutional values regarding diversity. Concerning faculty values and diversity, much discussion has occurred around what is taught (diversity-related content in the curriculum) and how it is taught (inclusive pedagogy). In the “integrated inclusive excellence paradigm” I suggest that our conversations focus on epistemology--the origin, nature and meaning of knowledge.

Centering our attention on epistemology provides stakeholders in the academic enterprise the opportunity to locate the source of faculty views and values regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and scholarship. Mayhew & Grunwald (2006)³ provide a compelling example as to why we need to begin by focusing on epistemology. They found faculty’s personal beliefs about diversity influenced their likelihood to incorporate diversity related content into their courses. Specifically, faculty who were more likely to believe that affirmative action leads to the hiring of less qualified faculty and staff, were less likely to incorporate diversity-related content in the classroom. When we shift our attention to

³ Mayhew, M.J., & Grunwald, H.E. (2006). Factors Contributing to Faculty Incorporation of Diversity Related Course Content. *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol 77, No.1

epistemology, we begin to focus inward. In so doing, we not only attend to the nature and meaning of knowledge, and how learning occurs, we are also presented with an awesome opportunity to reflect on our fears, and hopes as teachers, scholars and practitioners.

Writing about the experiences of elementary classroom teachers regarding the inclusion of special need students into the general student population, Jordan, Schwartz, and McGhie-Richmond (2009) suggest that teachers fear that they may not have the specialized knowledge and skills to work with students with special education needs in regular (general education) classrooms.⁴ I argue that university faculty, whose expertise does not reside in the diversity and inclusion domain, may have a similar fear. The “integrated inclusive excellence” paradigm does not call for faculty to become diversity experts. It simply invite faculty to take a moment to consider and for some to reconsider how they come to understand the meaning of knowledge, and their perspective on factors that contribute to learning. Moreover, this reflection should consider one’s own social location (race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, social status, religion, language and ability (mental/ physical) regarding one’s approach to teaching, learning and scholarship.

Specific attention should be paid to what Belenky et al. (1986) calls *connected* ways of knowing, which is a belief in an empathic knowing involving adopting the perspective of the others way of thinking⁵. I must pause here and note that this type of reflection should occur regardless of academic discipline. Although faculty in the humanities and social sciences may have a different epistemological orientation than faculty in the natural sciences, I argue that for both faculty groups student learning is seen as a primary concern. Therefore, reflecting on the **other** offers the opportunity to explore alternative ways of knowing. This can provide a deeper understanding of the students in the classroom. Focusing on epistemology is the keystone for having an inclusive curriculum, for practicing inclusive pedagogy, and for conducting inclusive research.

My own institution has reacted to the shift in paradigms as well. Bridgewater State College, a comprehensive public college, like many other colleges, has a rich history of addressing diversity, which was mainly approached from the “islands of excellence” paradigm. Because of the efforts of many dedicated faculty, staff, students and administrators, I am the beneficiary of an academic environment ready to embrace the “integrated inclusive excellence” paradigm. Through our faculty driven Diversity and Inclusion Research Institute, we are engaging faculty in reflective conversations about how their personal narratives surrounding power and privilege influences research. Through our Peer Cognate Initiative faculty are investigating the meaning of inclusive epistemologies across disciplines and departments. We are engaging our academic leadership in conversations to find concrete ways to tie the traditional extrinsic incentives to the refined diversity and inclusion agenda.

Through the generous support of the Nellie Mae Foundation, not to be confused with Sallie Mae or Freddie Mac, we continue to keep our collective eyes on the prize by using data-driven decision making to close the achievement gap of our underrepresented student (students of color, low-income and first-generation college goers) populations. We are working diligently to make visible the needs of our GBLT students, faculty and staff. We are building our capacity to embrace the veterans returning from Iraq

⁴ Jordan, Anne, Schwartz, Eileen & McGhie-Richmond, Donna (2009) Preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 25 (2009) 535-542

⁵ Belenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women’s ways of knowing: The development, voice and mind*. New York: Basic Books

and Afghanistan. We are using the Inclusive Excellence framework to articulate our coordinated efforts, among faculty, staff, administrators and students. Although it is too soon to provide “hard” data on the efficacy of our efforts, I can say definitively that our campus has successfully transitioned from theoretical discourse to promising practice; we are seeing more faculty and staff joining the choir for inclusion and organizational transformation. More units are beginning to ask themselves how they can enact the campus’s espoused value of inclusion. In short, Bridgewater’s excellence is becoming more inclusive.

I hope you will join this conversation. Please feel free to contact me at william.lewis@bridgew.edu.

The author, William T. Lewis, Sr., PhD, is the Director of the Office of Institutional Diversity at Bridgewater State College. He is a Visiting Lecturer in the School of Social Work at Bridgewater State College, is Senior Associate for Everyday Democracy and co-founder of First Semester, LLC (www.1stsemester.com).