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Diversity Works: The Emerging Picture of How Students Benefit—An Executive Summary

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In reviewing research on the impact of diversity on students in higher education, we have combed research reports from numerous sources to compose a picture of our current understanding of the value to students of diversity on campus. While many studies reviewed for this report evaluate the practices employed by individual institutions and their programs, others use national databases and multi-institutional studies to provide an empirical foundation for the development of individual initiatives.

Over time, the research traces a movement from focused concern for the access, retention, and success of underrepresented students in higher education to broader concerns about the effects of increasing demographic, cultural, and social changes on the educational context as a whole--campus services, intergroup relationships, pedagogy, the curriculum, and institutional purpose. While concern for the continuing underrepresentation of certain groups of students remains high on the research and institutional agenda, the analysis of campus diversity now also includes new developments in climate, curriculum, scholarship, institutional practice, and mission. As fundamental changes resulting from societal diversity are felt throughout an institution and its constituencies, multi-faceted and ongoing evaluations of the impact of these changes become essential.

Campus leaders are also exploring what institutional changes are needed to successfully educate a diverse student body to live, work, and excel in a complex and pluralistic society. These changes mean more than just the successful adjustment of new categories of students to a given institution. They include as well how institutions must be altered if they are to better educate and prepare all students for a changing world.

While conclusions about successful strategies for implementing broad-based changes are preliminary, the published research literature nonetheless warrants a number of statements about "what works" in campus diversity efforts.

1. Overall, the literature suggests that diversity initiatives positively affect both minority and majority students on campus. Significantly, diversity initiatives have an impact not only on student attitudes and feelings toward intergroup relations on campus, but also on institutional satisfaction, involvement, and academic growth.
2. Programs which focus on the transition to college are important for the recruitment, retention, and academic success of underrepresented students. The apparent success of honors approaches for at-risk students suggests that the differences between cultural and academic transitions need to be clearly addressed in the design of transitional and special support programs.

3. Mentoring programs, involving both student peers and faculty, consistently result in improved adjustment, retention, and academic success rates for their participants. Faculty involvement with students produces similar results.
4. The evidence grows showing that involvement in specialized student groups, such as ethnic residential theme houses, support centers, and academic departments benefits students of color and others. Indeed, these activities appear to contribute to increased satisfaction and retention, despite prodigious commentary of their negative effect on the development of community on campus.
5. Though specialized student support programs and campus community have been pitted against each other, research results suggest that institutional commitment to both contributes to the educational success of all students. These findings underscore the capacity of individuals, groups, and institutions to thrive through an acknowledgment of multiple affiliations and identities on campus.
6. Contrary to widespread reports of self-segregation among students of color on campuses, the research finds this pattern more typical of white students. Students of color interact more with dominant students than the reverse.
7. Opportunities for interaction between and among student groups are desired by virtually all students and produce clear increases in understanding and decreases in prejudicial attitudes. Such opportunities also positively affect academic success. The conditions under which interactions among individuals are likely to be beneficial include institutional support, equal status, and common goals.
8. Increasing numbers of campuses are recognizing the significance of creating opportunities for intergroup dialogue as part of diversity efforts. However, the conditions for effective dialogue cannot be assumed and the necessity of sustaining difficult dialogues has become increasingly urgent. There appear to be significant numbers of instances where institutions and groups are "talking past" one another. While the literature reviewed here focuses on campus initiatives with students, it is likely that evaluating the conditions for dialogue among other constituencies, including faculty and administrators, is equally important.
9. The evidence continues to grow that serious engagement of issues of diversity in the curriculum and in the classroom has a positive impact on attitudes toward racial issues, on opportunities to interact in deeper ways with those who are different, on cognitive development, and on overall satisfaction and involvement with the institution. These benefits are particularly powerful for white students who have had less opportunity for such engagement.
10. Recent research on the significance of the institutional commitment to diversity suggests that the perception of a broad campus commitment to diversity is related to increased recruitment and retention of students from underrepresented groups.
11. This perception of a broad campus commitment to diversity is also related to positive educational outcomes for all students, individual satisfaction, and a commitment to improving racial understanding.
12. Evidence in the literature suggests that comprehensive institutional change in teaching methods, curriculum, campus climate, and institutional definition provides educational benefits for both minority and majority students. Comprehensive diversity initiatives, beyond their capacity to improve access and retention for underrepresented groups, are related to satisfaction,

academic success, and cognitive development for all students.

13. Special mission institutions--historically black colleges and universities (HBCU's), American Indian controlled colleges, women's colleges, and Latino/a serving institutions are important in higher education for the student groups they serve. High expectations, belief in students' ability to succeed, community involvement, and the presence of role models seem to play crucial parts in their well-documented success.
14. While reports of successful diversity initiatives are encouraging, more cross-institutional studies are needed. Moreover, the deeper studies which are emerging from individual campuses will continue to expand what we know about effective strategies, about the differential impact of certain strategies for different student groups, and about the apparent relationship between addressing the needs of underrepresented students through particular programs and initiatives, while at the same time addressing institutional issues through broad based strategies.
15. We also need more clear analysis of what students need to know and do to function in a diverse workplace and global society, and what part they can play in developing healthy, respectful communities.