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Diversity awareness among a diverse business student population: insights and curriculum implications

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses insights gathered from business students enrolled in a Hispanic Serving University (HSU) and resulting curriculum implications related to the continued heritage of the United States to embrace cultures of others. Although awareness of the realities regarding past, current and future diversity within the United States is important for all citizens, such awareness is especially necessary for business students planning to participate in the United States marketplace.

This paper provides a limited historical perspective regarding the evolution and promotion of diversity within the United States. Secondly, the current degree of diversity in the United States is presented through a descriptive analysis of various demographic data including gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation, educational attainment, disability status, language spoken, religion, and socio-economic status. Thirdly, the results of a diversity awareness survey administered to a convenience-based sample of over 60 business students enrolled in a HSU is presented. Lastly, resulting curriculum implications and recommendations are proposed.

The population of the United States was originally based on its' differences and on the desire to protect the citizen's right to be different. Although, not every citizen in the United States welcomes such diversity and related rights, the majority of the citizens do. The enactment and acceptance of various laws requiring diversity is not only a unique part of the proud heritage of the United States, but also poises the country well for future global interaction. Business students, regardless of their own differences, will benefit from an accurate perspective regarding the current and future state of diversity within the United States.

Keywords: diversity, Hispanic Serving University, business curriculum, diversity awareness

INTRODUCTION

By 2050, the population of the United States will increase to 420 million people. The number of Hispanic-Americans will nearly double to 102.6 million people making up 24.4% of the total population. Further projections include growth related to both African and Asian Americans increasing their proportions of the population by 14.6% and 8% respectively (United States Census Bureau, 2000). As a result, Non-Hispanic American Whites will no longer comprise the majority of the population of the United States. Ethnicity is one of many cultural variables, which continues to contribute to the rich diversity of the United States. Regardless, the ways in which business organizations market and operate should reflect the diverse environment entered into.

“Diversity refers to the variety created in society by the presence of different races, ethnic backgrounds and cultures, as well as differences that emerge from class, age, and ability, with the expectation that each of these concepts, in relation to each other, enriches the meaning and value of the other” (Schneider, 1995). While no federal law defines a diverse workforce, Guion’s definition of diversity is helpful: “Diversity is a mosaic of people who bring a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, styles, perspectives, values and beliefs as assets to the groups and organizations with which they interact” (Guion, 1999). Public companies and governmental agencies have been reported as more likely to have a definition of diversity whereas small businesses as least likely to have an official definition of diversity. Greenberg offers a good working definition of workplace diversity: “Workplace diversity refers to the variety of differences between people in an organization. That sounds simple, but diversity encompasses race, gender, ethnic group, age, personality, cognitive style, tenure, organizational function, education, background and more” (Greenberg, n.d.).

Barr and Strong describe a multicultural organization as “one that is genuinely committed to diverse representation of its membership; is sensitive to maintaining an open, supportive and responsive environment; is working toward and purposefully including elements of diverse cultures in its ongoing operations; and is authentic in its response to issues confronting it” (Barr and Strong, 1988). However, Pope explains, “there is no single or broadly accepted definition of the term *multicultural*” (Pope, 1993).

Penn State notes there are two dimensions of diversity: primary dimensions of diversity are those characteristics that cannot be changed, such as gender, ethnicity, race, age, physical abilities or qualities, etc., while secondary dimensions such as education, marital status, income, and geographic location are mutable or changeable (Penn State, 2001). Within the educational environment, Gurin’s expert report offered in *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* presents a three-pronged view of campus diversity: structural diversity (the student body’s racial and ethnic composition); classroom diversity (curricular incorporation of knowledge about diverse groups); and informal interactional diversity (the opportunity for student interaction with others from diverse backgrounds). She explains: “The impact of structural diversity depends greatly on classroom and informal interactional diversity. Structural diversity is essential but, by itself, usually not sufficient to produce substantial benefits; in addition to being together on the same campus, students from diverse backgrounds must also learn about each other in the courses that they take and in informal interaction outside of the classroom. For new learning to occur, institutions of higher education have to make appropriate use of structural diversity. They have to make college campuses authentic public places, where students from different backgrounds

can take part in conversations and share experiences that help them develop an understanding of the perspectives of other people” (Gurin, 1997).

Students also do not have a clear understanding of the meaning of *multicultural*. It should be noted that, at least from the perspectives of minority students, ethnicity is the primary criteria for defining diversity in the workplace (76.6 percent). Gender is the second more important component (53.4 percent), followed by age (29.8 percent) and nationality (26.6 percent). Socio-economic background, religion, personality, and education are also included to a lesser extent; and language skills, sexual orientation, work style, work function, physical disability, and inclusive work environment are also mentioned (Definitions of Diversity, 2008).

Although students value at least the primary dimensions of diversity, they are unsure as to what constitutes diversity in their education. For example, results from a recent Kennedy School Student Government survey of Harvard students demonstrated a significant gap between the value placed by students on diversity (3.6 on a scale of 4) and the extent to which students felt diversity was incorporated into the classroom through teaching and course materials (2.7 to 2.9 on a scale of 4) (Kennedy School Student Government Survey, 2009). Since 2000, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has obtained annual student data from more than 1300 colleges and universities about participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for student learning and personal development. NSSE survey data represents undergraduate "good practices" that are used to identify and improve aspects of the undergraduate experience (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2009). Focusing on campus diversity as one of those aspects of good practices, Pike and Kuh utilized 2001 NSSE data to conclude that “the effects on the campus environment of interactions among diverse groups seem to depend on the nature and quality of the interactions, rather than on their quantity” (Pike and Kuh, 2006).

Rankin and Reason (2005) examined student perceptions of race on campus and also found differences between the experiences and perceptions of students of color (African American/Black; Asian American; Chicano/Latino/Hispanic) and white students. They encouraged “quality interactions, those that intentionally maximize cross-racial interactions and encourage ongoing discussion contact... both inside and outside the classroom” (Rankin and Reason, 2005). The Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students (BEAMS) initiative helped 102 participating MSIs support enhanced student success through the collection and use of NSSE data for decision making, accountability, and campus change in various areas including diversity and multicultural awareness (Del Rios and Leegwater, 2008).

Laird and Associates also used 2003 NSSE data to investigate whether HSIs (Hispanic Serving Institutions) were serving Hispanic students in similar ways that HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) serve African American students. They concluded that “the average Hispanic senior at an HSI looks quite similar to the average Hispanic senior at a PWI (Predominately White Institution) in terms of engagement, satisfaction with college, and gains in overall development in contrast to the results for African American seniors who are more engaged at HBCUs than at PWIs” (Laird, et.al., 2004).

A LIMITED HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the Western Hemisphere, indigenous tribes inhabited the territory known as the United States and Mexico, each with their own sets of customs, religions, languages and cultures. English, Dutch, Irish, Spanish and French settlers began immigrating and settling onto the lands

of these Native Americans bringing with them their own northern and western European customs, religions and languages. Add to this onslaught, Scandinavian and German immigrants followed by Poles, Italians and Russians in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Metress, 1997). Piece by piece, different sections of the United States was developed by groups of European people. In the area of the middle and southern Atlantic states of Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Georgia, North and South Carolina was where the Irish immigrants settled. The first stage of Irish immigrants brought artisans, small shopkeepers and small farmers from an Ulster Protestant background. Later, as crops failed in Ireland, more farmers and impoverished families along with indentured servants and slaves immigrated with at least 40% of that group being Catholic (Metress, 1997). In the late 1600's, African-Americans were brought into the United States mainly as slaves from the western coast of Africa and were called such because the term depicted the occupation of most of the people with dark skin. In the 1800's the term slaves changed to *Freedmen* to depict these people were free from the bonds of slavery (Naylor, 1997).

The area known as Louisiana began as a French colony which had sparse population. Clerics and slaves began increasing that population in the 1700's. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 began the westward expansion of the U. S. with the southern-most portion of the Louisiana Purchase inhabitants being Mediterranean, Caribbean and African in origin. Most of these inhabitants were Catholic, spoke many languages and had a dissimilar view of government, law and race. "Creoles of French and Spanish origin, Germans from New Orleans, English pioneers in what would become the Florida parishes, Acadians to the west, free people of color, slaves, and Native Americans would interact with the new waves of Americans from states such as Tennessee and Kentucky" (The Louisiana Purchase, n.d.). The southern portion of the United States became inhabited by what was a melding of European and Indian races that had settled in Mexico and that brought about its own unique social strata where certain unique social and cultural qualities were attributed to the white group while the dark skinned group was undervalued (Cruz, 1997).

As these groups assimilated into their new country, the melding, albeit much occurred through fighting, of the different cultures brought new awareness and identities. Those settling in the north of the United States were considered Anglo-American while those settling in Mexico were considered Mexican or mestizo. With the westward expansion of people from the North and the northern expansion of people from the south, the meeting of both groups brought fighting over the land that each considered their own. In 1846, with the Treaty of Hidalgo, these Mexican born settlers found themselves with an ambiguous national identity, that of American citizens (Cruz, 1997).

Legislation over the years of immigration has played a part in shaping the citizenry of our country. The *Federalists Papers* in 1787 began the acceptance or tacit agreement of English as a predominant language for barter and trade although bilingualism was protected as the right for which the Pilgrims had come to America (Fennelly, 2007; Fitzgerald, 1993). Then the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 began the endorsement of definitions of race and class as criteria to define particular groups as "undesirable aliens," ineligible for entry or citizenship (Fennelly, 2007; Lee, 2002). In 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act was passed ending open immigration from Europe by enacting a quota system (Fennelly, 2007; Ngai, 1994). With passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) preference was given to the relatives of U.S. citizens, and secondarily to immigrants living in the U.S. and those with special skills needed by American companies. This act became the core of the immigrant system today where the majority of immigrants are

granted entrance because of relationships to U. S. citizens (Fennelly, 2007; Green, 2002). The next piece of legislation was the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) which granted unauthorized immigrants who had been in the U.S. since 1982 permanent resident status (Fennelly, 2007; Green, 2002). The Immigration Act of 1990 raised the immigration ceiling to 700,000 per year and granted preference to relatives of U.S. residents or citizens and to immigrants with high-level work skills. Although The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), enacted in 1994, did not include major provisions addressing immigration (it was characterized as a treaty that would indeed lower immigration) instead, it served as a stimulus to increase unauthorized immigration because of the disparities of wage factors of both U. S. and Mexico economies as well as factors of the marketing, sale and transport of goods to and from Mexico (Fennelly, 2007; Massey, 1998). In 2006, after failing to obtain the immigration reform President Bush had sought in the form of a guest worker program, he signed into law a bill authorizing the construction of a 700-mile fence on the 2,000-mile southern border to try to slow the influx of illegal immigration (Fennelly, 2007).

With legislation for immigration also came legislation for workplace diversity. Since the 1960s, diversity in the U. S. workplace has expanded when it was based on the assimilation approach, where the melting pot concept was used to describe everyone. Followed by affirmative action, and equal employment opportunity they became an important part in the diversity effort with key legislation being a successful instrument for change including the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The movement today toward workplace diversity is one of inclusion and the business case: accepting and controlling disparities for the good of the organization. The blending of different cultures, ideas and perspectives is now judged an organizational benefit so much so that organizations are gradually concentrating on initiatives for corporate diversity to enhance performance (Lockwood, 2006; Thomas & Ely, 2002).

This limited historical perspective of the evolution of U. S. diversity serves to provide a segue into the current degree of diversity in organizations through a descriptive analysis of demographic data including gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation, educational attainment, disability status, language spoken, religion, and socio-economic status.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument. The survey for measuring diversity awareness was created by the authors utilizing each of the eight traditional diversity related variables measured by the United States Census Bureau including gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, educational attainment, disability status, language spoken, and socio-economic status. In addition, the authors included two additional diversity related variables: sexual orientation and religion. Students were asked to select a percentage of the population related to each of the ten variables. The survey is composed of 28-scaled items scored from “a.” (lower percentages of the population) to “e.” (higher percentages of the population). For example, regarding gender, students were asked to select a percentage which they felt best estimated the percentage of the total United States population who are male. Percentages provided ranged from “a.” for 40% to “e.” for 60%. A copy of the instrument used can be found in the appendix.

Sample. The survey was administered to undergraduate business administration students during the Spring 2009 semester. The survey was administered on a voluntary basis with consent from students who enrolled in marketing, MARK 3371, offered by the School of Business at the

University of Texas at Brownsville. After a brief introduction of this research project, the questionnaire was administered by the instructor and took from 5 to 10 minutes to complete. The survey was administered to the marketing students immediately before coverage of a related unit on diversity. Seeking and utilizing student input, as a basis for change is not new. Hansman, Jackson, Grant and Spencer surveyed graduate students to determine gender, race, equality and diversity prior to revising their curriculum to encourage understanding the reality of racial and gender issues (Hansman, et.al., 1999). Phillips, Settoon, and Phillips used student survey input data to design new business management curricula (Phillips, et.al, 2003).

Data Analysis. Table I presents three variables. First, the actual or current percentage of the United States population related to ten demographic variables. Secondly, the average student estimate related to the ten demographic variables. Student estimates do not total to 100%, as each estimate was asked for independently. Thirdly, the percentage of over or under estimation comparing the average student estimate to the actual or current percentages is provided (See Table 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although, student responses included significant over estimates related to a number of the ten diversity-related variables, overall, student responses reflected significant proportional awareness of diversity within the United States. For gender, estimates were largely accurate. For age, a small underestimation of the middle-aged population and a small overestimation of the senior population are noted. Regarding ethnicity, large overestimations of both American Indian and Asian American populations were provided, although largely accurate on a proportional basis. A small overestimation of the Hispanic/Latino American population and a small underestimation of the White/Non Hispanic American populations are noted. For marital status, a large overestimation of both divorced/separated and widowed populations was significant. For sexual orientation, a large overestimation of the gay/lesbian/bisexual population is noted. However, a related limitation of this study is the lack of a valid and reliable source for estimating the size of the gay/lesbian/bisexual population. For educational attainment, a small underestimation of those with at least a high school education is noted. A somewhat larger overestimation of the percentage of the population with a Bachelor's Degree or higher is noted. For disability status, a small overestimation of disability was estimated among the general population and a small underestimation of disability estimated among the senior population are noted. For language spoken, a large overestimation of the bilingual population was significant. For religion, a small underestimation of both the religious and nonreligious populations is noted. For socio-economic status, overestimation of each level was noted, however the largest overestimate related to the size of the upper class followed by the estimate of the size of the lower class. In summary, the most significant overestimations related to American Indians, Asian Americans, divorced/separated Americans, widowed Americans, gay/lesbian/bisexual Americans, college educated Americans, bilingual Americans, Lower socio-economic class Americans and upper socio-economic class Americans. Underestimations were less significant.

CURRICULUM IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum implications derive largely from the most significant overestimations noted which related to ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation, educational attainment, bilingual

ability and socio-economic status. A general review provided in courses, such as, Principles of Marketing should provide sufficient opportunity to provide students with correct data regarding the various related topics. Specific analysis of student estimates, indicate a potential under appreciation of the uniqueness of bilingual skills common among Hispanic American college students. Attention and sensitivity to curricular, social, economic and cultural expectations must also be considered prior to curriculum revision. Laden reminded HSI business faculty to be cognizant that HSIs also educate non-Hispanic White students and that the "dynamics of cultural and social diversity will continue to be played out in a variety of dimensions within HSIs" (Laden, 2001). All MSI faculties should keep these recommendations in mind. Dayton and Associates also reinforce the need to expand and diversify Latino students' experiences while creating a supportive environment that recognizes individual differences. As one student in their survey of HSIs recognized... going through the transition of working with people from other races is kind of difficult" (Dayton, et.al. 2004). MSI business faculties that deliberately expose students to other cultures and experiences will help students graduate with greater confidence to enter a diverse work environment.

Muller and Parham agree that "racially homogenous students may be differentiated along the lines of class, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, age, religion, and other dimensions." They place the burden on the instructor "to draw out these stereotypes and dimensions so that they become the focal point of some of the class discussion. In short, diversity education is applicable not only to visibly multicultural or multiracial groups, but to any collective of persons" (Muller and Parham, 1998). Spencer writes that some MSIs are now reaching out to white students in an attempt to diversify their student body. She reports a MSI faculty observation that white students attending an MIS learn that "people are individuals and that there are as many variations within race as there are within society" (Spencer, 2009).

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Table 1: Diversity Awareness—Actual Estimates, Average Student Estimates and Percentage of Under/Over Estimations			
Variable 1: Gender			
	Actual*	Average Student Estimate	% Over/Under Estimate
Male	49%	48%	Underestimated by 1%
Female	51%	52%	Overestimated by 1%
Variable 2: Age			
0-24 year olds	35%	35%	Estimated correctly
25-54 year olds	42%	38%	Underestimated by 9%
55 or more years old	23%	32%	Overestimated by 39%
Variable 3: Ethnicity			
Black/African American	13%	13%	Estimated correctly
American Indian	1%	5%	Overestimated by 400%
Asian American	4%	8%	Overestimated by 100%
Hispanic/Latino American	15%	17%	Overestimated by 13%
White/Non Hispanic American	66%	57%	Underestimated by 13%
Variable 4: Marital Status (15 year olds and older)			
Married	51%	45%	Underestimated by 11%
Never Married	30%	33%	Overestimated by 10%
Divorced/Separated	13%	52%	Overestimated by 300%
Widowed	6%	23%	Overestimated by 283%
Variable 5: Sexual Orientation**			
Heterosexual	95%	76%	Underestimated by 20%
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual	5%	28%	Overestimated by 460%
Variable 6: Educational Attainment (25 year old and older)			
High School Graduate or higher	84%	64%	Underestimated by 23%
Bachelor's Degree or higher	27%	39%	Overestimated by 44%

Variable 7: Disability Status			
Disabled (5 years and older)	16%	20%	Overestimated by 25%
Disabled (65 years and older)	43%	34%	Underestimated by 20%
Variable 8: Language Spoken			
English Only	81%	73%	Underestimated by 9%
Language other than English	19%	33%	Overestimated by 33%
Variable 9: Religion***			
Religious	84%	67%	Underestimated by 20%
Nonreligious	16%	14%	Underestimated by 12%
Variable 10: Socio-Economic Status			
Upper Class (HH income of \$500,000 or more)	1%	10%	Overestimated by 900%
Upper Middle Class (HH income above \$100,000)	15%	25%	Overestimated by 66%
Lower Middle Class (HH average income of \$35-75,000)	32%	40%	Overestimated by 25%
Working Class (HH average income of \$16-35,000)	32%	42%	Overestimated by 31%
Lower Class (HH average income of less than \$16,000)	20%	37%	Overestimated by 85%

*U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2007 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, S2601A, 2007.

**Gay and Lesbian Population Estimates, Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org>, 2000.

***Religious Composition in the U.S., U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Pew Research Center, 2007.

Appendix

Diversity Awareness Survey In Terms of Percentage of Population

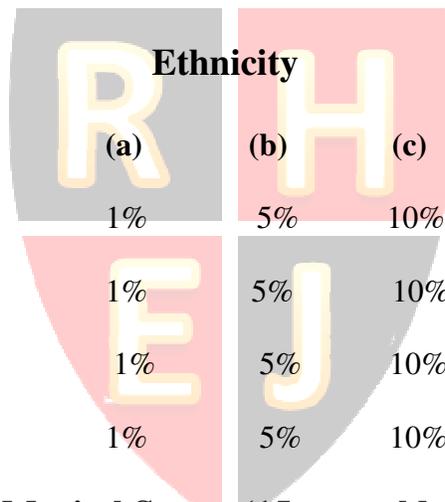
Please estimate the percentage of the total United States population made up of each of the following groups:

Gender

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Male:	40%	45%	50%	55%	60%
Female:	40%	45%	50%	55%	60%

Age

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
0-24 year olds:	15%	25%	35%	45%	55%
25-54 year olds:	15%	25%	35%	45%	55%
55 or more years old:	15%	25%	35%	45%	55%



	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Black/African American:	1%	5%	10%	15%	20%
American Indian:	1%	5%	10%	15%	20%
Asian American:	1%	5%	10%	15%	20%
Hispanic/Latino American:	1%	5%	10%	15%	20%

Marital Status (15 year olds and older)

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Married:	5%	25%	50%	75%	95%
Never Married:	5%	25%	50%	75%	95%
Divorced/Separated:	5%	25%	50%	75%	95%
Widowed:	5%	25%	50%	75%	95%

Sexual Orientation

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Heterosexual:	5%	25%	50%	75%	95%
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual:	5%	25%	50%	75%	95%

Educational Attainment (25 year olds and older)

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
High School Graduate or higher:	10%	25%	50%	75%	90%
Bachelor's Degree of higher:	10%	25%	50%	75%	90%

Disability Status

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Disabled (5 years and older):	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%
Disabled (65 years and older):	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%

Language Spoken

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
English Only:	55%	65%	75%	85%	95%
Language other than English:	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%

Religion

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Religious:	10%	25%	50%	75%	100%
Nonreligious:	0%	5%	10%	15%	20%

Socio-Economic Status

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Upper Class (HH incomes of \$500,000 or more):	1%	15%	30%	45%	60%
Upper Middle Class (HH incomes above \$100,000):	1%	15%	30%	45%	60%
Lower Middle Class (HH average incomes of \$35-75,000):	1%	15%	30%	45%	60%
Working Class (HH average Incomes of \$16-35,000):	1%	15%	30%	45%	60%
Lower Class (HH average Incomes of less than \$16,000):	1%	15%	30%	45%	60%

