Auditing Diversity

An interest in assessments is rising as officials strive to show they are committed

By Sarah Brown | MAY 15, 2016

When Davenport University, in Grand Rapids, Mich., conducted its first "diversity audit" six years ago, officials there made several encouraging discoveries. Among them: Most students — no matter their race, gender, or age — had a positive view of the university’s diversity and inclusion efforts. But faculty and staff members, particularly women and minorities, were skeptical. Many believed that employees who weren’t white men faced a glass ceiling, and that the university’s leadership was an old boys’ club.

A closer look at the data revealed that student responses weren’t all rosy, either. Many students said they weren’t familiar with Davenport’s policies and procedures on discrimination and harassment. Students who took classes online or at a satellite campus felt isolated. And others said they wanted more meaningful interaction with students who were different from themselves.
Who Sets a College's Diversity Agenda?

True diversity remains a struggle for many colleges. This special report looks at who actually sets a college’s diversity agenda, and what makes that agenda flourish or flop. These questions have taken on a special urgency as race-related protests have erupted on many campuses and as the nation’s population grows more diverse.

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Davenport has sizable diversity among its 8,400 students: 28 percent are from minority groups, more than half receive financial aid, and the average age of undergraduates is 28. Those figures made it especially important for officials to formally evaluate how they could better serve diverse needs, says Richard J. Pappas, Davenport’s president.

Nearly 2,500 students and employees across five of the university’s 11 campuses participated in a focus group, an online survey, or both during the spring of 2010. The consultants overseeing the audit then made recommendations to Davenport’s
administration: Create an office of inclusion and equity. Establish an inclusion council. Host a guest-speaker series focused on multicultural and global topics. Mandate diversity training for all employees. Reform the hiring process to ensure that all search committees have diverse representation.

Nearly six years later, Davenport officials have done all of the above, and more. "It wasn’t just a nice thing to do," Mr. Pappas says. "It was critical if we were going to be successful in what we were trying to achieve." Within the next couple of years, he says, the institution will probably do another audit. He won a 2016 leadership award from Insight Into Diversity magazine for his efforts.

While diversity audits have existed in higher education and other workplace settings for decades, interest in such assessments is rising as officials strive to show that they are committed to diversity. A recent survey of college presidents by the American Council on Education reflects that trend, Mr. Pappas says, particularly with respect to race: More than half of four-year-college leaders responded that the racial climate on their campus was a bigger priority now than it was three years ago.

The assessments come with drawbacks, though. They’re not cheap, and it can be difficult for colleges to tell what, exactly, they’re getting for the money. Davenport’s audit took just over six months and cost $46,000, "but it was well worth it," Mr. Pappas says.

While the findings weren’t earth-shattering, the assessment forced officials to be introspective about their commitment to diversity and to pinpoint which efforts to tackle first, he says. For instance, based on the consultants’ final report, Davenport has expanded its outreach to the Hispanic community — which currently makes up just 3 percent of the student body — and has established goals to recruit, retain, and graduate more Hispanic students by 2020.

Moreover, the audit started critical conversations on the campus about embracing difference, Mr. Pappas says.
Why might a college do a diversity audit? Momentum typically starts from the top, or it must at least have the support of senior administrators, says Myra Hindus, founder and principal at Creative Diversity Solutions, a consulting firm that helps colleges assess and improve their diversity.

A chief diversity officer might take the initiative, or a president might spearhead such a review as part of an institution’s strategic plan. At Davenport, it was the latter. "Planning for diversity and equity is not separate from the overall vision for the institution," Mr. Pappas says. He has led three other colleges and conducted a diversity audit at each.

Some reviews are the result of campus crises or student complaints. The University of Missouri system is doing a diversity audit as its campuses try to resolve racial tensions at its flagship, in Columbia. Student protests of the administration’s handling of racist incidents there helped force the system’s president and the flagship’s chancellor to resign last fall. The assessment is part of a list of recommendations issued by the system’s Board of Curators shortly after the administrators stepped down.

Some people are concerned the audit could further tarnish the university’s reputation, says S. David Mitchell, associate dean of academic affairs and an associate professor at Missouri’s law school. "It takes a great deal of courage to do an audit, to engage in this process, to reveal things that might be uncomfortable," says Mr. Mitchell, who is chairman of the system’s diversity task force, formed last fall to look at Missouri’s policies and suggest reforms. Moreover, he says, when people think of an audit, "they think of a tax audit, which is a terrible thing. You don’t want to be audited." However, "they don’t recognize that audits can illuminate things that are going well."

His role as chairman of the task force will involve whittling down the consultants’ recommendations into a handful of priorities and gathering comments from students, faculty and staff members, and alumni.
Ask college officials and others about what the audits should cover, and most stress that assessing all aspects of diversity — beyond race and gender — is the best approach. In Missouri’s case, though, Mr. Mitchell says racial tensions were the primary impetus for the audit, and will receive special attention.

Initially, the Missouri audit was to be narrowly focused, covering just system-level policies and programs, and completed within a couple of months. "It was quick because it needed to be responsive," Mr. Mitchell says. But the audit was soon expanded to include the four campuses. Audits conducted in part or entirely by an outside consultant can take from three to eight months, depending on the institution’s size and the audit’s scale, says Ms. Hindus, the consultant. (Some institutions take more time; the University of Denver, for instance, spent all of 2013 on its most recent diversity audit.)

Most colleges Ms. Hindus has worked with have had active committees that collaborate with her on the audit. "I can’t come in as an outsider and just start working," she says.

Many administrators say bringing in an outside consultant is key for a successful audit, but not all colleges can afford that option. Austin Community College, in Texas, couldn’t, so two administrators — Connie P. Williams, manager of one of the college’s testing centers, and Marcus Jackson, director of institutional planning and evaluation — are doing an in-house audit, the first ever at the college. They say one motivation for the review was a perception that most of the college’s diversity efforts were focused on students, and not faculty and staff members.
But doing the audit isn’t their full-time job, so it’s taking significantly longer. Gathering information from surveys, student-success reports, and other assessments, crafting an evaluation template, and filling it in took more than a year. Then Ms. Williams and Mr. Jackson began to analyze the information: Which offices and centers on the campus do diversity-related work? How many personnel are devoted in some capacity to diversity and inclusion? They will soon present a final report to the college’s administration, and they hope nearby colleges will use their template to conduct similar diversity assessments.

Hodges University, in Florida, will try a hybrid approach, using a consultant for some of the work when it begins a diversity audit next year. "Everything that we can do ourselves, we will," Gail B. Williams, the chief diversity officer at Hodges, says of the audit. "But sometimes it’s really best if someone from the outside comes in and works with me across campus to do interviews and to analyze with an unbiased eye." She estimates the consultant could cost a minimum of $10,000.

Racial diversity among students isn’t a problem for Hodges, where 42 percent of students are Hispanic and 13 percent are black. Ms. Williams’s goals for the audit are to show how diversity helps the university and where limited resources can best be used.

There are also a number of tools colleges can use to self-evaluate, such as the Equity Scorecard developed by the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California.

Data collection — both quantitative and qualitative — is one of the most concrete results of a diversity audit, Ms. Hindus says. Data might answer such questions as: Are you recruiting but not retaining minority students? Are there enough affinity groups for underrepresented students? Is there a perceived bias in college policies? In some audits, colleges compare themselves to peer institutions.
The reviews can also solve a persistent problem with diversity efforts in higher education: Each department on a campus often has no idea what others are doing. "So many of our efforts are fragmented," says Austin Community College’s Ms. Williams. She hopes the audit will help the college coordinate its diversity activities more purposefully.

Ultimately, officials must have buy-in for diversity programs across an institution to become truly inclusive, says Dave Veneklase, executive vice president for organizational development at Davenport. Diversity, he says, "couldn’t be seen as someone else’s responsibility. It needed to be truly integrated into all of our work." That’s something the audit helped emphasize.

There’s evidence that skeptical faculty and staff members are gaining confidence in Davenport’s commitment to diversity. The university’s annual employee-satisfaction survey asks respondents to weigh their agreement with the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5: "This institution values diversity of thought, people, and ideas." In the last five years, the average has gone from 3.49 to 3.74.

"Is it as high as we’d like? No," Mr. Veneklase says. "Are we moving in the right direction? Absolutely."

This article is part of:
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