

Bloomfield College Greater Expectations Institute Report

The Strengths of Diversity: A Pathway to Excellence

Introduction

America requires much from its institutions of higher learning. From their inception, colleges and universities have been charged with many tasks: cultivating leaders, creating professionals, providing a creative base of knowing for scientific and artistic discovery, generating new ideas and theories, transmitting cultural knowledge, grappling with humanistic issues, redressing legacies of discrimination, strengthening democracy, creating new knowledge. The liberal arts have provided fertile ground for accomplishing these tasks, and Bloomfield College, in the tradition of liberal arts colleges, has provided hope and promise in this direction. A truly liberal education prepares its students to live responsible, productive, and creative lives and allows them to function effectively, and even thrive, in a dramatically changing and complex world. The liberal arts at Bloomfield have provided us a forum to prepare students for their chosen professions and to live lives of practical and responsible citizenship. Because liberal learning helps us become more deeply human, in all of our beauty and complexity, it embraces individual identity as it seeks to assist us in finding common ground as human beings.

For over 136 years, Bloomfield College has offered educational opportunities in the liberal arts and the professions to immigrants and first-generation college students. Nearly twenty years ago Bloomfield College embraced an increasing diversity in a revision of its mission, which focuses on *preparing students for personal, academic, and professional excellence in a multicultural and global society*. We now have achieved structural, compositional, and critical diversity. More than 50 countries of birth are represented in our student body of 2300. The student population is comprised of 51 percent Black, 18 percent Hispanic, 15 percent White, 4 percent Asian, and 10 percent other or undisclosed. Half of our students are over 25, and 70 percent are women. Diversity extends through the college: 42% of our staff, 39% of our management and administration team, and 27% of our faculty represent minority groups. Our commitment to diversity is unparalleled in the region and, indeed, quite rare in the United States. We have achieved this at a time when difference still divides the nation and the world.

As we have grown and matured as a college, we have come to more deeply understand and value the rich resources of heritage, experience and perspective in our community. Indeed, ***we have begun to view our diversity as our strongest asset, and have realized that it provides us a unique pathway to pursue institutional excellence.*** The Greater Expectations Institute has helped us to clarify and articulate this new sense of purpose. We embrace our mission in a new way, as the essential foundation for a more inclusive and effective model of educational excellence in the 21st century.

Affirming Our Direction – Applying the Principles of the GEI

The national discourse on student learning is challenging colleges and universities to re-envision teaching and learning, and to raise new questions about student gains from their college experiences. Recently the discourse has refocused on the issues of access and equity in American higher education, offering new definitions and implications. Brown, Bartee et al. (2005) note that while the increase in minority representation has been impressive since the civil rights movement; and access to college is seemingly an accomplished goal of a majority of institutions in the country, the level of systemic inequities in the higher education community is at an all time high. More colleges are enrolling more students deemed

unprepared for college without carefully examining institutional resources to ensure their successful completion of a college education. Consequently, the services and programs to support the diverse needs of these students warrant considerable reevaluation to understand their true benefit to student retention and degree completion. *The Greater Expectations Report* (2002) calls for a dramatic reinvention of undergraduate education to move beyond access, and focus on a renewed commitment to enrich the collective learning experiences of today's college students who are becoming increasingly diverse with respect to life experiences, learning styles and capacities prior to college entry.

The Greater Expectations Report urges American colleges and universities to rethink teaching and learning practices. The document reprioritizes the value of liberal education, and its relevance to educating 21st century college students. The literature strongly recommends that 21st century learners master intellectual and practical skills, become informed of their world in local, regional, national and global contexts, and assume responsibility for their personal actions and civic values. The report raises the higher education community's attention to the necessity for colleges and universities to take purposeful actions to develop learner centered communities where learning is an inclusive community responsibility and a reciprocal, active, engaging exchange between students and educators.

The challenges and recommendations presented by the Greater Expectations document are of critical importance to Bloomfield College in its renewed commitment to its mission and its developing initiative to use the strengths of its diversity as a pathway to excellence. The college is committed to providing educational opportunities for students traditionally denied access to higher education. Over the years, the college has established several initiatives to address the needs of its diverse student population; however, the *Greater Expectations Report* commands the institution's attention to determine whether present practices are appropriate to the expectations of students served, and offers a holistic foundation for the learning experiences of students and educators. The report challenges the college's leadership to exact a clearer definition and sense of purpose for its mission; and to refine its efforts to embrace and infuse diversity in the educational practices at the institution.

The College is challenged with a first year retention rate of 70%, a second year retention rate of 52% and a six year graduate rate of 28%. These pressures have forced a rethinking which invokes questions about: institutional mission, institutional effectiveness with respect to population served in the 21st century; the effectiveness of the college's teaching and learning philosophies and curriculum/co-curriculum; and the commitment to its competencies as authentic institutional learning goals.

Serving the Already Underserved

Changes in the student population at Bloomfield College over several years indicate a need to reassess the institution's level of preparedness for these new transformations. Bloomfield's unique mission, which focuses on providing access to those traditionally denied entry to higher education, situates the institution at the vanguard of those institutions reflecting national student demographic trends. The college is the only private liberal arts undergraduate institution in NJ in which more than 70 percent of the total student population is minority and first-generation college students. The college is unique as a private institution with a concerted vision and mission to educate students who have traditionally been denied access to higher education. Moreover, the present agenda affords opportunities for Bloomfield to be among the first private institutions in NJ to carefully examine the impact of holistic learner centered pedagogy on the retention and graduation of minority and first-generation college students. As an institution, we must commit to examination of who our students are, how they perceive their educational experience; and broadened our expertise to enrich their learning experiences on campus.

One of the institution's critical responsibilities over the next three years is to conduct an internal assessment, and unveil answers to critical questions similar to the following:

- How is the College's mission reflected in its cultural practices and values?
- How does the college define itself?
- Who are the students, faculty and staff at the college?
- What is the institution's niche?
- What are the institution's long-term goals?
- What are the institution's aspirations?
- Where does the institution fit into the NJ higher education landscape in the next decade?

These fundamental questions and their answers can establish a strong foundation for the college as it considers a new paradigm to carry out its educational priorities to meet the diverse needs of its increasingly diverse student population. Bloomfield College has the potential to become the most effective and successful institution in NJ to educate a student body that reflects the 21st century global community. The institution's two decades of experience with the changing student population in NJ serves as an advantage and resource as Bloomfield repositions itself to become the model for other private institutions in their efforts to adjust to new realities.

Educational Practices in the 21st Century

The College has learned from its recent work with the Bildner Foundation Diversity Initiative over the past three years that the education of 21st century college students requires educators to take a personal journey within to examine how their life experiences, and their students life experiences, affect their approach to their work, both within and outside the classroom. We learned from the work of Kuh (in press) that institutions should live by a mission that permeates core behaviors, values, and actions of all member of a college community, and has observable outcomes in student teaching and learning. He further notes that the environment must be conducive to the institution's learner-centered agenda; and pathways for ensuring students' success within and outside the classroom must be unobstructed and free of barriers that hinder learning. He urges a commitment to research and the use of data for institutional improvement and shared community responsibility and accountability for educational quality and student success. Kuh's (2005) recent work on effective educational practices implies that institutions of the 21st century should: establish high academic standards and expectations balanced by appropriate support and resources; establish forum for active and collaborative learning engagements; establish structured and informal opportunities for faculty-student interactions; establish and enriching educational experiences infusing diversity and service/experiential learning engagement; and provide a supportive campus environment for students appropriate to the diversity of needs and day-to-day experiences.

Based on the college's demographic transformation over the past twenty years, the literature from Greater Expectations, and the recent research of George Kuh, Bloomfield is challenged with the following priorities for consideration of the next five years:

- To use diversity as a resource to reenergize students, faculty, staff, administrators to engage in meaningful exchanges, to enrich their personal and professional lives, to inform the practice of teaching and learning, and to create an inclusive college community.
- To reinvent the curriculum and co-curriculum to achieve transformational learning within and outside the classroom, using an understanding of its students' contexts for learning as its foundation.
- To reinforce the education of students as a collective community responsibility.
- To equip the faculty with the skills, understandings and expectations to assure that every student can learn at a high level
- To redesign assessment strategies to fit the new teaching and learning paradigm adopted by the institution to meet the changing diverse needs of 21st century college students.

Through the GEI Project, we will restructure curriculum and co-curriculum to align with the transforming learning needs and styles of today's college students, and the standards of teaching and learning expectations to challenge faculty and students to reach new levels of educational excellence. The GEI Project will challenge all members of the college community to analyze their roles. Programs and services will undergo a careful audit to reposition the points of contact with students and to maximize their effectiveness for education and student retention. The college will profit from the GEI Project's commitment to ongoing assessment and will introduce new approaches to examining college cultures, campus diversity and inclusiveness, staff and students' experiences; and the college's effectiveness in carrying out its educational mission and purpose.

Project Plan: What are we doing when we are doing our best?

The goal of our initiative is to understand and more fully embrace the opportunities our diversity provides to promote greater understanding, definition and sense of purpose to our work. We will emphasize a diversity – inspired agenda, regarding students as an asset and building on their learning and experience across the college in the work of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. We see this as a significant pathway to institutional excellence.

Driving Forces

- Middle States Mandates for Assessment, Learning Outcomes and Mission fulfillment and success
- Bildner success and need for continued work
- Mission commitment and pride

A Three Phase Approach

We propose that Phase I of our project is a data generation and utilization plan focused on a mission-inspired agenda on diversity. Its purpose is to inform the college community of existing circumstances and to foster inquiry into meaningful change. Phase II, a second, more discreet approach, will take advantage of at least 6 current initiatives that will either move our agenda forward or allow us to infuse some student learning focused elements into the projects. We refer to this approach as utilizing current **strategic moments**. Phase III, concurrent with Phase II, will enhance the collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs to infuse our work with new understandings of the implications of diversity for “inclusive excellence” and a holistic approach to teaching and learning.

Phase I Data Collection

The data project is a primary strategy. What is really happening in the institution? We want to take a hard look in so that we may go out. The data generation strategy will galvanize interest in what we want to accomplish. To answer the question, “What are we doing when we are doing our best?” and to realize our diversity agenda in a more substantive proposal, we will: a) review existing data sources and determine what we have and need and b) perform an institution-wide inventory. This will also assist us in preparing for Middle States midterm review and in addressing the deficiencies identified in that report. The inventory will also provide baseline information for us to continue to build on the work of the Bildner Diversity Project and move us toward a more student learning focus.

We will need buy-in for this task, but we think that the community is ready for such work. There is a great deal of pride in our mission. Faculty members want more development opportunities focused on teaching and learning. We already have a very strong practice of Student Affairs/Academic Affairs

collaboration. There is tremendous frustration regarding data integrity, which our research effort will help to resolve. We also have the benefit and energy of new senior level leadership at the College.

Data Collection Plan

Two-fold data collection process

- a. Review internal and existing data sources and information and develop a plan for restructure, dissemination and utilization (2005-2006)
- b. Decide on the appropriate external Inventory (Equity and/or inclusion excellence) (Fall, 2005)

Immediate outcome (2005-2006)

1. Community-wide protocol on the use of data for planning, development and implementation purposes.
2. Resultant changes in teaching that are more directed by faculty through the data results. They will be more informed and able to lead change in their own teaching.

Long term and next phase outcome (2006-2007)

1. Review of General Education with Mission and student learning foci.
2. Review of the appropriateness and implementation of the 7 core competencies

Phase II Strategic Moments

The second approach is a more discreet plan to capitalize on current **strategic moments**. There are six initiatives that have already been approved by various college constituents which provide unique and critical opportunities to assess and to “plant the seed” for evolving the student learning agenda and to begin to reverse the deficiency model approach to “serving” our students.

1. Learning Community Block (LCB)

a. LCB First Year Program

The faculty who will be teaching this program have agreed to develop the block using the DEEP Assessment protocols. In addition, they will develop a student co-inquiry of teaching and learning with the student representatives in the GEI.

b. LCB Pre-Law Major

The faculty responsible for the development of this curriculum is very interested in creating the program as a LCB, which includes student affairs collaboration in the planning stages. Utilizing the DEEP assessment would be informative.

The work from both LCB's will be reported out to the faculty at various meetings. The LCB for first year will be a progress and results oriented report and the LCB for the pre-law major will be for approval seeking.

2. Faculty Hires

The College will be undergoing 7 separate faculty searches which represent 10% of the faculty. The VPAA and Division Chairs have already planned to create a workshop (briefing) for search committees on how to do a faculty search. The intention is to begin inserting into job descriptions and the search process new institutional expectations of faculty in line with our project, the valuing of working in a diverse institution and a commitment to learning centered teaching. The GEI team and the Division Chairs will develop the content for the “briefing”.

3. Orientation for Faculty

We will use these opportunities to discuss the mission, present data and provide expectations regarding teaching and learning. This will occur in three separate steps.

- a. The first will be a pilot orientation with adjunct faculty in the Education Division in August, 2005 (already planned).

- b. The second will be an orientation with the larger adjunct population (120) in January, 2006
- c. The third will be an orientation for the newly hired full time faculty (June, 2006)

4. Faculty Development

There will be a change in faculty leadership in the Teaching and Learning Program. The faculty and student from the GEI team and the VPAA will share this project with the new coordinator. The VPAA also plans to discuss the GEI project with the chair of the faculty development committee.

5. Student Development Model

The Center for Student Leadership and Engagement was newly established this year. The plan is to connect the work from the project with the coordinator of the center. The point is to provide the student initiative from this project to have a legitimate home within the college structure as well as within the student government structure. Listed below is a current initiative upon which the GEI will be placed.

**Peer advisor connection team with first year residence halls

6. Student-led Initiatives

- ❖ Co-inquiry role of the student in curriculum development
- ❖ Connecting classroom materials with co-curricular events and student organizations

Other initiatives

- Title III initiatives
- Online interactive tutorials
- Start Out Smart Program
- SAGE Program (Student access to graduate education)

Phase III Student Affairs and Academic Affairs Collaborations in the Context of Bildner Diversity Project and DEEP Criteria for Effective Educational Practice

Background

The Bildner Foundation Diversity initiative, with its emphasis on “faculty/staff learning for curricular and co-curricular change,” helped to create contexts for Bloomfield College to embed its diversity work more deeply into institutional structures, programs, and practices to reach its goal of “inclusive excellence.” Building on the skills, resources, life experiences and insights of Bloomfield students, the Student Affairs and Academic Affairs divisions of the college have made a commitment to collaborate in the development of curricular and co-curricular programs. These programs are designed to connect to students’ lives, and build from them to create learning environments in which students can thrive because they are able to connect new ideas and skills to the knowledge and abilities they already possess. Programs will be shaped to address students’ differing levels of skill. This collaboration is resulting in a more efficient use of resources, enriched classroom environments, better attended co-curricular programs, and a more coherent learning environment for students.

Practices Leading to Inclusive Excellence

The collaborative work already begun between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs will be inspired in its next phase by five educational practices identified by the NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice. Those practices include: providing academic challenge, engaging in active and collaborative learning, enhancing student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and creating supportive campus environments. We are embracing these practices in the context of SA/AA collaboration and a foundation forged from the Bildner work of identifying the richly diverse experiences of all members of the college community to develop new programs and deepen the effectiveness of those that already exist. The five practices can serve as goals as well as measures of programs.

We can employ the DEEP Five Practices to evaluate and strengthen several SA/AA program collaboration areas, which include:

- Engaging in ongoing SA/AA collaborations for campus life and learning
- Fostering future General Education revision
- Planning and implementing program review and curriculum development
- Revitalizing the Honors Program
- Expanding and strengthening the Study Abroad Program
- Enhancing and more effectively utilizing academic support programs
- Further developing service learning, internships and experiential learning
- Connecting students' college experiences to career and/or graduate school admission

The Process

The DEEP Five Practices will be used to evaluate each area identified above, as well as the Learning Community blocks, where appropriate. Additional evaluation tools may be relevant in some areas. Results will be used to inform new program development and to strengthen existing programs. Our goal is to employ the rich context of SA/AA collaboration that values the diversity of faculty, staff and students and utilize the resources this diversity provides to create and inform educational programs and practices that enable students to thrive at Bloomfield College and to attain personal and professional excellence.

Conclusion

Many of the initiatives mentioned have already been approved and community members are engaged in their work. Our new emphasis is recasting this work in new ways. We believe the buy-in for our overarching initiative will be strong because it grows from our mission and is embedded in the ongoing work of the institution. Our new emphasis on the connection between inclusion and excellence has its roots in and extends the work of the Bildner Diversity Project. The data collection phase of the project serves the needs of a growing emphasis on institutional assessment and helps to prepare us for an upcoming Middle States review in 2007. Most importantly, recognizing the strength of diversity as a pathway to excellence profoundly deepens and broadens our commitment to our students, their learning, and the power of an inclusive community to inspire justice, excellence, and the healing needed for a sorely troubled 21st century world.

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