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Creating A Multicultural Learning Environment at Lesley College

Patricia L. Jerabek

Introduction and Background

In 1987, Lesley College announced in its newly adopted mission statement that "The goal of a Lesley College education is to empower students with the knowledge, skills, and practical experience they need to succeed as catalysts and leaders in their professions, their own lives, and the world in which they live." By 1992, it became apparent that the professions, their lives, and the world in which students live were presenting diversity challenges of such significance that, to prepare graduates adequately, the college needed to address the issues even more actively. With the support of the Trustees, President Margaret McKenna obtained a grant from a generous Lesley alumna and established The Lesley College Diversity Initiative to prepare students—particularly teachers—to work collaboratively and productively in a multicultural world.

In order to effectively reach students, faculty and staff have worked inclusively to radically transform the culture of the college to that of a multicultural learning organization. The journey has been challenging, rewarding, and renewing. At the same time, it has been a struggle - a struggle in the recognition that the ideals of social justice may never be entirely achieved, where moments of success have been cherished long enough to provide the energy to reach for all that has not been achieved. This article traces the path of institutional change and identifies important learnings which have implications for higher education and other organizations that seek to create learning environments that better prepare our citizens to work and live productively and peacefully in a multicultural society.

Lesley College, founded in 1909 and with current enrollments of more than 6000 students, prepares women and men for professional careers in education, human services, management, and the arts. A distinctive and fundamental aspect of education at Lesley College is the conviction that people matter, and that the professionals who respond to their needs provide a unique service to society.

Conceptual Model

President McKenna began her career as a civil rights lawyer, influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, believing that race was America's most critical issue. After several career moves in government and education, one of her primary motivations in assuming the presidency of Lesley College was the opportunity to create an institution that would attract and retain students, faculty, and staff from all of America's populations. Early in her presidency, she assumed that with supporting values, intentions and words, the college community would engage in transformation toward the desired goal. There were committed change agents sponsoring multicultural projects throughout the college, but progress, as with most institutions, was slow. Lesley remained a primarily white institution, and she decided that bolder leadership was needed. She created in 1990 the position of Special Assistant to the President for Affirmative Action. In 1992, she announced to deans and search committees the goal that all fifteen open faculty positions were to be filled with people of color as a remedy for historical discrimination. To attract students of color and dramatically alter the applicant pool, Lesley announced that any student of color from Boston or Cambridge accepted to Lesley's Women's College would be guaranteed tuition and funds for book expense. In three years, the number of students of color increased from 7% to 19%. Costs prohibited continued aid at that level, but by then, Lesley was a different place.

With progress in bringing in new populations, the major task of transforming Lesley as an institution remained. The president contended that the mission of the college could not be realized without creating a truly multicultural environment. With a three year grant of \$225,000, the president charged the Special Assistant to the President for Affirmative Action and Diversity to coordinate and promote strong campus wide support for the Lesley College Diversity Initiative. The donors particularly emphasized their interest in preparing teachers to be effective with diverse populations in classrooms. In addressing that priority through systemic change, Lesley simultaneously changed the experience of graduates in all areas including management, human services, and the arts.

The Lesley community was invited to a kick-off breakfast meeting that announced plans, and a group of twenty including faculty, students, and staff was invited to serve on the Diversity Initiative Executive Committee. Diverse along all dimensions including level, function, school, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and others, The Executive Committee established committees to carry out its work: Recruitment and Retention, Curriculum and Instruction, Institutional Assessment and Evaluation, Quality of Life, Training and Development, and Student Issues. The chairs of the committees with the Executive Committee formed the Diversity Initiative Steering Committee. The entire structure created a balance between broad inclusion and small groups that could get the work done. Leadership at all levels of the college was then in place.

Inclusion was one of the most powerful and acknowledged elements from the beginning. Faculty, staff, senior administrators, and students worked together to plan and implement a broad spectrum of activities, programs, and initiatives that would address diversity issues. But the process of developing a conceptual model for change was not an intuitive priority of the Executive Committee in the beginning. The group struggled with process, purpose, confidence, and trust. Disciplines of education, management, organizational development, and the arts introduced varying approaches. At a Fall retreat, the Executive Committee brainstormed goals, and within a few months, there were expressed and restless requests for the clarity of a vision statement and outcomes. A volunteer subgroup met and extracted the substance of the brainstorm materials and drafted proposals for group critique. After four or five rounds, the Executive Committee unanimously approved the Vision and Desired Outcomes and recommended adoption to the president. She responded favorably and communicated the document to the college community. The statement is included in this article because of its centrality to all that followed. It has survived the test of time and been useful in both spawning activity and pointing to deficiencies and gaps.

Diversity Initiative Vision Statement and Desired Outcomes

At the heart of the Lesley College Diversity Initiative is the goal to create a campus living and learning environment to prepare Lesley students to become positive forces for diversity within their communities. Toward this goal, the Lesley College community will achieve increased diversity, value cultural contributions of all its members, strive to enhance multiculturalism in the professions, and serve as a model pluralistic community.

Desired Outcomes

- Lesley College graduates will be culturally aware, engage in practice with attention to diversity and take active leadership in their professions to contribute positively to a more equitable and pluralistic society.
- Lesley College's curriculum and pedagogy will incorporate knowledge of and perspectives of diverse groups within society.
- The Lesley College academic community will contribute to advancing multiculturalism in academic fields and professions with continual efforts to develop and disseminate innovative conceptual work and research to affect theory and practice.
- As a learning community committed to issues of diversity, all members will engage in on-going educational activities to assure knowledge of and sensitivity to oppressed individuals and groups.

- Lesley College will seek, recruit, and work to retain persons from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education to insure wide diversity in all levels of the college community.
- Members of the Lesley College community will address issues of power, privilege and oppression as they affect self, others, groups, and the institution.
- Lesley College policies and procedures will be equitable for all members of the community.
- Lesley College will make continued efforts to secure and allocate resources to support diversity.
- Lesley College will project its commitment to diversity through all public relations materials, academic documentation, and activities of its members in the larger community.

The outcomes became immediately operational as the basis for committee charges, clearly aligning committee work with the vision and outcomes.

The vision and outcomes reflect conceptual elements from the literature which members of the Diversity Initiative Executive Committee brought from their disciplines, scholarship, teaching and organizational experience. A range of research findings, some of which have provided the basis for more recent publications, particularly influenced the Diversity Initiative:

- Diversity is not a new issue but as old as human history and conflict among diverse groups precedes recorded history (Arredondo, 1996). Research has documented the roots, nature, and dynamics of prejudice (Allport, 1988) but denial has permeated socialization and written history. Media attention to diversity issues in the 1980's and 90's has increased awareness and spawned action to change organizations and communities.
- Changing demographics have confronted the nation with major implications for education. Foreign born persons in the United States increased from 4% of the population in 1970 to 8% in 1990. Increasing immigration from Asia, Mexico, Central and South America created a phenomenon named the "browning of America", with immigrants bringing hundreds of languages and dialects to work, communities and schools. More than 13% of the United States population speaks at home a language other than English (Esty, Griffin, & Hirsch, 1995); Spanish is the predominant second language of the United States. By the year 2000, nearly 40% of students in American classrooms are predicted to be African American, Hispanic, Asian American, or Native American while their teachers will be white.(Delpit, 1995). And the workforce is growing more disadvantaged while expanding service jobs demand higher skill levels (Johnston & Packer, 1987).

- The culture of power in schools creates destructive dynamics. Those with power are frequently least aware and least willing to acknowledge its existence. The world views of the privileged are often taken as the only reality while others are dismissed as inconsequential (Delpit, 1995). This has important implications for context, teacher education, faculty development, curriculum, and interactions between teachers and students.
- Broad and inclusive definitions of diversity including age, gender, race, function, religion, class, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and others bring constituencies together and address problems that cut across all dimensions (Hayles & Russell, 1997; Loden & Rosener, 1991).
- American commitment to democracy makes diversity a central American issue. Diversity issues involve examination of evil, and no democracy can survive without heroic energies of citizens wrestling with legacies of personal and institutional evil. Democracy is about critiquing forms of hierarchy that associate people who are different with degradation. Americans are trying to decouple difference and degradation and after more than two hundred years of slavery, have to deal with white supremacy. Democracies are rare in human history and tend not to last long. America, as the oldest surviving democracy in the world, has to grapple with increasing distrust among its citizens, especially on racial, gender and class lines (Cornel West, Lesley College Diversity Day Keynote Speech, October, 1996).
- Increased needs for equity and justice for all students require educating communities and professionals regarding race, language, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation and disability and giving priority to the development and achievement of ethnic minority students and bilingual education (Nieto, 1996). Education regarding the sociocultural contexts of human growth and development in non-mainstream cultures is essential in teacher preparation (Pritchey-Smith, 1996).
- To remain competitive and effective in meeting future demands, American organizations in all sectors need change masters adept at the art of anticipating and leading productive change by reconstructing reality (Kanter, 1983). In higher education, this particularly means serving broader populations by delivering relevant educational services that increase the professional effectiveness of graduates.
- Approaches of Affirmative Action, Valuing Differences, and Managing Diversity, and clarification of the differences among them, create new options for organizational change (Thomas, 1991). Managing Diversity emphasizes policies, systems and organizational practice that capitalize on differences and create effective learning and work environments. Individual, group, and organizational development models and activities are important tools for managing diversity (Hayles and Russell, 1997).

The literature provided rich theoretical frameworks and institutions of higher education

provided laboratories of practice. Through conferences, networks and the literature, Lesley reached out to learn what other organizations were doing and discovered exemplary practice in areas, such as curriculum, faculty development, student recruitment, and hiring, among others. Lesley set out to strengthen all these areas and further to accomplish radical change through organizational transformation, creating both multicultural and multi-contextual environments.

Significant Actions and Achievements

With a goal that the college reflect communities in which graduates will work and live, Lesley made **recruitment and retention** of faculty, staff, administrators and students of color a priority. People of color now comprise: 18% of Lesley employees compared to 8% in 1989; 18% of faculty compared to 7% in 1989 and 16% of administrators compared to 4% in 1989. Senior administrators at Lesley are now a diverse group. Students of color in the undergraduate Women's College increased from 7% to 17% from 1987 to 1996 although college-wide, only 8% of students are people of color. The School of Education has established a priority of developing a master recruitment and retention plan to attract a more diverse student body in 1998.

Aware that the knowing of self is as challenging for institutions as individuals, the Diversity Initiative established an **Institutional Assessment and Evaluation** Committee. Lesley's Office of Institutional Research tracked historical institutional data, primarily quantitative in nature. But the committee sought to probe more deeply and broadly, employing also qualitative techniques. In 1995, at the recommendation of the committee and the Diversity Initiative Executive Committee, the college contracted with Ibis Consulting Group to conduct a Culture Audit to capture the diversity issues of the Lesley community, programs, environment, and policies. There is significant faculty expertise in evaluation at Lesley, but the compelling argument for an outside consultant was the objective collection of sensitive and confidential information. Ibis employed a multi-faceted approach including a survey, focus groups, individual interviews, observations, and a review of college documents. The results of the Audit were informative and useful in identifying both positive and negative elements. Positive elements included description of Lesley as welcoming, friendly, and supportive although rankings of people of color were consistently lower than others'. Twenty-three issues were identified as important to address, with priority to: creating a shared vision as a multicultural institution, increasing access to buildings for the disabled, addressing concerns of support staff and contract workers, and providing training on racism. The Audit was energizing and informing, and the college continues to

respond to issues raised. One adult student commented, "I took part in several focus groups because of my many roles. It was fascinating to see people with a common identity respond to the questions. And I am hopeful that the college will get better as a result of these discussions."

On-going assessment and evaluation are necessary to inform change efforts and recognize progress. At Lesley, assessment and evaluation primarily occur at the level of schools, departments, programs, and courses so data and results are generally not aggregated for the entire college. Field supervisors and program directors note positive changes in, student papers, projects and reflective journals regarding student awareness and knowledge of diversity. Faculty members Merrifield and Boris-Schachter researched processes used by student teachers in creating lesson plans. They compared responses of undergraduate women students interviewed in 1993 and 1994, noting that students in the 1994 sample criticized a selected fifth grade social studies text chapter on immigration for lacking a fully developed multicultural perspective whereas not a single student in the earlier group made such an observation. They attribute the multicultural awareness in the second set of interviews in 1994 to the Diversity Initiative vision, agenda and its influence on course content and faculty world views. In a 1993 School of Management program evaluation, students rated the required bachelor's level diversity course as the second most valued. In hundreds of course evaluations, the new learning most reported relates to recognition of personal prejudices and their impact on management practice. Preliminary interviews and anecdotal evidence are encouraging. "When I came to Lesley, there were only 3 people of color. Now I feel my community is reflected here and it makes a huge difference in my attitude toward work. An aspiring teacher reports that "We have had some dynamic, heated, rockin' conversations. I never knew there could be as many points of view as we discovered in discussing the Holocaust. And another reports, "When I am a classroom teacher and have difficult kids to work with, I will learn about their culture, family and ethnic groups by reading and asking questions. I used to think that some kids and groups were unreachable."

Training and Development have provided an important educational foundation for change. The Training and Development Committee implemented a multiple year, college-wide strategy for providing opportunities and resources for dialogue, knowledge building and organizational change. Workshops offered included: Claiming our Cultural Identity, Exploring Differences in the Workplace, and Power and Conflict in the Multicultural Workplace. Other on-going projects launched were the Diversity Encounters Series with faculty and staff presenting and initiating dialogue on diversity topics, and the Racism Education Project for students, faculty and staff. The Home Groups project which involved the creation of a network of groups for ongoing discussion, assessment, problem solving and strategic planning in each organizational unit of the college served as a vehicle for system-wide change. Participation in training is

voluntary and groups are diverse along many dimensions including level, function, and school. More than three hundred Lesley community members have participated in fifteen workshops in two years. Senior staff have engaged in diversity training and now have diversity on the agenda for all meetings, encouraging leaders to bring issues for discussion and resolution.

The Diversity Initiative urged faculty development by supporting summer workshops in **curriculum revision**. Participating faculty worked with multicultural curriculum consultants to revise more than eighty courses and create fifty new courses, aligning curriculum with the vision and outcomes of the Initiative. Resulting new courses include, for example: Past and Present Realities of Racism, International Perspectives on Health and Nutrition, and Native American Experience. The enthusiastic faculty commitment to transforming the curriculum provides testimony to the congruence of the values of Lesley faculty, the Mission Statement of the college, and the Vision and Outcomes of the Diversity Initiative.

The Transformation Project was an exemplary three year faculty development project, created and led by faculty, to facilitate: faculty awareness of cultural identity, power and privilege; infusion of multicultural perspectives into courses; and development of programs and policies to prepare graduates to engage effectively with both mainstream and socially marginalized populations. Approximately forty faculty participated, motivated primarily by concerns of social justice and limitations of the knowledge and practice in their fields of study. The first year focused on defining cultural identity through an exploration of the ways in which cultural roots combine with the social-political context to shape world views and professional thinking and practice. Monthly trainings emphasized the primary strands of cultural identity and their impact on professional practice and pedagogy. Readings stimulated thinking about topics from differing perspectives. The second year focused on Curriculum Transformation. Faculty identified courses, preferably required, to revise and worked in small peer groups to discuss course objectives, content, and resources. They critiqued theory and practice and introduced readings, case studies, and other pedagogical strategies to reflect diversity in existing courses. At the end of the year, forty participants submitted syllabi for peer review and received feedback. The third year focused on multicultural competencies to be addressed and used in program evaluation. The project has been a source of significant learning at Lesley, with results presented at several national conferences. One faculty member commented about curriculum revision, "I have generally felt that the arguments about multicultural issues in curriculum have been exaggerated, but as I got into the specifics of my course and the readings in discussion with my colleagues, some of the exclusion issues became clear for the first time, and I was able to make changes that I felt good about."

To advance multiculturalism and encourage dissemination of innovative conceptual work and research, Lesley launched in 1997 *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*, a biannual, web-based publication. Additionally, the college sponsored a **Writing Retreat** in March, 1997 where writers from faculty and staff with expertise in diversity, engaged in small groups for peer review and critique of written drafts in a relaxed off-campus rural setting.

Recognizing the potential isolation of adjunct faculty and the importance of their contributions, the college supported **The Adjunct Faculty Project** in 1995 to provide cross-college leadership to assist the four schools in enabling adjunct faculty members to address the Vision and Desired outcomes of the Diversity Initiative. Several recommendations from the project are incorporated in the 1996-1997 goals of the Diversity Initiative.

Celebration/Recognition and Awards

In October, 1996, Lesley sponsored **Diversity Day**, an educational and celebratory extravaganza to acknowledge what the college has become and further enlighten the community. Fourteen hundred participants from all segments of the college attended more than sixty workshops and events from morning to late evening on topics such as: Caribbean Story Time, "Out" in the Classroom: A Faculty Perspective, and Physical, Learning, Psychological, Emotional, and Other Disabilities: Hidden and Obvious. Cornel West's keynote address was thought provoking and provided a basis for further discussion and debate during Faculty Development Day in January. Small groups of faculty explored from the speech, topics of democracy and multiculturalism, market culture and influences on nurturing and caring, and faith, hope and renewal. Coordination and staff investment in the success of the event were extraordinary. Evaluations surfaced such comments as "organizational masterpiece, great showcase of Lesley talent, and exceptional experience that separates Lesley from the others". One faculty member of color commented, "The day was amazing. I would not have believed that Lesley was capable of this. The diversity and gifts in our community have never been so apparent to me before."

In December, 1995, Lesley College was honored with a highly coveted **Ray Frost Award** from the Association of Affirmative Action Professionals. The citation lauded the College for "setting high standards and challenging the system in pursuit of affirmative action, equal opportunity and social justice." Lesley was the first institution of higher learning to receive the award.

The concept of **Institutionalizing Change** was an important but elusive element in the consciousness of the Diversity Initiative Steering Committee. Going out of business represents best success for vehicles of change, but administrative processes established for a particular purpose seek a life of their own. As the Steering Committee discussed actions and change, there was one participating senior administrator whose predictable

cant, "There is an office in the college responsibility for that." brought the committee back on course. In 1997, the college persists in its efforts, as the following few examples indicate:

- Human Resources is training supervisors to work with employees to establish each year at least one goal that supports diversity priorities.
- The Deans' Group has charged each school to develop at least one adjunct faculty diversity training effort in 1997 that serves at least 25% of the school's adjunct faculty.
- Partnerships with Boston elementary and middle schools provide immersion experience in preparation to teach in urban schools and communities serving diverse populations.
- The Spousal Equivalent Policy promotes equity related to sexual orientation by acknowledging same sex relationships and offering health, dental, and tuition remission benefits.

Budget and Resources

Resources and funding always influence what is possible. Lesley committed resources to this initiative by creating a Special Assistant to the President for Affirmative Action and Diversity position, obtaining grant funds, requesting that all offices and programs cooperate with the Diversity Initiative, providing work time opportunities for staff to participate and faculty release time for some faculty leadership roles. Basically, these provisions communicate the high priority of diversity work in the college at all levels and in all constituencies.

Important Learnings in Creating Multicultural Environments

The Diversity Initiative has been a rich and challenging learning experience for the Lesley community. In reflecting on three years of institutional change efforts, the Lesley Diversity Initiative Executive Committee urges institutions engaging in diversity-related change to consider the following:

1. Recognize that the quest for pluralism is never ending and requires continual learning.

Diversity work is relational and the realities of multiculturalism require constant listening, challenging, and changing, both interpersonally and at institutional and societal levels. Doing the work institutionally means "walking the talk" personally.

2. In leadership groups, model the pluralistic community that the institution aspires to become, with involvement from all levels and identities within the institution. The group will exhibit social issues that the initiative is addressing. The commitment of members to the vision and outcomes create an important context for challenging contradictions and developing trust.

3. Build on a foundation of clear statements of vision that are aligned with institutional mission and principles of American democracy.
4. Establish a broad base of support with committed leadership at all levels to move an organization forward in both real and symbolic terms.
5. Move forward with positive leadership and small victories to gain credibility and confidence. Work for consensus but be strategic in expending energy on minor resistance.
6. Seek and advocate for resources to make available at least the minimal money and time required for efforts to succeed.
7. Continually challenge with detailed project plans for results each year.
8. Institutionalize changes through existing organizational structures, creating new structures only when necessary.
9. Assess and evaluate with increasing focus and depth, paying particular attention to silenced minorities.
10. Differentiate outcomes clearly from goals, intent and process to evaluate impact and results effectively.

Lesley has made major strides toward commitments of the diversity vision statement in areas of: increasing diversity among faculty, students and staff at all levels; valuing contributions of all members; and enhancing multiculturalism in the professions. Also the college commits to becoming a living and learning environment to prepare Lesley students to become positive forces for diversity in their communities. The real tests are the extent to which: graduates are positive forces for change in their communities, the college community as a model pluralistic community inspires the transformation of world views, and community members comprehend the challenges of democracy and respond positively. Answers to these questions require dialogue and assessment with groups that have been disadvantaged and underserved as well as with dominant groups who must examine their privilege and choose to change. The American experience is unique in human history and the development of democracy depends on learning by institutions and individuals. Lesley students who increase their knowledge, skills and practical experience to succeed as social change agents enlarge the circle of hope.

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