



**NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
INSTITUTIONAL DIVERSITY**  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

# Strategic Planning for Diversity in Higher Education: Insights from a Multi-Institution Research Project

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## *Insight Paper*

The National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID) seeks to strengthen and integrate research about diversity, equity, and inclusion in education and society, and to promote its effective use in addressing contemporary issues.

Insight papers seek to connect scholarship in diversity, equity, and inclusion to practice in higher education. Insight papers emphasize the translation of cutting-edge research into concise, accessible discussions to inform the work of practitioners, leaders, and policymakers. All papers undergo a rigorous peer review by NCID editors to ensure that they meet high-quality standards and are actively disseminated throughout our network.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Higher education institutions continue to profess the importance of diversity while facing significant internal and external pressures to create inclusive and equitable campus environments for diverse populations of students, faculty, and staff. To achieve these goals, institutional leaders must challenge existing structures and commit to transforming their campus climates (Chang, 2002). This insight paper summarizes research undertaken by the National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID) that examines the process of strategic diversity planning as a tool for enacting organizational change.

Over the last two decades, many higher education institutions have adopted and worked under the direction of strategic diversity plans, each unique to their institutional circumstances and the legal, political, and social environments surrounding them. Despite many differences in adoption and form, strategic diversity plans often address similar goals, for example: improving campus climate, recruiting and retaining historically underrepresented students and staff, and fostering diversity-related research and scholarship (Smith, 2009; Williams, 2013). Strategic diversity planning has been characterized as a key step in framing diversity as being central, rather than parallel, to institutional effectiveness, excellence, and viability (Smith, 2009). However, little research has examined the actual process of strategic diversity planning, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of how these plans are created, what issues they address, and what makes them effective.

Recognizing the complex challenges confronting colleges and universities when addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the NCID sought to understand how institutional leaders engage and respond to these challenges through the process of strategic diversity planning. Through an analysis of plans and

interviews with campus leaders at multiple universities, a model emerged that identified four common “stages” of the strategic diversity planning process (Figure 1). A detailed description of the study methodology is available in a report prepared by the authors (Frye & Morton, 2014).

Figure 1: Model of the Strategic Diversity Planning Process



## **TRANSLATING RESEARCH FINDINGS INTO A PRACTICAL MODEL OF THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS**

Although the process of strategic diversity planning is influenced heavily by the mission and culture of an individual institution, this general model is intended to highlight the opportunities and challenges embedded in diversity planning across institutional contexts. The four interconnected stages that comprise the model include 1) leadership and initiation, 2) engagement of campus community, 3) endorsement and implementation, and 4) accountability, assessment, and revision. Key recommendations for practice related to each stage of the model are discussed below.

### ***Initiation and Leadership***

- The importance of strong executive leadership in the process of strategic diversity planning cannot be overstated, particularly in the beginning phases of planning. Executive leaders play a key role in announcing the creation of a diversity plan and establishing institutional support for the planning process. Executive leaders may also provide guidance for the planning process in the form of a vision statement or set of principles for the plan to address. Strong executive leadership is instrumental in securing campus wide participation and mobilizing planning efforts.
- In order to strengthen institutional commitment to the plan, it is important for executive leaders to align the goals of the diversity plan with the university's overall mission or existing strategic imperatives. The development of a diversity plan that is seen as "separate" from the institution's broader strategic mission may undermine its effectiveness in promoting campus-wide change.
- In addition to centralized executive-level support, strong engagement of the deans and administrative unit directors is necessary in the creation and implementation of the diversity plan. Strong

engagement of the deans can empower them to lead the day-to-day work of improving the climate for diversity and inclusion in their colleges while creating accountability structures for diversity efforts.

### ***Engagement and Expectations***

- The process of creating a strategic diversity plan can be more than just a means to an end. When members of the campus community are highly engaged in discussions of diversity and inclusion, the process of developing the diversity plan can itself be transformational. The design of a planning process that fosters engagement and creates space for transformation requires careful attention to the culture of the institution and the participation of key constituency groups across the campus community.
- For faculty members in particular, one strategy for fostering their engagement in the diversity planning process is to emphasize discussions on how diversity can be integrated throughout the curriculum and inform pedagogy. These conversations highlight the key roles faculty play in improving the campus climate for diversity within their immediate sphere of influence: the classroom.
- During the process of generating campus-wide "buy-in" for a new strategic diversity plan it is important to acknowledge the diversity efforts that are already being made by faculty, staff, and students. Recognizing and supporting this work demonstrates its value to the institution and encourages continued engagement in renewed efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus.

### ***Endorsement, Adoption, and Promulgation***

- The process of garnering endorsement and approval of the strategic diversity plan varies considerably across campuses. While some institutions may adopt an extensive approval

process requiring the endorsements of multiple bodies such as the faculty senate, student government, and governing board, other institutions may choose to enact a plan without any formal approval procedures. The optimal endorsement and adoption process is likely to be highly dependent upon the administrative culture of the institution, and careful attention to these procedures should be given as early as possible in the planning process. This information can be useful in helping to craft the membership of the planning committee and structure the planning process in a way that will mitigate the challenges associated with navigating approval for the plan.

- The formal adoption and public announcement of the strategic diversity plan may be a source of anxiety for campus leaders during the planning process, particularly when institutions are operating under political or judicial constraints regarding affirmative action and other issues related to diversity in their states. Clear communication of the expectations and goals of the plan to key stakeholders from the very beginning of the planning process can build support and attenuate reluctance and anxiety during the development and announcement of the plan.

#### ***Accountability, Reporting, and Revision***

- The creation of accountability structures is an essential component of the strategic diversity planning process. The responsibilities of individuals and units for carrying out particular activities and initiatives should be clearly outlined in the strategic diversity plan. Although “ownership” of the plan may be held by executive leaders in the president’s and/or provost’s office, it is important for responsibility and accountability to be distributed across all levels of campus leadership. In establishing an accountability structure, the strategic diversity plan should also detail the process that will be used to evaluate the plan’s effectiveness and determine areas for improvement.

- Specific, well-outlined progress measures are also critical in the implementation and sustainability of strategic diversity plans. Individuals who are heavily involved and invested in the diversity planning process often have high expectations for institutional progress as a result of strategic diversity plan adoption. Plans that include clear indicators of progress toward campus goals, as well as a timeline for regularly reviewing this progress, can help sustain the engagement and momentum needed for change.
- To be successful, the strategic diversity plan must be accompanied by the financial and human resources necessary to carry out the initiatives and activities associated with the plan. The pledging of resources to adequately support the plan signals the institution’s commitment to this work, and helps ensure that diversity will remain a priority even through leadership shifts and other campus changes.

#### **IMPACT**

If the rising number of students protesting racial injustices at colleges and universities over the last year is any indication, institutional leaders will continue to be called on to create campuses that are more equitable and inclusive of an increasingly diverse population. Strategic diversity planning has emerged in higher education as an important step toward fostering organizational change. Such plans encourage campuses to articulate their values and goals related to diversity and identify clear strategies for achieving diversity-related objectives. This paper summarized some of the practical insights gleaned from a recent multi-institutional study of strategic diversity planning processes in higher education. The process of strategic diversity planning is necessarily complex and context-dependent, but campus leaders may nevertheless benefit from this general model of the planning process and key recommendations for practice.

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