Faculty Leaders and Discourses of Diversity
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As our campuses become more diverse in myriad ways, faculty are often engaged in conversations and actions related to how to engage diversity in higher education contexts. As Moses and Chang (2006) contend, “the ideal of diversity is worth wanting because it enriches a democratic society and cultivates adults who can function more effectively as citizens of a complex and connected world” (p.9). Yet, there are multiple ways of thinking about diversity that both complement and compete with each other as universities decide whether and how to move toward that ideal.

The ways one thinks about diversity affect actions and policies in higher education. For example, Susan Iverson’s (2008, 2012) work on diversity plans and commissions explores how different diversity discourses are embedded in official reports and have both intended and unintended effects. She asserts that universities must be careful to ensure that the assumptions they make related to diversity are clear to both internal and external stakeholders, and that the discourses used to inform diversity are, in fact, engaged consciously.

This research paper addresses the tensions and complexities of varying diversity discourses espoused by faculty leaders in a research university. Through the presentation of our research, we will challenge participants to think critically about the implications of our policies and practices in relation to equitable institutional environments for faculty and students alike.

Research Focus and Methods

In this research paper, we present findings associated with a study involving faculty leaders at a research university. Our initial broad purpose was to better understand the ways in which faculty leaders understood and engaged with diversity in their higher education contexts. The overarching research questions guiding our inquiry were: 1) How do faculty leaders make sense of diversity in higher education?; and 2) How do faculty leaders’ understandings influence how they engage in their professional roles? In our presentation, we will focus on how faculty leaders develop particular views of diversity and which diversity discourses seem to shape or influence how they think about diversity in their professional work and personal lives.

Our participants were faculty leaders and mid-level administrators who work with faculty. Our participants were selected based upon their discipline and mid-level leadership roles within the institution. We sought to have a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and experience doing ‘diversity’ work. While some of the participants had explicitly worked on issues related to diversity, many had not. We were interested in both in order to gain a broad understanding of the relationship between participants’ roles and viewpoints around diversity and their enactments with it.

Findings

The findings we present in this paper illustrate that faculty leaders draw on their identities, research focuses, and experiences both within and outside academic contexts to establish their views on diversity. For example, one participant told us, “You asked me why I thought diversity mattered, but you didn’t ask, “Why you?” Because most of the people, I think, who do this work have some passion for it, and where did that come from?” While we believe that all faculty leaders have perspectives on diversity (even if they believe that diversity isn’t important), in our paper we explore how and why faculty leaders came to their current thinking.
The second aspect of our findings focuses on the diversity discourses that are most prevalent among our faculty leader participants. While there are many different ways of thinking about diversity, we found that our participants largely drew on arguments related to student demographics, neoliberalism/economic urgency, and internationalism in articulating their views. One participant illustrating the neoliberal discourse told us, “I have told [faculty in my unit], if this is how you want to make your living, if you want to revitalize our curriculum and bring in more people to the course by virtue of this new way of thinking, the dean again doesn’t care how the money shows up, the dean just wants the money to show up. If it is in the form of increased tuition dollars because you are enrolling [students from] Botswana that want to learn on-line and get a degree that’s fine.” In our presentation, we consider the complexities of drawing on different discourses associated with diversity to take action within university contexts.

Importance of Research

We learned from our findings that the way faculty leaders engage in diversity discourse with their colleagues has significant implications on faculty and graduate student recruiting practices and hiring decisions. We posit that in order to shift towards a more equitable and inclusive discourse those in leadership positions must make substantial change in all parts of an organization (Krutky, 2008). This paper explores how faculty leaders’ understandings of diversity become operationalized within policies, programming, and rhetoric in ways that converge or contradict one another, leading to either the creation of inclusive spaces for diverse faculty and students, or to hostile places that resist that inclusivity.

Transformative change requires individual actors and, in academic settings, diversity has to be tied to the core work that faculty do as teachers, learners, scholars, community members and leaders. Grounding perspectives in theory and practice related to allied relationships (Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2006), social justice (Bell, 2007), and organizational change related to diversity (Smith, 2011), our paper contributes to the ongoing examination of how faculty are involved in constructing institutional initiatives related to diversity.

References


