

Making the Full Case for Diversity in Higher Education

Five Cases Beyond the Business Case that Administrators, Educators, and Students Should Embrace

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I have worked in Higher Education in various capacities for the past four decades. Through the years, my approach to diversity education has expanded significantly. What has remained constant, is how we in the diversity space are still attempting to make the case for diversity in institutions of higher learning and beyond. I write this against the backdrop of the Trump-presidency era, and I still hold firm to the belief that we've made progress. If in no other way, we have changed the way we talk about diversity and the case for diversity.

The Academic Case

As it relates to making the case for diversity on college campuses, my earliest attempts involved first defining diversity. Only after that, did I feel capable of making a compelling argument on behalf of the benefits of having a diverse student body, faculty, staff, and curriculum. I firmly believe that a diverse curriculum, taught by diverse faculty, to a diverse student body, is more likely to provide a more enriched learning experience.

On June 23, 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court rendered a landmark ruling that upheld the rights of universities to consider race in their admission policies. The purpose of this ruling was to ensure the enrollment of a more diverse student body. The Justices believed that the variety of experiences from a diverse student body could enrich the learning experience by invigorating the dialogue and diminishing the influence of "group think."

The Legal Case

Litigious activity based upon racial and gender inequalities has loomed large within the academy for decades. Numerous institutions have navigated through legal cases involving claims of race, sex, gender discrimination, and more. The cost associated

with supporting such cases, even when settled out of court, deserves attention. As the cost for higher education escalates and federal funding provided to institutions steadily decreases, exhausting fiscal resources to fight claims and compensate injured individuals is detrimental. Additionally, the negative impact to the morale on campus and damage to an institution's reputation extends far beyond the campus community. How does one begin to measure the damage done to campus morale by high profile incidents like the harassment allegations and eventual conviction of Dr. Nasser at Michigan State University; protests involving race at the University of Missouri, which led to the eventual resignation of its president; and the sex scandal involving Gerald "Jerry" Sandusky at Penn State University.

Institutions can decrease the volume of discriminatory caseloads by doing two things. Leaders must invest more in educating constituents and affiliates on civility, diversity, equity, inclusion, and engagement; and, they must couple learning efforts with a strong accountability structure.

The Business Case

In my experience, institutions of higher learning tend to spend less time focusing upon the Business Case. Colleges and universities were created to educate our citizenry and equip them to contribute to societal advancement. Earning money is often treated as a non sequitur to earning a degree, as institutions of higher learning often prefer not to see themselves as profit-making entities. Nevertheless, responsible leadership at colleges and universities, not-for-profits included, are still tasked with monitoring their bottom lines less mission-critical programming and initiatives become compromised.

Because the expatriate experience is viewed as an opportunity to enhance one's ability to think globally, many organizations encourage those pursuing senior-level executive positions to take at least one international assignment. Universities are designed to educate future leaders. Hence, understanding and appreciating the business case for diversity can help students transition from earning a degree to building a career.

The Social Justice Case

Taking into consideration the moral and ethical perspective of diversity, I am always forthright in distinguishing between what is moral and what is legal. Historically, the two have not always aligned. Slavery was once legal in the U.S. yet, not ethical in practice or principle.

From the 1950s through the 1980s, we spoke more about civil rights than social justice. By the 1990s, academic scholars and political pundits were more likely to use the term social justice to describe and discuss social issues. Although the concept was born in the early 1970s, like much of our contemporary vernacular, it became more commonly used decades later.

The concept of social justice grew out of the work of the Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, who wrote one of the movement's most famous books, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). Initially, the principal focus was on poverty and later morphed into other forms of disparity and degradation. The term social justice was used to address racism, sexism, heterosexism, xenophobia, classism, and many other issues plaguing issues.

Social Justice institutes, departments, faculty, curriculum, and directors have all found homes on college campuses throughout the academic landscape. While campus communities have become skilled at researching and articulating the need for adopting a social justice agenda, many business leaders shutter when the topic is broached. Often, business leaders would rather discuss unconscious bias than the manifestations of racism, sexism, or ageism in the workplace. Corporate entities could enhance their social responsibility efforts by examining the case for diversity through the lens of social justice.

Leaders who put people before profits are best equipped to attract and retain a diverse, qualified, and fully engaged workforce. Viewing the social justice and business cases for diversity as a both/and not an either/or proposition would be an enormous step in the right direction.

The Equitable Case

The Civil Rights Movement forced us to address policies, practices, procedures, and principles that were legal, yet discriminatory. Although most egregious manifestations were documented in the South, the North does not bode well based on its handling of racism. Dr. M.L. King Jr. labeled Chicago, “the most segregated city” in America. The Little Rock Nine was not a basketball team. Both examples serve as reflections of a national rather than a regional manifestation of inequality.

Equal opportunity and equal protection under the law helped to level the proverbial playing field. However, equal, or the same treatment isn't necessarily the goal. In many cases, equitable treatment serves the individual more effectively than equal treatment.

Equity takes differences and distinctions into consideration in a manner that equality tends to exclude. Consider parenting. Parents rarely treat their children exactly the same, because they realize early on the nuances that make each child unique and they parent accordingly. Equal treatment means treating each the same, while equitable treatment is about being fair and considering needs. Equitable treatment may require more effort due to its responsive nature; however, it often yields a more effective result. For me, the Equitable Case for diversity is simply the appropriate thing to do.

The Religious Case

I serve on the Board of Trustees with two faith-based institutions, where biblical foundations are an integral part of their mission and core values. There is historical relevance in viewing diversity from a biblical perspective because slavery was often justified by misguided individuals who used scripture to support the atrocities committed against the enslaved. Absent slavery, others might still argue that the Bible often demonstrates an intolerance when it comes to embracing people from different nations, cultures, or groups. The simplest way to address is to review the Book of Revelations, Chapter 7:9, which epitomizes why embracing diversity is essential. It speaks to the uniting of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

Institutions of higher learning, organizations, and individuals would benefit from approaching diversity from a holistic perspective. Doing so leaves open the opportunity to incorporate components from each of the cases mentioned above, which in and of itself, represents diversity of thought, and would serve to benefit a broader population. Consider the possibilities!



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