Understanding and Activism on Campus Diversity: Challenges and Unique Promise

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Activism

Ariana’s perspective

Becoming Activated

- In 2017 the N-word was written into the cork board of one of the residence halls of TMU. At the time I hadn’t known how to interpret the situation. College was the first time that I had any real experience with racism. This was not the first incident of racism or microaggression that I had experienced on campus, but the first time that it was written down for all to see.
- In 2018 I joined the Black Student Union to help African American students find a place to fit into on TMU’s campus.
- In 2019 a friend of mine was experiencing bullying on TMU’s cheerleading team that involved race and discrimination on various levels. A video came out of one of the cheerleaders on the team saying the N-word on their social media. My friend brought public attention to the bullying and the racially insensitive language used by the cheerleader. From there an institutional trial was held to charge either my friend or the other cheerleader with bullying. My friend was charged with bullying. It was later appealed.

Being an Activist

- UC, NKU, and TMU teamed up to create a group called USR (United, Strength, Resistance) to bring awareness to the racial tension on our own campuses. We analyzed our universities’ anti-discrimination policies and brought attention to weaknesses in the policies and where they can be improved. TMU held a presentation discussing these issues where student life, the Deans of the College of Business, the College of Arts & Sciences, and Nursing, and the Academic Provost were present.

Caitlin’s perspective: As an instructor and advisor, I’d witnessed the impact of this incident on my students. I attended the meeting, and was impressed with Ariana’s leadership, as well as the clearly identified needs stated by the students for ways we could improve the campus.

Academic Research

- Caitlin’s perspective: I saw a real opportunity to design a project around Ariana’s activism and institutional need. I’m a big believer in research as a high impact practice, and an act of empowerment, and find mentoring student research to be personally fulfilling as well.
- Ariana’s perspective: I began exploring how these issues may relate to African American students over all college experience so I began meeting with Dr. Powell.

Psychological study

- We collaborated over the summer of 2019 to generate a research project exploring psychological factors impacting black students at TMU (self-esteem, support, black identity), and how involvement with student services, student activities, and athletics impacted those factors.
- Results: We had 42 students complete our survey, and found that involvement in student organizations and use of student services played an important role in black identity, self-esteem, and meaning and purpose.

Additional projects in the works

- We are working with a communications class to design a focus group that will target students of color and LGBTQ students.
- We are working on developing an institutional climate survey.

Challenges

- One challenge we both faced was carving out time to do this work!
- Caitlin’s perspective: One challenge I faced was identifying ‘pots’— which research work is academic, which is institutional? This could determine who owned the data, how it could be analyzed and presented, and how participants could be recruited. I was also aware of my positionality when it came to participant recruitment— I knew our project’s success was because Ariana personally recruited participants, and trust was vital to gaining student involvement.

Administrative Change

- Our Dean of Students created a grievance reporting portal.
- Thomas More’s Provost formed a Diversity Equity and Inclusion Task Force.
- Specific initiatives in progress: Plans to add diversity statement to webpage, clarify bias policy, consequences, and reporting procedure in student handbook and on the website, administrative support and training.

Challenges

- Caitlin’s perspective: I was glad to see a responsive administration that was prepared to ask challenging questions of itself. I was surprised by initial institutional concern from some about involving students in diversity research, as well as concern with institutional reputation and the messaging/framing of our research results, and as a pre-tenure faculty, I felt I had to tread more carefully.
- Ariana’s perspective: I was frustrated by a lack of transparency and a distrust in the administration because nothing was being communicated. Students don’t feel heard when issues are presented to the administration.

Professional Development

- Ariana’s perspective: Working with Dr. Powell I have been able to:
  - Build a robust network of professionals who genuinely care about my personal and academic success.
  - Gain more experience with SPSS, literature reviewing, and learning how to better navigate starting research.
  - Present at not only this conference but also plan to at MAUPRC
  - Develop skills around leadership, visualizing and executing long term plans, and time management

Caitlin’s perspective: If students are going to do diversity work, they need credit for their labor, and a way to legitimize their work—one way is through presentation at conferences. (This also helps my own professional development as well!)

Next Steps

Continuing to use activism to drive change

- Ariana has transitioned from Black Student Union to help revive Diversity & Inclusion club. Diversity & Inclusion is currently working to bring a Cultural Center on campus to be a physical representation of how much we value our diverse student population.

Continuing to use diversity research for professional development

- Ariana plans to present the results of the psychological study at MAUPRC, a regional psychology conference for undergraduate research.
- Caitlin has flagged additional student research projects identified for Fall

Continuing Challenges

- Ariana’s perspective: Proposing a cultural center to a school that has never had anything dedicated to diversity, equity, or inclusion until recently may receive a lot of push back.
- University wide budget cuts may bring down the priority level of the center.
- Since the cultural center is being spearheaded by students, the time management of each step may not be consistent, and sustainability is a challenge.
- Caitlin’s perspective: One continuing challenge I see is a lack of student voices in ‘the room where it happens’. I want to make sure our institution is responsive to student voices and student activism, and one path is through involving students more closely in task force work, strategic planning, institutional research, and academic research. I also want to make sure I have energy and capacity for ongoing efforts—this isn’t a ‘one and done’! Diversity work is a continual process.