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Now Is the Time for Change: Reframing Diversity Planning at Land-Grant Universities

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Now Is the Time for Change: Reframing Diversity Planning at Land-Grant Universities

Abstract

Using policy discourse analysis, the author analyzed 21 diversity action plans issued at 20 U.S. land-grant universities over a 5-year period to identify images of diversity and the problems and solutions represented in these documents. Dominant discourses of access, disadvantage, the marketplace, and democracy were most prominent in conveying images of diverse individuals. These discourses shape individuals' ways of thinking and acting, meaning these discursive practices produce (at times competing) possibilities and constrain, even conceal, alternatives. These findings are discussed and recommendations are delineated for how Extension personnel might reframe diversity efforts.

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Background and Significance

Congress passed the Morrill Act in 1862, creating a new type of university. These land-grant universities were based on the ideas that U.S. higher education should be open to all, provide liberal and practical education, and prepare the citizenry for the U.S. labor market (Campbell, 1995; McDowell, 2001). Dedicated to teaching, research, and public service, these land-grant universities continue to be recognized as educational leaders and many have joined the ranks of the nation's most distinguished public research universities (Johnson, 1999).

Yet the institution "with its emphasis on 'equal access'" (Johnson, 1999, p. 222) faces a challenge: not all sectors of society have benefited equally (NASULGC, 1999). For instance, historically, Black farmers have been excluded from USDA and land-grant programs (Schor, 1992); and women have been (and remain) under-represented in agricultural components of Extension (Hassanein, 1999; Hine & Cheney, 2000). Further, Ewert, and Rice (1994) observe that "Cooperative Extension's traditional, white, rural clientele is aging and the rapidly growing, ethnically diverse population remains under-represented in its programs." Academic fundamentalism may contribute to these inequities in 1862 land-grant universities; the "gate-keeping function of a 'research-based approach' . . . may have unintended consequences of excluding diversity" (Hassel, 2004).

A commitment to access that is "inclusive of talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity" (*Now is the time*, 2005), coupled with demands for the land-grant institution to increase its multicultural competence and effectiveness, has contributed to the elevation of diversity as an educational priority (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). In response, land-grant universities, and their respective colleges and Extension offices, initiate diversity planning and assessment and generate *diversity action plans* to increase access and retention of historically underrepresented populations, improve campus climate and inter-group relations, incorporate diversity into the curriculum and program design, and utilize diversity as a resource for an enriched and engaged academic environment (Ewert & Rice, 1994; Hurtado, 1992; Ibarra, 2001; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000).

These university policies codify an institution-wide commitment to influence and determine decisions to strengthen, enhance, promote, and support coordinated and integrated diversity

efforts, applied to students, faculty, and staff. Despite the proliferation of recommendations, initiatives, and strategies, codified in diversity action plans, many segments of the national population continue to be grossly underrepresented on campus and under-served, and the capacity and effectiveness of land-grant universities to function inclusively in a multicultural world remains under-achieved (Ibarra, 2001; Ingram, 2005; Valverde, 1998).

Purpose

In order to enhance understanding of these diversity policy documents, how they contribute to producing a particular cultural reality, and how they may compromise the achievement of their own goals, the study described here sought to identify and analyze discourses circulating in diversity action plans. These policy documents are a primary means by which land-grant universities advance recommendations regarding their professed commitment to inclusive access and an equitable climate for *all* members of the campus community.

As Schauber and Castania (2001) observe, diversity policies provide a "vision for change" and "the language and goals that can guide our system." As such, diversity action plans not only record and reflect organizational culture (e.g., as an archival document), but also construct particular realities for members of the institution (e.g., construct power relations and re/produce dominant ideologies) (Allan, 2003). This is explicitly notable when programs and policies are designed "from a dominant cultural perspective, which does not work for most of our under-represented cultural groups" (Schauber & Castania, 2001).

Thus, an analysis of the discourses circulating in diversity policies queries and illuminates "which groups or institutions have preferential access to various kinds of knowledge, which groups or institutions set the criteria for the very definition or legitimization of knowledge, and which are specially involved in the distribution of knowledge--or precisely in the limitation of knowledge in society" (van Dijk, 2002, p. 88). Well-intentioned attempts to create a more inclusive institutional culture may unwittingly reinforce practices that support exclusion and inequity. The use of assumptive concepts in diversity planning policies may limit a policy's effectiveness and actually reinscribe the very problem the policy seeks to alleviate (Allan, 2003; Bacchi, 1999; Ball, 1990; Scheurich, 1994).

Defining Diversity

"Diversity" is a term often used but without simple definition. In their review of diversity scholarship, Linnehan and Konrad (1999) identified four themes:

1. Diversity broadly defined as individual differences among people,
2. Diversity rationales devoid of "the difficult, emotionally charged issues of stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination" (p. 400),
3. Definitions that strategically maintain distance from affirmative action debate or contribute to negative views of affirmative action, and
4. Concern with "backlash against diversity programs" and subsequent minimizing of "the sense of loss experienced by privilege groups" (p. 401).

The predominant usage of diversity is often the first: defined demographically, listing multiple identity statuses (e.g., race-ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion). Yet these identity categories are typically without definition, leaving diversity to mean difference that is reflective of how those who are socially dominant define reality for themselves and *others* (see Jones, 1996; Yanow, 2003; West & Fenstermaker, 1995 for elaboration on the social construction of difference). Diversity is a socially constructed concept, "into which 'others' are now being added" (Ellsworth, 1999, p. 35).

For this article, my use of the word "diversity" is as an all-inclusive category representing (subsuming) numerous identity groups; this is consistent with its definition in diversity action plans (differences in age, ethnicity, gender, race, culture, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, class, and physical ability). Notably, while the policies delineate multiple identity statuses, and some add that diversity can be viewed more broadly, incorporating differences in thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and personalities, the attention in the plans (e.g., their descriptions of problems and recommendations) focuses primarily on race and gender, and secondarily on sexual orientation and disability, with little to no discussion of the other identity statuses defined in the introduction to the plans.

Some scholars offer a critique of the term "diversity," suggesting alternatives (e.g., Bensimon's 2005 discussion of three cognitive frames--diversity, deficit, equity--and her argument that individuals must shift from deficit and diversity toward equity thinking); however, it is beyond the scope of this article to engage this analysis. Thus, while acknowledging the limitations of the existing conception of diversity, I adopt the term as explicated in the policies.

Diversity Planning

The origins of diversity planning can be traced to institutional policies of the 1960s and 1970s on equal opportunity and affirmative action that considered race, along with other factors, in assembling a diverse student body of varying talents, backgrounds, and perspectives. These laws and policies, along with changing demographics in the U.S., have contributed to the construction of diversity as a social phenomenon requiring institutional attention.

Pluralism and globalization rose to the top of the agenda in the late 1980s for numerous university presidents and system chancellors who, in addition to identity-specific commissions (i.e. women's commissions), convened Commissions on Pluralism into the 1990s (e.g., University of Maine System, 1989). Similarly, the Cooperative Extension System engaged committees in strategic diversity planning and published several reports during this time, as shown by these selected examples:

- 1988 Organized the Council on Diversity
- 1989 Established "Emphasis on Diversity"
- 1990 Published two reports: *Valuing Diversity and Celebrating Diversity* and *Pathway to Diversity*
- 1991 Released *Commitment to Diversity and Pluralism*

In 1999, the Change Agent States for Diversity (CASD) project was initiated by Cooperative Extension. The goal of this project was to "build the capacity of land-grant universities to function inclusively and effectively in a multicultural world" and "set standards and implement a vision for supporting healthy, thriving, culturally diverse communities through Extension, research, and academic programs" (Ingram, 2005). More recently, Cooperative Extension published *Pathways to Diversity Reaffirmed* (2003) to intensify its commitment to diversity and codify recommendations for change.

Land-grant universities continue to generate their own diversity policies--documents that serve as a plan of action, codify "an institution-wide commitment to enhancing diversity and vigorous leadership" (Green, 1989, p. 7). Chang (2005) echoes Green, more than 15 years later, when he states that "the impact [of diversity] is likely to be strongest when campuses intervene by coordinating a set of mutually supportive and reinforcing experiences" (also Ewert & Rice, 1994).

Methods

The data for this article come from a larger study investigating the questions: (a) what predominant images, problems, and solutions related to diversity are represented in diversity action plans? and (b) what discourses are employed to shape these images, problems, and solutions? I employed Allan's (2003) method of *policy discourse analysis* to investigate how university diversity policies discursively frame diversity and what reality is produced by diversity action plans. A hybrid methodology, policy discourse analysis focuses on written documents; it is a strategy for examining policy discourses and the ways they come together to make particular perspectives more prominent than others (Allan, 2003).

According to Ball, "discourses construct certain possibilities for thought. They order and combine words in particular ways and exclude or displace other combinations" (in Bacchi, 1999, p. 41); discourses then provide "frameworks or ways of viewing issues" (Bacchi, 1999, p. 40). Thus, my use of policy discourse analysis serves to illuminate how these texts (diversity action plans) construct social relationships and re/produce dominant ideologies (and conceal alternatives) regarding inequities in higher education.

For this sample, I screened 50 U.S. "1862 land-grant" universities (one per state), seeking institutions that had a diversity committee, charged by a senior administrator (e.g., president, provost), which had developed at least one university-wide diversity action plan issued within a recent 5-year period (1999-2004). This search yielded 21 diversity action plans issued at 20 U.S. land-grant universities over a 5-year period (see Appendix A). I retrieved these policies from the Internet sites of each institution (with two exceptions, from which I acquired paper copies of the policies and then scanned these to generate electronic copies). All documents were loaded into NVivo, computer software designed for qualitative data analysis, and then analyzed using line-by-line coding.

The process of data analysis was informed by established methods of coding and categorizing (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify broad themes and predominant images of diversity. Initially, I conducted line-by-line analysis of each report in reply to the research questions. Once all documents were coded, I used NVivo to generate "reports" for each category--images, problems, and solutions--across all diversity action plans. These reports were then analyzed using both deductive and inductive processes, which served as the second phase of coding; in this phase, the codes assigned were both descriptive and interpretive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, an examination of the coded data for conceptual patterns and linkages illuminated how coded text reflected and shaped discourses circulating within the scripts and how

these discourses produced particular identity positions.

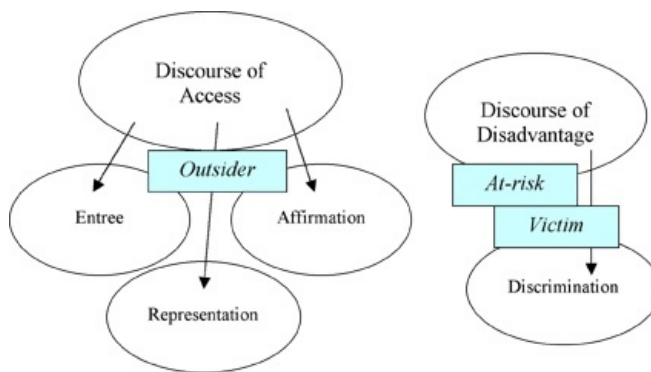
Findings and Interpretations

The goal of the inquiry was to understand how university diversity policies frame ideas about diversity and what realities are produced by the discourses carried in these documents. The investigation of the 21 diversity action plans examined:

- Problems and solutions related to diversity described in diversity action plans;
- Predominant images of diversity that emerged from the diversity action plans; and
- The discourses employed to shape these problems, solutions, and images.

Analysis of 21 diversity action plans revealed a dominant discourse of access, evident in attention to and improvement of recruitment, retention, and advancement practices to enhance entrée and representation, and create a campus culture affirming of diverse individuals (Figure 1). Three distinct strands were evident within the access discourse: a discourse of entrée, clear in calls for diverse persons to be permitted to enter and participate in the university; a discourse of representation, apparent in attention to greater involvement, full participation, and *increased* retention and advancement; and a discourse of affirmation, visible in calls for diverse persons to be valued, welcomed, and celebrated by the campus culture. These discourses coalesce to produce the diverse individual as an outsider to the university, particular arenas within the institution, and the dominant culture.

Figure 1.
Discourses of Access and Disadvantage

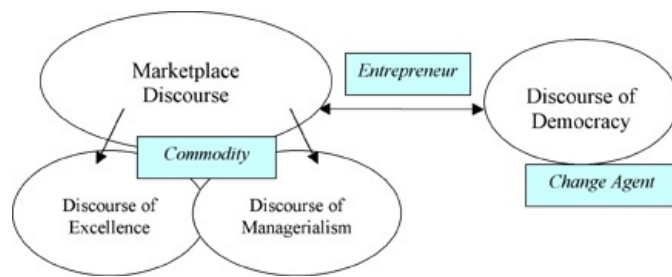


Analysis also revealed descriptions of diverse individuals as at-risk for educational failure before entering institutions of higher education and remaining at-risk once a member of the university--at-risk for educational failure, non-promotion, no advancement, no tenure, attrition, discrimination, and harassment, among other things. These characterizations are made visible by a discourse of disadvantage, along with a discursive strand of discrimination that constructs the diverse individual as an at-risk victim (Figure 1).

Framed in this way, differences in educational outcomes are generally attributed to lack of academic preparation, deficiencies in skills, and inadequate support. The diverse individual, constituted as at-risk before and after entering the university, is also dependent on the university--represented by an administration that is predominantly white and male--for access to and success in higher education, as well as for remediation, skill development, safety, and support.

Further analysis revealed a marketplace discourse, characterized by fierce competition and rapidly changing market conditions and the need for multicultural competence in the global marketplace. Two distinct strands emerged within this discourse: a discourse of excellence, evident in a focus on success and reputation, quality and performance; and a discourse of managerialism, apparent in the emphasis on effectiveness, accountability, monitoring of costs and effects, and quality assurance (Figure 2). These discourses contribute to shaping the diverse individual as a commodity, possessing economic value that can enhance the university's status, and an object to be managed.

Figure 2.
Discourses of Marketplace and Democracy



Finally, analysis of diversity action plans revealed a discourse of democracy, evident in calls for inclusion and opportunity, civic responsibility, commitment to equity and equality, and open, participatory, and deliberative dialogue (Figure 2). This discourse contributes to shaping a change-agent identity, visible in individual and collective efforts to produce social change and equality as a result. The discourse of democracy emerges as an alternative to the marketplace discourse; however, the dominance and greater weight of the marketplace discourse undermines the systemic change-making possibilities of the discourse of democracy. Instead, out of the tension evident between the discourses of democracy and the marketplace, images of the change agent give way to images of entrepreneurial endeavors: individuals encouraged and rewarded for initiative and the development of innovative programs that ensure the university a competitive edge in the marketplace.

Discussion and Implications

Various university personnel, including Extension leadership and managers, draft and implement diversity action plans "to build the capacity of land-grant universities to function inclusively and effectively in a multicultural world" (Ingram, 2005). Toward this end, the Change Agent States for Diversity (CASD) project was initiated by Cooperative Extension to support greater cultural diversity in land-grant universities by providing technical assistance and training to participating state. In this section, the findings reported above are discussed and some recommendations are delineated for how Extension administrators might use the findings of this research to improve their work.

Become Informed About Privilege and Power

Land-grant universities, and specifically Cooperative Extension, strive to open access and increase representation of racially and culturally diverse populations; yet the ability to recruit and retain diverse persons is fraught with challenges. Inextricably linked to the problem of access are inadequate resources to invest in effective recruitment and retention efforts. Predominant solutions articulated in the plans, made visible by the commingling of a discourse of managerialism with the discourses of access and disadvantage, include the development of risk factor models and criteria for improved identification of "diverse pools" to mobilize recruitment and enhance the delivery of support services.

Yet the problems of access and disadvantage remain located in the diverse individuals, namely in their deficiencies and how to compensate for these or accommodate them, on their disadvantaged status and how to support them. The policies generally fail to identify privileging conditions and practices that advantage some (namely white males) and marginalize others; they fail to question what produces a *risky* institution for some more than others.

Thus, Extension personnel, and in particular those with responsibility for diversity efforts, could benefit from reading, training, and discussion on privilege and power. Such education and training should not divert attention from the material realities of oppression and disadvantage, but rather extend discussion to include awareness of the privileging conditions that construct both oppressive and empowering realities for individuals. As Hu-DeHart (2000) critically observes, until the university interrogates its privilege, "the diversity project as we know it on our campuses [will remain] complicit in perpetuating the racial order as historically constructed" (p. 42).

Be Critical of How Documents Are Constituted

Through awareness, Extension personnel can consider how their work could result in discursive shifts, meaning they may call upon alternative discourses. Unfortunately, this is not as simple as rewriting policy to replace certain words with others, such as searching a document for "disadvantage" and replacing it with "equality" in order to shift from a deficit to an equity focus. However, individuals can be more informed and critical of the ways in which such documents are discursively constituted. For instance, a discussion about an institution's commitment to diversity action versus equity planning may be a useful start, for a focus on equity can shift attention away from individual differences and deficiencies to institutional practices and the production of unequal educational outcomes (Bensimon, 2005).

Consider the Relationship Between Stated Problems and Solutions

Extension personnel are invited to examine the (in)congruence between diversity problems and

solutions. The research described here revealed a striking lack of relationship between many problems and solutions. For instance, the problems made visible by a discourse of discrimination are harassment, bias, racism, sexism, homophobia; solutions include to offer support services to those who are victims, deliver training and education, and facilitate inter-group dialogue. These solutions are important, but they fail to sufficiently address the "source" of the problem: the individuals or systems that are discriminatory, racist, sexist, and homophobic. Consideration of the relationship between stated problems and solutions can engage a process through which practitioners can question assumptions about a problem, what Stacey (1992) refers to as "double-loop learning." Such a "cognitive shift" (Bensimon, 2005) may inspire discussions about different solutions and deploy the tactical use of discourse.

Disaggregate the Problem

Discussions about "the discrepancy between shifting demographics and current practice" (Ewert & Rice, 1994) typically lump together multiple identity-based groups under the heading of "diversity" and assign concerns to all. Solutions, in turn, are assumed to apply to everyone as well. Disaggregating the problem enables Extension leaders to see the patterns of inequalities that exist and examine unequal outcomes (Bensimon, 2005). Discussing the problem in this way, enhanced through the display and analysis of disaggregated data, "can intensify learning, confirm or refute untested hypotheses, challenge preconceived ideas, motivate further inquiry, and provide the impetus for change" (Bensimon, 2005, p. 106).

Embrace Multiple Perspectives

Listen to (hear) all voices; learn (tell) the whole story. Diversity action plans are authored by institutional agents (e.g., administrators, faculty, and experts such as contracted consultants), and thus these documents tell one (part of the) story. Multiple perspectives exist regarding the challenges faced when organizations build their multicultural capacity (Ewert & Rice, 1994); yet the university's narrative, disseminated through institutional policy and the university newswire, can give the impression that one perspective is universally applicable (Hassel, 2004). Additional sources of knowledge can be identified, and other voices should be heard. Extension leaders can use their positional authority to facilitate dialogue--not to help "us" learn from "them," but instead to bring multiple worldviews to bear on the diversity problem through a "critical, balanced, and fair-minded approach" (Hassel, 2004).

For instance, personnel can engage inter-group dialogue about the construction of identity and difference, and interrogate dominant conceptions of communities as inclusive, welcoming, and friendly environments. The discourse of affirmative that gives rise to calls for a community of inclusion sustains the insider/outsider binary in dominant views of community and unwittingly reinforces practices that support exclusion and inequity. For diversity practitioners, this demands a move away "from the certainty and arrogance of knowing to the uncertainty and humbleness of not knowing" (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2003, p. 353) to explore the ambiguities, contradictions, and tensions inherent in identities and communities. This involves negotiating understanding, attending to silences, and will likely generate "moments of discomfort . . . as we step out of familiar and into unfamiliar story lines" (Huber et al., 2003, p. 359). This shift in thinking challenges practitioners to "unpack" diversity, identity, and community, "to discover their possibilities and limitations" (Baez, 2002, p. 152). For then, we might be able to "eradicate the punishing sense of difference" that produces and sustains inequality (Yanow, 2003, p. 228).

Summary

The investigation of discourses circulating in diversity action plans described here identified dominant discourses of access, disadvantage, the marketplace, and democracy as most prominent in conveying images of diverse individuals. These discourses contribute to shaping perceptions of diversity and constructing particular social identities for diverse individuals to assume. Discursive practices, carried by diversity action plans, produce individuals' ways of thinking and acting, meaning these discursive practices construct (at times competing) possibilities and constrain, even conceal, alternatives.

In sum, the aim of the investigation was to increase practitioners' awareness of the conditions that produce particular diversity discourses, how some discourses both constrain and liberate, and how diversity action plans, in their current form, may (unwittingly) compromise the achievement of their own goals. Further, it is to be hoped that the inquiry will inspire new questions and further research about discourses of diversity, how policy discourses come together to make particular perspectives more prominent than others, and how these discourses contribute to re/producing particular cultural realities at land-grant universities, including Cooperative Extension and the constituents they serve.

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Appendix A: Sample Documents

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