

Beyond Access: Creating A Climate for Culturally Different Students

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Walking through the crowded hallways at Bunker Hill Community College at the start of a new semester, we witness a wonderful phenomenon — a dynamic and diverse student body moving about the campus. Among our students there is diversity in language, academic ability, race/ethnicity, culture, gender, and physical mobility. Almost every racial/ethnic group making up the population of this country is represented at the college in addition to students from more than seventy-five other countries. This phenomenon attests to the successful implementation of one of the institutional goals — to increase the diversity of the student population.

The transformation of the student population did not happen overnight but has been a steady and progressive endeavor. For example, in 1982, Bunker Hill Community College reportedly had a diverse racial/ethnic student population of approximately seven percent, which increased to about thirty-seven percent in 1989 and a little over forty-seven percent in 2000 (BHCC Institutional Research). Statistically, this is an impressive increase, which suggests that we have largely accomplished the diversity goal as it pertains to numbers of students. We may, however, be tempted to congratulate ourselves a little too soon for having achieved our diversity goal and to feel that we can now move on to something else.

Before we do so, let us consider the invisible or submerged barriers that are a present reality in our society and, as such, will directly or indirectly impact student interactions at BHCC. Our diversity initiative must continue for the following reasons:

- Access does not translate into equity.
- Prejudice and racism are often invisible, submerged and deeply entrenched in all of America's institutions and structures.
- Peoples' attitudes do not change quickly even when they are exposed to new knowledge (Allport 9).
- Stereotypes and stigma abound (as evident in Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve*), and are resistant to correction because they are used as evaluative tools to support intellectual deficiency and/or inferiority of some groups (Allport 99, 191-192).

Because of the above-mentioned factors, culturally different students will still be confronted with obstacles such as “stereotypic attitudes, unfamiliar values, ineffective teaching methods, and an organization approach that may not support their efforts to succeed” (Smith 1) after they enter BHCC.

Because BHCC is an open admissions college, quantitative data can only tell us that an increased number of diverse student populations gained access and have chosen to matriculate at our institution. As Hurtado and her colleagues (19-20) correctly state, numbers cannot tell us what kinds of experiences students are having once they are admitted. If we are serious about diversity, it becomes necessary to move beyond the first level of access and assiduously work on creating and maintaining an institutional climate that respects and supports the full range of diversity in our college community.

Moving Beyond Access

We must be vigilant and pay increased attention to the impact of our institutional climate on culturally different students, who today comprise almost fifty percent of our student population. Many are recent newcomers and as such may be unprepared to navigate through the multiple systems of the institutional culture. We, therefore, have a responsibility to create a climate not only of access, but also of respect, inclusion, and support that evolves into a nest for positive learning outcomes.

In order to accomplish this task, we must both raise and expand the level of analysis by asking effective and critical questions that address the multiple dimensions of diversity and how they interact to either create a supportive or non-supportive institutional climate. Effective questions will enable us to create an agenda from which we can develop and implement action plans to ameliorate problems that surface from our investigation.

We must be serious about this next step and challenge ourselves to act decisively; a warm and supportive institutional climate is crucial to the success of students who have historically been denied access to higher education. Our commitment cannot stop with access but should include an assessment of institutional factors that may impact students' educational experiences and, as a result, influence retention. The best way to accomplish this task is to conduct "customer satisfaction research" to provide immediate feedback from students on how they perceive the institutional climate.

To allow entrance and then think about climate only haphazardly speaks volumes about an institution's commitment to diversity. It conveys a subtle yet powerful message that we are not concerned about culturally different students after their enrollment.

Furthermore, if we pay scant attention to environmental factors and how they impact students' well-being and educational achievement, we may very well be setting students up to fail.

These concerns are important and worth considering, especially since there has been a somewhat rapid increase in student diversity without a concomitant change in institutional personnel. Most of the faculty, staff and administrators are racially homogeneous, and although they may have longevity and tenure, some of them may be underprepared or unprepared to serve the influx of new students. They may continue to conduct business as though change has not taken place. This attitude can, and often does, have a profoundly negative effect on the overall institutional climate.

We often objectify and speak of the institution's climate as something outside of ourselves. We forget that we, as individuals, make up the institution and create its climate. While we bring our skills and talents to BHCC, we also bring our societal and cultural baggage (for example, our beliefs, prejudices, assumptions, attitudes about race). On a daily basis, we make students feel either welcome or unwelcome, supported or unsupported with our attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

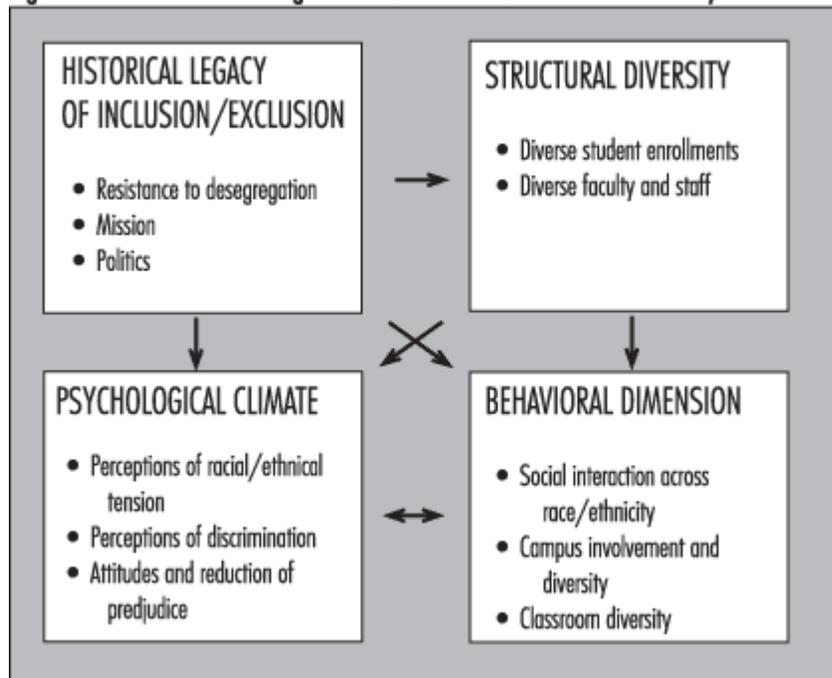
An example from our recent national history further illustrates this point. When James Meredith finally gained access to the University of Mississippi, he encountered a hostile climate (attitudes, beliefs and behaviors — verbal and non-verbal) that even the National Guard could not protect him from. Today, some students continue to face hostile climates in more subtle forms, including non-affirming behaviors and inadequate information and services. Though overtly hostile behaviors are no longer tolerated, these subtle attitudes and actions (or lack of them) are just as damaging. BHCC has made herculean efforts to welcome students and provide a warm and supportive climate.

However, we still, by and large, do not know what kind of experiences culturally different students are having and how our institutional climate impacts those experiences. In order to discern and gain an understanding of these experiences, we need to assess, measure, and compare them with our own perceptions. Next, we must act affirmatively to bridge incongruities so that we can continue to accomplish the twin goals of diversity and equity. Some ways that such understanding can be achieved include planning and implementing focus groups (with broad representation), student clubs (discussions, recommendations and action plans), and exit interviews.

Institutional Climate: A Broader Perspective

Before we continue further, let us define and expand what we mean by institutional climate, because it can be an amorphous and a difficult concept to grasp unless we can determine its boundaries. Hurtado and her colleagues have developed a four-dimensional model (Figure 1) that provides a helpful framework for our discussion.

Figure 1: Elements Influencing the Climate for Racial and Ethnic Diversity



Source: Hurtado et al, 1999

The psychological dimension of climate is primarily concerned with “perceptions, stereotypes, racial/ethnic tension, perceptions of discrimination, attitudes and stigma” (25-28) which are prevalent and pervasive in the institution, but usually not talked about openly. Conversely, culturally different students are sometimes more willing to talk. They come to college with both positive and negative expectations, but most are positive that they will have a new learning experience, earn a college degree and transfer to a four-year college or university.

Negative expectations include the fact that they will encounter stereotypes, be stigmatized or labeled by teachers, staff and administrators, and will receive differential treatment at some point in their college careers. When students encounter prejudice, they expect the incident will be minimized, glossed over or avoided. When the college

climate mirrors negative expectations, students are likely to become preoccupied with survival strategies rather than develop creative learning strategies that propel them toward achievement and graduation. If students have not developed sufficient coping strategies, or if they feel the school is not supportive, they will tend to drop out of school, thus supporting an incorrect and superficial analysis that culturally different students are not serious, and/or not college material.

Secondly, the structural dimension is primarily concerned with the “numerical representation of various racial, ethnic, and gender groups on campus. Research supports the notion that increasing an institution’s structural diversity is considered the first important step in the process of improving the climate for diversity” (Hurtado 19).

The behavioral dimension is concerned with how students interact with “diverse peer groups,” the extent to which they are involved in student government and student activities, classroom interactions, and their classroom experiences (37-54). It is in this dimension that action can be initiated for teaching and learning about ethnocentrism, race privilege, and cultural relativism. It also provides an ideal context for germinating ideas that build bridges across racial and ethnic differences in and out of the classroom.

One such effort that has crystallized at BHCC is the “Day of Dialogue.” Every semester, the college community is invited to participate in discussions about race, ethnicity, power and race-related challenges. While this effort is to be applauded and serves as an impetus to create a more inclusive and positive climate, a large number of culturally different students, especially those who encounter racism or discrimination inside and outside of the institution, do not attend. One plausible explanation for low attendance is that a one-day dialogue about race can be emotionally charged for people who have suffered systematic oppression while other people from the majority culture go about their business. This observation is supported by psychologist Na’im Akbar, who suggests that discussion about race “...preoccupies people unnecessarily and purposelessly with old hurts, tending old wounds” (v).

In addition to the Day of Dialogue, it might be helpful to initiate a student focus group that convenes periodically and prior to the first campus-wide event to discuss matters of race, thus providing an ongoing process. Another promising area that contributes to a positive climate at BHCC is Student Activities. During the weekly activity hour, student clubs frequently conduct activities that are inclusive, welcoming and bridge the gap across cultures.

Finally, the institutional dimension of climate is “concerned about the historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion, the resistance to desegregation, the institution’s mission and the politics of the institution” (9-14). By understanding this dimension of climate and the multiple issues it contains, we can often dismiss simplistic explanations that seek to divert our attention from entrenched and submerged issues and cause us to focus instead on learning pathologies (remedial, developmental issues, underpreparedness and unpreparedness) as the salient issues. Unmasking internal and external politics allows us to gain a sense of how historical remnants may be adversely affecting the college climate and therefore may be acting in ways that are counterproductive to the college’s present mission, goals, and objectives.

Hurtado’s model provides an analytical tool to help us understand that diversity is multi-faceted and that its dimensions are interconnected. Therefore, it is important to the

process of moving beyond access by bringing us into a greater awareness of how climate affects and impacts culturally different students' retention, persistence, graduation and transfer rates. Further, it provides a framework for asking effective questions about what happens after culturally different learners gain access to the college:

- What kinds of barriers, visible and invisible, are students likely to encounter that might stifle their creativity and erode their resolve to persist and realize their educational goals?
- What systems within the institution are likely to add to students' frustrations?
- What support systems are in place that promote advocacy, redress, reconciliation and prevent students from prematurely foreclosing on education?

These questions are of immediate importance if we are to continue to shift upward from pre-activity (recruiting, supporting inclusion) to proactivity (isolating dimensional factors that positively or negatively impact climate).

Conclusion

Finally, creating a climate at BHCC is fundamentally about creating equal education opportunity. It means remembering that the *Brown v. Board*¹ decision was about dismantling systems of injustice and inequality and continuing the commitment. Ashmore reminds us that "It (*Brown v. Board*) figures in our concept of justice and it colors our notion of equity. It nags at our consciousness and troubles our conscience" (29). He is profoundly correct in his observation. Therefore, creating climate is about "sensing" in order to be on time with solutions, listening to voices that have been silenced, and it is about becoming mindful of the comfort level of individuals and groups who have little or no experience in the college environment. It entails coming into an awareness of how interactions, language, policies and procedures are injurious to some and rewarding to others. Creating a climate is about developing and finding new ways and means of communicating the message that culturally different students are valued and supported at Bunker Hill Community College while simultaneously conveying the message that all forms of bigotry, prejudice and racism will not be tolerated. Most of all, creating a climate means challenging the status quo and shedding light on internal forces and "gate keeping" functions that have allowed access, but have tacitly or explicitly encouraged attrition.

Endnote

¹ The landmark decision made by the Supreme Court in 1954 upheld the legal right of Linda Brown, a young African American student from Topeka, Kansas, to attend the nearby white school from which segregation laws had restricted her. Widely considered an overdue step in ending segregation in schools throughout the South, the case brought attention to a wide range of social and constitutional issues and effectively ended the "separate but equal" doctrine by affirming that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.

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