How to Realign Views on Diversity with Institutional Change

Sarah Mayorga, Brandeis University

Most universities say they care about diversity and inclusion, yet research shows that when it comes to policies and practices, universities often fall short of their goals. Why?

In recent research, I identify four ways people – particularly those in positions of power – understand and define diversity. The four conceptions of diversity include: diversity as acceptance, diversity as intent, diversity as commodity, and diversity as liability. Developing an understanding of these four views can help uncover why discussions about diversity fail to move beyond rhetoric and small gestures. While I have focused on race in my research, these perspectives on diversity likely affect many marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQ communities, and people with disabilities, for example.

Below I discuss these four conceptions, highlighting how universities and their administrations often miss the mark on diversity issues. I end with a brief discussion about how to challenge these views and move toward real institutional change.

Diversity Ideology on Campus

Diversity as acceptance – This perspective on diversity focuses on everyone's contributions to diversity, equating structurally-shaped identities, such as race and gender, with more idiosyncratic details, such as favorite food. Equating these types of diversity allows people to argue that a room full of white men is diverse, since all of these men have different life experiences. This perspective often erases the history of both discriminatory policies and policies meant to address historical and institutional inequities, such as affirmative action.

Diversity as intent – focuses on the intentions of actors rather than the outcomes and effects of their actions. Diversity as intent focuses discussions about diversity on the feelings and intentions of those in power – what they meant, how they feel when people of color are hurt by their actions, and how those in power are, in fact, good people despite their actions (or lack thereof). Diversity as intent shifts the focus of the conversation from the experiences of people of color, making the effect of racism on their well-being a secondary consideration to the well-being of those in power.

Diversity as commodity – is somewhat wide-ranging, but its central logic treats people of color as objects, or means to an end for white people. From this perspective, white people use diversity efforts to show that they are in fact "good." In this, white people use people of color to signal positive attributes about themselves, by consuming ethnic foods, living in multiracial neighborhoods, or knowing about non-white cultures. Diversity as commodity also drives campuses to Photoshop students of color into their brochures to demonstrate that they are an institution that values diversity, regardless of whether it reflects reality. Rather than highlighting the variation and humanity of people of color, diversity as commodity flattens non-white perspectives into digestible nuggets for white consumption or public relations stunts.

Diversity as liability – This view warns against the downfalls of diversity, often pitting diversity against merit, as if institutional diversity cannot exist without lowering academic standards. People who subscribe to this view also argue that diversity is a good thing as long as it is controlled and does not make white students and faculty uncomfortable.

Moving Toward Institutional Change

Universities and their administrators who want to move beyond the status quo and these limited conceptions of diversity should challenge their core logics. University leaders should be careful to avoid the temptation of quick fixes and public relations-centered approaches. Diversity goals must be defined in terms of structural inequities and explicitly connected to institutional change. Below are a few suggestions for colleges and universities who want to inspire real change.

Grapple with the racial history of the institution, as well as the ramifications of that history for the present. By being honest about where they have been, institutions have the opportunity to choose a new path for themselves, actively refusing to repeat the harms caused by previous administrations.

Seek to acknowledge and repair the damage done with humility, especially when the current administration has caused harm. Due to the deeply embedded nature of oppressive systems, anyone attempting to challenge structural inequities has the potential to harm others in the process, regardless of good intentions. The job of those in power is not to be perfect, but to listen and work with their constituencies, particularly those they have harmed.

Center the experiences and feelings of marginalized groups. It takes courage and a great amount of care for those in vulnerable positions to share the ways that they have been harmed. Institutions should respond in kind. When institutions or their administrators turn immediately to the feelings of those who are accused of causing harm, they disregard the vulnerability of their marginalized community members. There is also no singular way to experience Blackness, queerness, or disability. Administrators should keep this in mind when trying to create spaces at their institutions where marginalized people can share their experiences and seek redress. By creating space for various, even conflicting narratives, the humanity of marginalized populations takes center-stage. This is an important starting point for restructuring institutions in ways that allow real inclusivity.

Focus on outcomes rather than intentions. Often, when administrators or other people in power are corrected or the shortcomings of their institution are highlighted, they turn to short-term fixes, perhaps inviting expensive speakers, to repair their tarnished identity and quickly move on. Instead, leaders should listen to what institutional changes students, faculty, and staff of color need: funding for ethnic studies programs and departments, equity in salaries and benefits for faculty and staff, sustained funding for recruitment and retention of students of color, financial and institutional support to advance the tenure and promotion of underrepresented faculty, accountability for harassment, and protections and support for faculty targeted by hate groups – to name a few possibilities. By investing in these kinds of institutional programs and documenting their successes and failures, those in power can move initiatives beyond rhetoric and good intentions to institutional and structural change.

Read more in Sarah Mayorga-Gallo, "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology," *American Behavioral Scientist*, (2019).