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Diversity: A value and challenge to the UD educational mission

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“Diversity is a powerful agent of change...an imperative that must be embraced if colleges and universities are to be successful in a pluralistic and interconnected world.” (Daryl Smith, 2010, p. 3).

“UD is not diverse in either absolute or relative terms. With few exceptions, ...the university trails its peers in every measure of diversity in every constituency of the institution.” (Middle States Higher Education Commission, 2011, p. 8)”

Introduction

Diversity is a compelling interest in higher education, opined former Justice Sandra Day O’Connor (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2006). Her assessment was based on two principles: first, that a **critical mass of diverse students is essential** to the success of universities to deliver a curriculum that enhances marginalized students' opportunities to succeed, and second, that **diversity benefits all students**.

Writings on prejudice and racism have been at the core of understanding and ameliorating dynamics of disadvantage, discrimination and exclusion (Jones, 1997). Over the last three decades, this work has been recast in the language and concepts of *diversity* (Jones, Dovidio & Vietze, 2014). Historically, prejudice and racism are integral to the narrative of societal and institutional exclusion and injustice. How does this history connect with the contemporary language of diversity? In this brief, I will discuss 1) differing beliefs about what diversity is and how to these differences become challenging for pursuit of a diversity goals; 2) evidence for the commitment to diversity at UD, but how differing values and perspectives can detract from accomplishing those goals; and 3) some specific things that UD could or should do to better achieve its diversity goals.

1. What is Diversity?

Diversity is many things, not one thing. Following are descriptions of ways diversity is conceived:

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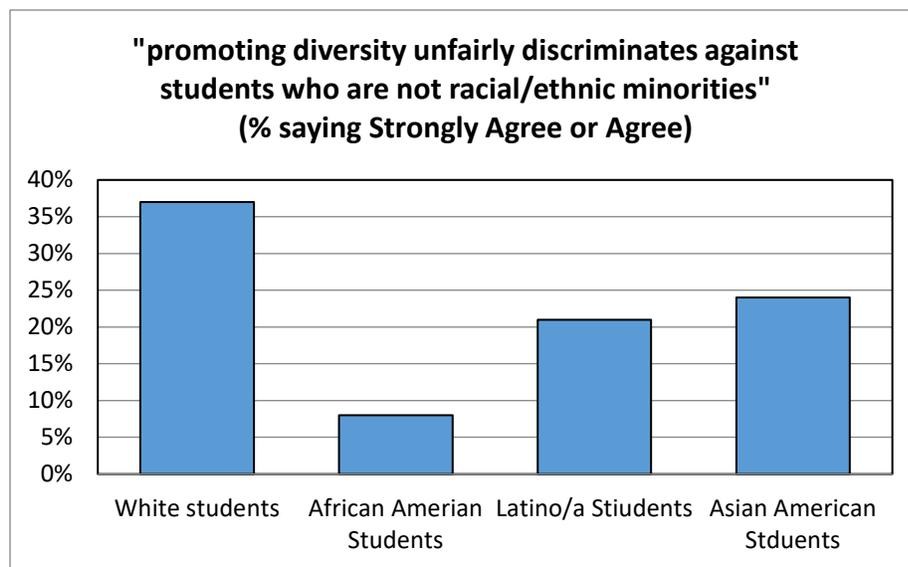
- Diversity includes the psychological dynamics that arise when people observe, evaluate, form expectations of, or interact with people who are different from them in salient and significant ways (Jones et al, 2014).
- Diversity is also a shorthand for differences that are historically underrepresented in a given institution or society for reasons of animus, neglect or indifference. In this context, diversity references ways in which different others are marginalized or excluded from access and opportunity generally available to a dominant group—usually, but not always, the majority. It also takes into account how the marginalized other “experiences” the institution and people with whom they interact (Jones & Dovidio, 2017).
- Diversity is also the myriad ways in which people are different from each other including how they think, perceive, interpret and predict (**Cognitive**); their backgrounds, cultures and social roles (**Demographic**), their affinity for and acceptance of their background (**Identity**); and their tastes and values (**Preference**) (Page, 2007).
- Diversity is a set of intertwined factors including numerical and proportional representation (structural diversity), cultural awareness, curriculum and programs (diversity-related initiatives), and exchanges between and among people who are different (diverse interactions; Milem, 2003).
- Diversity in higher education has also been conceived as the nexus of student and faculty diversity, community engagement, and academic success as a nexus for the transformation of communities on and off campus. In this view, the successful approach to diversity is *full participation* —an institutional value that enables people, whatever their identity, background or institutional position, to thrive, realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others. (Sturm, Eatman, Saltmarsh & Bush, 2011).
- Diversity may be *inherent*—involving traits you are born with, such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, or *acquired*—involving traits you gain from experience. These two aspects, when combined, are referred to as 2-D diversity (Hewlett, Marshall & Sherbin, 2013).

Given the many ways in which diversity is constructed, a simple unidimensional definition is inadequate to capture the many perspectives of a fully examined and imagined meaning of diversity. Diversity has historical roots and is experienced and conceived differently by dominant and subordinate groups. Although the concept of diversity includes all people, diversity is most often associated with disadvantage, marginalization, rejection and exclusion. In fact, the contemporary notion of diversity arises, in part, out of a desire to remove barriers to egalitarian outcomes such as discrimination, segregation, and social avoidance (Jones & Dovidio, 2018). Moreover, because differences among us occur at both an individual and a group level, diversity is necessarily a multidimensional and multilayered idea affecting all facets of society including culture, institutional values and rules, decision-making processes, and even economic profit.

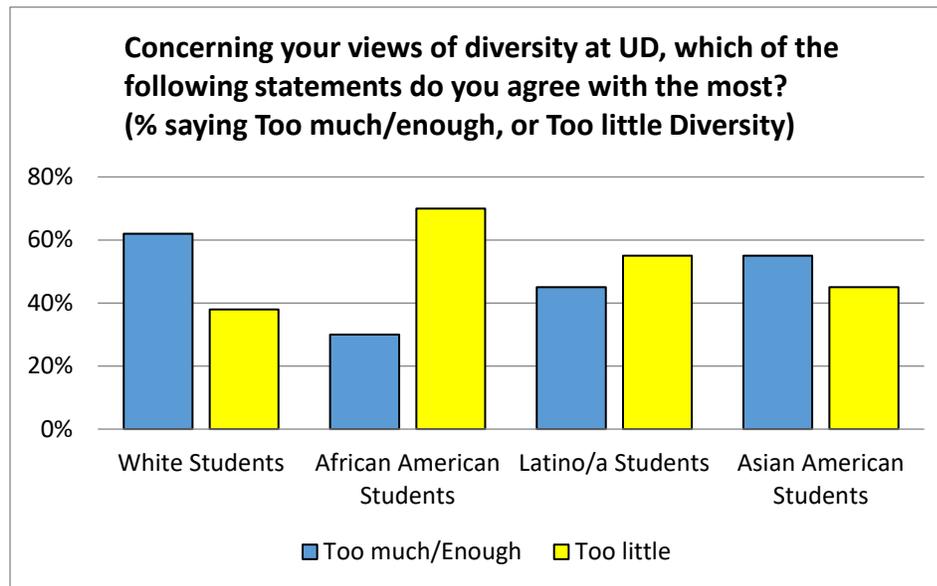
Companies in the business community describe their diversity approach as a natural consequence of their core values (Hewlett, S.A., Marshall, M. & Sherbin, 2013). However, in order for diversity to operate as a leadership value, its meaning, practice, and assessment must be grounded in a comprehensive and shared understanding; otherwise, diversity is relegated to superficial and transparent importance. Thus, the first challenge is to articulate clearly the core values and how diversity is fundamental to honoring them. Next, it is important to communicate regularly and transparently about what the diversity objectives are, why they matter and how they are to be achieved. Only if there is regular and open dialogue and communication can the goals of shared meaning and understanding be accomplished.

Perceptions of Diversity at UD. In spite of the varied meanings and approaches outlined above, there is a strong general tendency to conceive of diversity simply as a demographic marker. This tendency is reflected in two polls of UD undergraduates: a CSD poll in 2012 and a Blue Hen poll in 2013. For White UD undergraduates, diversity is often perceived as a proxy for affirmative action, and 37% of them believe it leads to discrimination against them (see **Figure 1**). This is consistent with recent research that shows that White Americans now believe they face more discrimination than do Black Americans—”Whites see racism as a zero-sum game that they are now losing” (Norton & Sommers, 2011, p. 215). By contrast, only 8% of African American students believed diversity discriminated against non-minorities (Blue Hen Poll, 2013).

Figure 1: Racial differences in perceptions of racial discrimination among UD students.



The CSD poll asked students to assess the degree of diversity at UD, and a majority of White students indicated that there is **too much or enough** diversity (63%), compared to a majority of African American and Latinx students who indicated that there is **too little** diversity (70% and 55%, respectively). (See **Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Racial differences in perceptions of diversity at UD

Student comments illuminate the divergence in perceptions of the amount of diversity at UD.

“At this University if you are not a minority you are very much discriminated against and do not have as much opportunity. It is as if you are being punished for being a majority!” *White College student*

“Diversity at this university is disgustingly terrible. Something drastic needs to be done to promote a more actively diverse campus, because you can feel the tension around campus if you are of a race that is not mainly the majority race on campus.” *Latino College student*

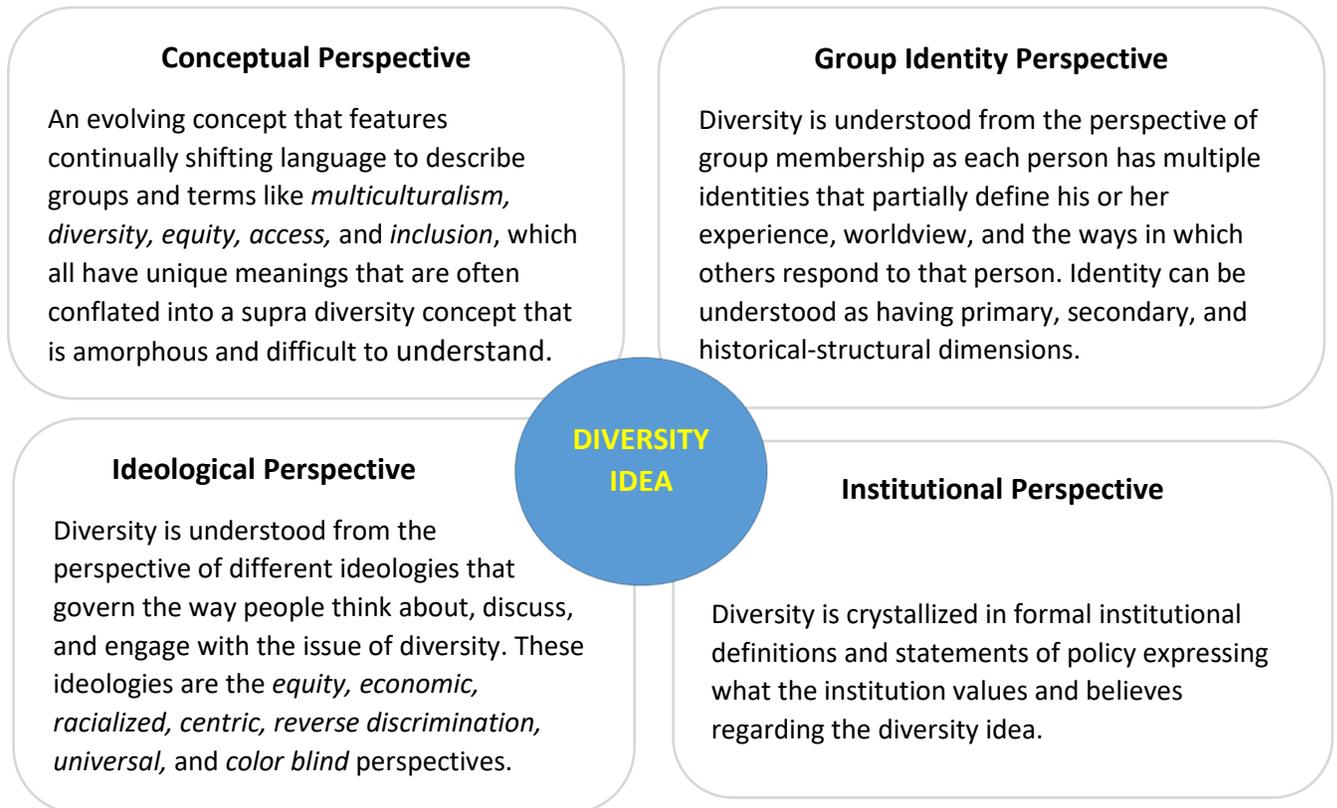
“Diversity can be good and bad at the same time. Diversity helps to broaden how people think about the world yet many people end up being cheated when diversity becomes a key issue.” *White College student*

These polls and student comments clearly show that diversity is perceived differently by students from different racial groups. These differences underscore different beliefs about what diversity is, different experiences with marginalization and access to opportunities, and a view of diversity that does not reflect the complexity of what it encompasses. Given these diversity belief disparities, it is a major challenge to pursue a diversity strategy that is perceived to *benefit all!*

The Diversity idea. Similarly, Damon Williams (*Strategic Diversity Leadership*, 2013), agrees that there is no definitive definition of diversity. He suggests a way to move forward with the diversity strategy; the *diversity idea*—a conceptual framework that focuses on group identity and membership, ideological perspective and institutional policy (see **Figure 3**) as an organizing approach. The diversity idea provides a coherent and concise framework for managing the discussions and programs from which the diversity agenda must evolve. We need to acknowledge

its dynamic, ever-changing nature, and variations across people, but move forward toward a vision of what a diversity-inspired university should look and act like.

Figure 3: A conceptual model of the diversity idea.



Diversity is a dynamic, and multidimensional concept, and approaches to address it must be similarly dynamic and multidimensional. H.L. Mencken famously noted that “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple *and wrong*.” Attempts to define diversity precisely and specifically may narrow our focus and lead us to simple and ineffective, if not wrong, approaches. Higher education institutions such as UD need to take a broad view of diversity that appreciates and recognizes its multidimensional and multilayered character.

Diversity is a multi-pronged concept. Most generally, diversity refers to variability and **Difference:** This may be referenced by individual characteristics based on experience, perspective, identity, point of view, skills, interests and background (Page, 2007). A second reference not always universally shared or understood, is diversity as **Equity:** a strategy for reconfiguring relationships, structures and social arrangements so that inequities in opportunities, outcomes, privilege and possibility, are more evenly distributed across a diverse population. A third important distinction is **Inclusion:** the active, intentional and ongoing engagement with diversity across all levels of the institution and relationships among members of the community. Strategies for increasing variability and difference are quite different from strategies for achieving equity. Fostering an inclusive environment may be complicated by diversity—what makes one person feel included, may make

others feel excluded. That has been the history for underrepresented members of the community. Pursuing all three of these goals is crucial to a successful **Inclusive Excellence** strategy.

This broad view will necessarily engage the entire UD community and inspire us to seek a comprehensive view of our campus culture that is diverse, inclusive, equitable, dynamic and excellent!

2. What is the value proposition for diversity at UD?

The value of diversity is enunciated as a belief and an aspiration for the ways in which the UD campus community should and will behave and the positive outcomes that will follow.

“The University of Delaware will foster a robust educational environment in which all people are welcome and feel welcome—one that supports critical thinking, free inquiry, and respect for diverse views and values. As a community, we will embrace diversity as an integral and vital part of everyday life and a cornerstone value of our University.”

Path to Prominence, University of Delaware Strategic Plan, 2007

“The College of Arts & Sciences affirms our commitment to fostering a diverse and respectful educational environment that advances critical thinking, open inquiry and full participation by students, faculty and staff. Diverse backgrounds, interests, intellectual approaches, global perspectives and identities are essential to a culture of deep and engaged learning. The ethnic, cultural, regional, international and intellectual diversity of our students, faculty and staff contributes substantially to the living - learning community of a great university.”

College of Arts and Sciences, Strategic Plan, 2012.

““Diversity is a core value and guiding principle for the University of Delaware’s educational mission to prepare students to live in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world. ... We are committed to building an inclusive educational community, one whose excellence is based not only on stellar disciplinary achievement, but also on understanding people from different backgrounds and circumstances, with different needs, perspectives and ways of thinking. We want to make all people who are part of the University feel welcome and valued in campus life.”

Inclusive Excellence An Action Plan for Diversity at UD, 2017

“[The University of Delaware] should commit itself forcefully and visibly to improving its diversity. The leaders of the university—Deans and Chairs, as well as the President and Vice Presidents—have a particularly important role to play.”

Middle States Higher Education Commission, 2011.

These documents indicate the value of diversity at UD consists of:

- Being welcoming and making people feel welcome;

- Supporting critical thinking, free inquiry, and respect for diverse views and values;
- Embracing diversity as an integral and vital part of everyday life;
- Holding diversity as a cornerstone value;
- Believing that diversity is essential to a culture of deep and engaged learning.
- A fundamental expectation and criterion for evaluating higher education and its leadership

Justice O'Connor articulated a diversity value proposition in her opinion in *Grutter v. Bollinger*—a critical mass of diverse students is essential to the success of universities, and that diversity benefits everyone. A value proposition articulates what is valued (**value**) and why it is important (**priority**), identifies the means by which valued outcomes are met (**implementation**), and provides evidence that they have in fact been met (**assessment**). UD's articulation of its commitment to diversity was openly and affirmatively articulated in the *Path to Prominence* in 2007². Since then, an escalating set of activities, structures and positions, public statements and commitments have defined both the value proposition and the means to reach those goals. Achieving those goals will be indicated when all members of the UD community feel their needs and desires for a high-quality education are met AND their desire for a welcoming environment, a relevant curriculum, a sensitive and effective community of peers, teachers and staff, and leaders that set and enact policies that meet these objectives, are achieved. Upholding our diversity values and meeting our diversity goals is enormously challenging. And, as noted by the Middle States Higher Education Commission, UD has not compared well with its peers.

Diversity differences. UD students, faculty, staff and Delaware community are diverse and, as a result, different constituencies may value different factors differently. For example, we focus primarily on **demographic** diversity in tracking progress, but **identity** diversity brings an additional source of difference *within* demographic categories. It is important to take that into account. For example, a person may belong to a disability demographic category, but the psychological and behavioral realities are quite different for someone with an intellectual disability, compared with one who is blind or deaf, or one who is physically limited.

Preferences add another layer of complexity. Page (2007) distinguishes between **fundamental** preferences—the *outcomes* we value or prefer, and **instrumental** preferences—the *means* by which we pursue preferred outcomes. Different people or groups may value outcomes differently, OR, they may value different ways of achieving outcomes even when they agree on their value.

To illustrate, one faculty member told me that efforts to teach diversity or create opportunities for people from different groups to interact was social engineering and should not be the responsibility of the university. Rather, he suggested, we should let students live their lives and they will find or create opportunities to interact and learn about and from each other. Interaction among students from different backgrounds may be a common and desirable value and goal, but how that goal is met is where the contention arises. We often discuss diversity as a fundamental preference issue

² For a comprehensive timeline of UD's diversity efforts see [Inclusive Excellence: An action plan for diversity at UD, Appendix 1](#) For a listing of documents that chronicle the history of diversity and inclusion at UD, see University Archives and Record Management (2018).

(you want it or you don't), but it can also be an instrumental preference issue (*this* way, but not *that* way, is the way to achieve it). The “how” can be more significant and difficult than the “what.”

3. What can/should we do?

Two things are clear: diversity is a complex idea, the pursuit of which can be quite challenging, and UD is committed to diversity as a core value reflected in its educational mission. The former is the context for enacting the latter. How should we approach these challenges? I suggest the following:

First, the commitment to diversity must be reflected in every core aspect of university life; teaching, scholarship, service, administration, governance and community engagement. In each of these areas, we have mounted a variety of activities, but in addition to then Middle States critique of UD's diversity status, other reports and critical judgments come from different quarters and the Delaware community remains skeptical of UD's commitment and relive to significantly address a diversity goals. It seems that the whole is *less* than the sum of the parts. Strategic efforts are needed to coordinate these activities and generate efficiencies and reduce unnecessary redundancies.

Second, the flat structure of Inclusive Excellence jeopardizes the ability to achieve the objectives of strategic, efficient and effective diversity efforts. There are a variety of models for how an effective structure might look, but the most effective ones establish clear lines of authority and accountability, with oversight, ongoing assessment, and adequate resources. It is important that UD determine the best structure that will accomplish these goals and implement it.

Third, we need meaningful dialogue and conversations that are inclusive of the broad campus community. This means creating more opportunities for conversations across traditional boundaries both vertical (teachers, students, administrators, staff, community) and horizontal (peer to peer at each level). The multicultural course requirement is a good example of one approach that fosters such conversations with an educational learning goal in mind—developing diversity competency. Many other examples could be cited, but it remains to develop a comprehensive and coherent approach to engagement across the campus.

Fourth, we need to make more effective use of the massive amounts of data we collect on a regular basis. Often the data are not deployed to support a specific strategy to address relevant diversity concerns. The *Advance* faculty surveys and related training and mentoring programs provide a good example of connecting data to action. Collecting targeted information to inform specific diversity programs should be better coordinated and vigorously pursued. The Student Diversity and Success project (SDS) is a collaboration between Student Affairs and the Center for the Study for Diversity. The project follows students from the summer prior to entering UD to their graduation, and links diversity experiences to academic, social and psychological outcomes and will provide important information to programs aimed at improving the overall experience of UD students. “Tell it like it is” is a CSD project that collects UD student stories about experiences of inclusion and exclusion on campus. The stories are then used for training, or classroom activities. Other ways to collect and utilize these stories are being explored. Other examples could be cited and demonstrate much of the good work that is being done. However, we need to coordinate and learn from these efforts to achieve their maximum impact.

A lot of good work, driven by research and analytics is going on at UD. Better coordination across units, projects, and programs will amplify their effects.

4. Conclusion

Diversity at UD remains a work in progress. The *Inclusive Excellence* diversity blueprint (also in [Spanish](#)) organized and breathed life into these efforts. Carol Henderson, Vice provost for Diversity, has shown tremendous energy and leadership in bringing organization, attention and motivation to UD's diversity work. The administration of president Dennis Assanis has embraced diversity as a core element of his goals for UD. There are many challenges and the work is hard. Continuing to make progress toward meeting our diversity goals requires understanding the complexity of the idea, recognizing its multifaceted nature, engaging the entire campus community and establishing the financial, administrative and leadership means to move forward.

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