CHAPTER 4

WEAVING THE INVISIBLE TAPESTRY
MANAGING DIVERSITY THROUGH
ORIENTATION INNOVATION

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Introduction

Transforming a discriminatory, fragmented higher-education system with elements of excellence in a sea of mediocrity into a coordinated and uniformly excellent one has been a major challenge for post-apartheid South Africa. (Ramphele, 2008:196)

This quotation by Ramphele illustrates the history that South African higher education must address, but also highlights the promise of what it can become. The impact of South Africa's fragmented past is still evident in the institutional cultures of many South African higher education institutions. The Council of Higher Education (CHE) Review of Higher Education in South Africa highlights the relevance and importance of institutional culture. Recent cases of intolerance of difference on several university campuses have highlighted possible fault lines in the institutional cultures, especially in relation to diversity (CHE, 2007:6). The establishment of a Ministerial Committee on 'Progress towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions' has focused attention on how institutions can develop cultures that create social cohesion and eliminate discrimination. Kuh and Whitt use the metaphor of an invisible tapestry when referring to institutional culture. They define culture as a 'persistent pattern of norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that share the behaviour of individuals and groups in a college or university and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off the campus' (Kuh & Whitt, 1988:iv).

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

This chapter focuses on the need and importance of diversity on campus and provides suggestions on how respect for diversity can be woven into institutional cultures in the first year of study and particularly in orientation programmes. Although we view diversity as including various forms of difference (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.), in light of the history of South Africa, issues around racial diversity are emphasised as a significant challenge facing the sector.

Why should diversity be woven into institutional cultures?

Milem, Chang and Antonio (2005:3) define diversity on higher educational campuses as ‘engagement across racial and ethnic lines comprised of a broad and varied set of activities and initiatives’. They expand further by highlighting that although diversity includes numbers and demographics, it goes beyond mere composition of the student body to *campus climate*, including an opposition to all unfair forms of exclusion, prejudice and discrimination. Chang and Astin (1997) offer a further operational definition that conceptualises campus diversity as a campus climate and programmes that offer opportunities for all students to interact with students from different racial groups. With these definitions as a point of departure, the benefits of diversity need to be considered. The case for diversity in the educational setting is grounded in the benefits various stakeholders accrue from such interactions. Milem *et al.* (2005:33) show how diversity results in individual student development, as well as collective benefits for institutions and society at large.

Individual benefits

Greater compositional diversity will inevitably result in a broader collection of thoughts, ideas, and opinions, and it is more likely that a student in such a setting will be exposed to a wider range of perspectives on a variety of issues. As a result, campus communities that are ‘more racially and ethnically diverse tend to create more richly varied educational experiences that enhance students’ learning and better prepare them for participation in a democratic society’ (Milem *et al.*, 2005:5).

The following democratic and learning outcomes have been reported in research by various authors:

1. Students *learn more and think in deeper*, more complex ways in a diverse educational environment (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002:347).
2. Individuals who are educated in diverse settings are *far more likely to work and live in racially and ethnically diverse environments* after they graduate (Milem *et al.*, 2005:5).
3. Individuals who study and discuss issues related to race and ethnicity in their academic courses and interact with a diverse set of peers in college are *better prepared for life in an increasingly complex and diverse society* (Milem *et al.*, 2005:5).
4. Individuals gain *deeper understanding* of themselves and *greater respect* for the complex identities of others and their respective cultures (Palmer, 2000).

Given the history of group segregation in South Africa and the increasing complexity within the 21st century world of work, the ability to be a meaningful role-player in

a diverse democracy is a life skill every graduate must be equipped with. Universities cannot shirk their responsibility to maximise favourable conditions for this development to occur.

Institutional and societal benefits

The benefits to the individual alone are sufficient reason to make diversity a priority in institutions, but there is evidence indicating that diversity enhances the effectiveness of the institution at the same time (Milem, 2003:139-140, 147). An emerging body of research indicates that greater diversity within organisations allows institutions to attract and retain the best talent, as well as to exhibit higher creativity and innovation, better problem-solving ability and more organisational flexibility (Milem, 2003:160). Research evidence further suggests that diversity in staff (both in terms of gender and race) is associated with more active learning techniques, increased student-centred learning and a greater diversity in curricular offering (Milem, 1999). In addition, there is evidence that research and service to the community are also positively impacted upon (Milem, 2003:135).

The societal benefits stemming from diversity in university contexts are the students who graduate from these institutions with greater ability to work in complex environments, deal effectively with diversity and value persons from diverse backgrounds for their inherent value. Higher education institutions with sufficient focus on diversity fulfil the role of training future leaders who understand and practise democratic values in civil society (Milem, 2003:160).

The cumulative benefits to the individual, the institution and society make a strong case for ensuring, promoting and managing diversity on campuses. However, before effective diversity management can be undertaken, an institution must gain an understanding of its current status quo with regard to culture and curriculum.

Examine your tapestry by evaluating the institutional climate

A two-stage research process should be undertaken in the interests of weaving a new institutional culture:

1. *Systematically assess the campus climate regarding diversity.* Given the fact that different groups have very different perceptions of what the diversity climate is on any given campus and these perceptions are constantly in flux, Milem *et al.* (2005:13-14) encourage institutions to conduct research on an on-going basis in order to ascertain the state of affairs. The Division of Student Development and Success at the University of the Free State (UFS), with which the authors of this chapter are associated, initiated this type of research to assess students' attitudes towards other groups upon arrival at university and to monitor changes in attitudes over time during the first year of policy implementation. First-year students at the UFS completed the Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994:741-763) and a version of Bogardus' classic Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1933:265-271).

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

2. *Reviewing best practice models in other institutions.* By reviewing the programmes that have been proven to increase intergroup cooperation and improve race relations, the university can combine contextualised results and proven methodologies in order to maximise the success of initiatives.

Following this research process, various principles related to the creation of diverse institutional cultures need to be considered. We will now briefly discuss these principles.

Principles for weaving diversity into institutional culture

There are three driving forces that facilitate student learning in diverse contexts – structural, curricular and co-curricular (Gurin *et al.*, 2002).

According to Milem *et al.* (2005:6-8), the first *necessary condition* under which students can truly experience these benefits is compositional/structural diversity (i.e. proportionate numbers of each group within the organisation and its substructures). In the ‘Enacting Diverse Learning Environments’ report, authors Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen and Allen (1999:19-21) also emphasise this point by citing structural diversity as the foremost prerequisite upon which to build diversity initiatives. Even though structural diversity is a necessary condition for diversity benefits, it is most certainly not a sufficient one: even when students find themselves in a diverse context, a deliberate effort must be made to manage this diversity in order for them to benefit educationally. In order to ensure that students develop optimally through exposure to diversity, the institution should implement a range of *multidimensional activities planned as long-term interventions* that deliberately create interracial connections (Hurtado *et al.*, 1999:69-79).

In a desktop review of various intervention programmes to promote diversity, a number of underlying principles emerged which can be summarised as follows (Change, 2005; Gurin *et al.*, 2002):

- ▣ Interaction between groups must occur on a *regular on-going basis*.
- ▣ Programmes must be *comprehensive in nature and long-term*.
- ▣ The groups who are interacting must have members who are afforded *equal status*.
- ▣ *Cooperation and common goals* for the group must be present, as opposed to a competitive structure.
- ▣ Integration must happen *inside and outside the classroom*, interactions must be curricular and co-curricular in nature. Research clearly indicates that mere co-existence of various races in the same institution will not result in any educational benefits.

Therefore, any approach to orientation that seeks to weave diversity into the institutional tapestry will need to be based on a first-year experience model that provides interventions throughout the first year and further into a students’ academic career.

Using orientation to weave diversity into institutional cultures

Theoretical perspectives on orientation

Various theories in student development underpin orientation programmes. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005:19) categorise these theories into psychosocial theories, cognitive-structural theories, typological models, and person-environment interaction theories and models. These authors identify commonalities in the aforementioned developmental theories. Relevant similarities that relate to the substance of these theories include the emergence of self-understanding and awareness as a participant in learning, identity development and a focus on the culminating stage of development, which includes self-definition and self-direction (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005:48). The culminating stage of development is of crucial importance for the development of independent learners that are able to maximise their chances of success in higher education teaching and learning environments.

In addition to development theories, college impact models of student change underline the importance of orientation. These models include Tinto's theory of student departure, Pascarella's general model of assessing change and Weidman's model of undergraduate socialisation (Pascarella, 1985:1; Tinto, 1993:114; Weidman, 1989:289). Impact models underline the important role of institutional structure, policies, programmes and services in the social and academic integration of students. This emphasises the important role that orientation programmes can play in introducing students to teaching and learning environments in higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005:58).

Orientation and the South African Context

The development of orientation programmes in South Africa appears to have been overshadowed by the development of bridging and foundation programmes – especially in the 1990s and early part of the new millennium, with the policy emphasis on access. The increased focus on success and throughput and changes in the school leaving population have resulted in the need for large-scale support for the majority of students that are making the transition into higher education. One of the examples of such efforts is the National Information Service for Higher Education (NiSHE) that has released the publication *Into Higher Education: A Guide for Schools* (Withers, 2006). This publication provides school-leaving learners with introductory information on higher education that is focused on preparing Grade 12s with a National Senior Certificate (NSC) (Withers, 2006:1). Recent Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) research underscores the possible need for a review of higher education orientation programmes. This research shows that about 70% of first-years are first-generation students, which means that both they and their families need more effective orientation approaches to help them understand higher education (Macgregor, 2007).

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

Current trends in orientation

Orientation programmes offer a crucial opportunity for institutions to start to address diversity. Mullendore and Banahan (2005:391) view orientation as the institution's 'best opportunity to introduce a strong learning environment, build the foundations for academic success, welcome students and families to the campus community, promote students interactions with faculty and staff, and convey the values and traditions of the new institution'.

These authors have identified the following trends in university orientation programmes:

- ▣ Orientation has become more academic in nature helping students to negotiate the academic environment.
- ▣ Technological advances have improved efficiency but require careful consideration of the balance between technology and human connection.
- ▣ The increased diversity in student populations requires flexible, innovative, purposeful and efficient orientation programmes.
- ▣ There has been an increased family involvement and attendance.
- ▣ There has been an increased awareness of diversity focusing on what students have in common despite their differences.

According to Upcraft, Gardener and Barefoot (2005:395), the goals for orientation programmes have also changed to the following:

1. First and foremost, orientation should help students to succeed academically.
2. The orientation process should help students adjust to and get involved in the university environment.
3. These programmes should be designed to assist parents and other family members in understanding the complexity, demands and services in the university environment.
4. The programmes provide opportunities to learn more about incoming students through formal and informal means.

Orientation can therefore be a very powerful re-socialisation agent that can be used to develop and nurture a new campus climate. Zepke, Leach and Prebble (n.d.) in their review of the impact of student support on learning outcomes, point out that orientation provides an opportunity for the norms, values and behaviours of an institution to be explicitly and implicitly communicated. These authors further report on the positive outcomes related to institutional cultures where students from all groups feel valued, fairly treated and safe. They further give evidence illustrating that higher rates of retention and success are associated with climates that welcome, accept, respect and value diversity. Thus, ideally orientation should serve as a mechanism to communicate a campus climate that embraces values and encourages diversity.

There are numerous institutional forces that determine campus climate (Hurtado, Milem & Clayton-Pedersen, 1998:279-302), namely:

- ▣ an institution's *historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion* of various racial/ethnic groups;
- ▣ its *structural/compositional diversity* in terms of numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups;
- ▣ a *behavioural climate* that is characterised by intergroup relations on campus; and
- ▣ the *psychological climate* that includes the perceptions and attitudes between and among groups.

Orientation programmes have the potential to influence the campus climate right from the outset of a student's time on campus. Research findings indicate that students' perceptions of the institution's commitment to diversity influence the extent to which they will benefit from diversity interactions (Milem *et al.*, 2005:11-12) and that the potential benefits of diversity are diminished in the face of problematic racial climates on campuses (Hurtado *et al.*, 1999:25-27). Research also shows that in instances where commitment to diversity is perceived there is increased retention of students from minority groups (Humphreys, 1998).

Strategies to weave the tapestry through orientation

Research highlights numerous specific strategies on how to manage diversity on campuses. However, for the purposes of this chapter only those most applicable within the context of orientation have been selected and are discussed briefly in the following pages.

- a. *Create living and learning environments that promote interaction.* The setting for student interaction created by a campus to a large extent determines the pool of peers for friendship selection, establishes the patterns and terms of contact among peers, and determines the types of friendship roles that are important within a particular setting. Ultimately, the climate created on campus inhibits or promotes the development of intergroup interaction (Milem *et al.*, 2005:17) and institutions thus have an opportunity to directly influence the type of setting students find themselves in during the orientation programme. Non-competitive, interactive and diverse settings will help facilitate the establishment of the patterns/terms of intergroup contact the institution wishes to espouse campus-wide. Practically, universities can investigate the establishment of diversity centres responsible for coordinating and implementing various diversity initiatives. Examples can be found at Arizona State University's Intergroup Relations Centre (Arizona State University, 2007) and at the Center on Diversity and Community at the University of Oregon (Oregon State University, 2006). Centres such as these can potentially be responsible for designing and implementing an intervention for first-years.
- b. *Create opportunities for students to develop interracial friendships.* The role of the peer group for undergraduate students has already been widely documented. For example, Astin (1993:4-15) states that the 'student peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years'. Research further points to the positive impact of intergroup friendships on students (Antonio, 2001:611-613, 2004:463-466). A particularly important element of such friendships is the equal status of the individuals who are interacting.

SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

This again highlights the value of orientation programmes where all students find themselves in an entirely new context in which all first-year students are at the bottom of the campus 'pecking order'. Antonio (1999) also found that students with strong interracial friendships were more committed to racial understanding and, interestingly, many of the friendships in this study were formed during the students' first year on campus. A well thought out orientation programme can serve to create an enabling environment for intergroup friendships to develop. For example, by structuring group activities that necessitate diverse groups to work on community-based projects, students will be placed in contexts where genuine friendships can be formed. Although many students in South Africa do not reside on-campus, residence halls are micro-communities where interracial friendships can thrive. An example can be found at Syracuse University, where the office of residence life coordinates various diversity related projects in residences (Syracuse, 2008).

- c. *Ensure that students are exposed to information-rich, diversity-related sessions/courses.* Chang (1999, 2005) found that diversity course requirements can play a meaningful role in diminishing divisive racial prejudices and can subsequently improve race relations. The rationale for his argument is that if students are given meaningful opportunities to examine their own biased and erroneous judgements and learn to process new information more effectively, their judgments about different racial groups will be more positive. At Penn State University, Betsy Palmer (2000) found that students who took a discussion-based diversity-related course, which addressed knowledge of other cultures as well as issues of power and oppression, produced more tolerant social racial attitudes across gender and ethnic groups. Although a full credit-bearing course may not be feasible in the typically short orientation period, well-structured, informative sessions on the value and meaning of diversity begin to shape the attitudes of first-time entering students and ultimately form a basis for students to think critically about issues of diversity on campus. An example in the South African context is the use of creative methodologies in current curriculum as another potentially powerful tool for addressing inequalities (Bozalek, Biersteker, Swartz, Leibowitz, Carolissen, Nicholls & Rohleder, 2008). Initiatives such as these can be incorporated into first-year courses to promote understanding of diversity early in a student's university career.
- d. *Create opportunities for intergroup dialogues.* Highly structured dialogues that are carefully facilitated by trained persons (usually senior students) have proven to be effective for diversity management and prejudice reduction in various studies (Engberg, 2007:310; Hurtado, 1999:86-87). The first weeks on campus during orientation provide the setting for such groups to be formed. Initial dialogues begun in formal orientation programmes can be extended into longer-term interventions that continue into the academic year. An example of this is structured intergroup dialogues, which is an emerging model that is being used and researched increasingly on campuses in the United States to get students to talk across boundaries (Zuniga, 1998). The University of Cornell takes a different approach to dialogue and presents a theatre production for first-year students aimed at making the new students aware of the extent of diversity on the campus. After the

production, structured discussion groups are held to help students become aware of and deal with their new highly diverse environment (Lang, 2006).

- e. *Communicate clearly stated policies on resolving harassment and discrimination.* The perception that the environment is just and fair is essential to the reduction of prejudice on campuses (Hurtado *et al.*, 1998:386-388). Thus, the materials provided to students during orientation, as well as the information presented during group and individual sessions are powerful agents through which the institution's commitment to diversity and methods of dealing with infringements on human rights can be communicated to students.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on understanding the need for integrating racial and ethnic diversity into university campus cultures. The integration of students holds benefits for individuals, institutions and society at large. Research indicates there are cognitive, affective and interpersonal gains for individuals who experience high-quality diversity experiences at university. Institutions who fail to prepare their students for the diverse world of work (locally and globally) run the risk of failing to empower students with the necessary skills for success. Research has linked increased diversity to specific higher education outcomes such as critical thinking. Students who have more diversity experiences report more progress in personal and educational growth, more involvement in active learning and higher levels of satisfaction with their higher education experience. At an institutional level, a commitment to diversity will inevitably lead to greater diversity in curricular offerings, staff composition, and ultimately in organisational flexibility and problem-solving strategies. At a societal level, lack of diversity is counterproductive to economic growth and development in the South African economy, whereas learning to work effectively with and in diverse groups leads to higher levels of citizenship and greater striving for equality in society.

The first step in the process of reweaving diversity into institutional culture is to assess the current climate by obtaining the perspectives of students and staff. A survey of student attitudes at the University of the Free State highlighted the need for specific interventions to start this process. A multi-faceted, long-term approach to orientation, similar to a type of first-year experience, can be used to help institutions to weave an invisible tapestry that will help to create a vibrant and more reconciled South Africa (Terrell Jones, 2005:154).

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SECTION ONE • OPENING PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST YEAR

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