

# ACHIEVING *Inclusive* EXCELLENCE:

## STRATEGIES FOR CREATING REAL AND SUSTAINABLE CHANGE IN QUALITY AND DIVERSITY



BY DAMON A. WILLIAMS

*Since the 1990s, the University of Connecticut has made several shifts in its culture and practice that have resulted in improved educational quality and greater success rates for students from traditionally underrepresented populations. Damon Williams shares his institution's approach.*

WHEN WORKING WITH MEMBERS of my own campus community or in my travels to other institutions, I often hear the same comments and questions from senior leadership, students, faculty, and members of diversity planning committees: “Our institution is struggling with respect to campus diversity and needs to find a way to turn the corner. How can we do it? Where do we start? How can we truly make a difference? We have a diversity plan, but is it enough?”

I nod sympathetically, knowing that in efforts to improve diversity, the change process is always difficult, but especially so in higher education. Several characteristics of colleges and universities make change a particularly com-

plex and painstaking process. Lengthy terms of employment for faculty and staff often result in substantial degrees of resistance to change. Decentralized structures create conflicting ideas about diversity and excellence, and loosely coupled systems make a coordinated future difficult to imagine. Moreover, ritualistic and symbolic diversity planning efforts—which result in superficial and short-term gains—tend to crowd out initiatives that result in deep and sustained transformation. In higher education environments, cultures do not change automatically, and diversity planning efforts are not successful simply because we desire them to be so. On too many campuses, tales of heroic diversity plans and heartfelt efforts often play out alongside persistent resistance that thwarts the work of well-meaning educators.

In a recent Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) monograph on organizational change and diversity, my colleagues Joseph Berger and Shederick McClendon and I argued that diversity planning committees should invest less time brainstorming diversity ideas and more time targeting the sources of resistance to real and meaningful organizational change—namely, institutional culture. Simply put, good ideas are cheap; good implementation is not. If educators are to overcome negative aspects of the culture of higher education and boost their diversity returns, they must focus on implementing a diversity change infrastructure that is holistic, multidimensional, and focused on making a real difference.

According to Edgar Schein, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor of organizational behavior and management, if we peel away the shell of any organization, we find a culture that is defined by a set of values, practices, systems, traditions, and behaviors that govern reality within the organization. To achieve deep and lasting change, we must unfreeze, move, and refreeze this culture in a way that is more consistent with our diversity goals, whether we define them in terms of increasing access and equity for historically underrepresented groups and women, creating a supportive campus climate for all, instilling a campuswide belief that diversity is an educational and organizational benefit, or designing formal and informal curricula characterized by diverse perspectives. Otto Scharmer, a founding co-director of the Society for Organizational Learning, argues that the key condition for transforming an organization's culture is to find the strategic leverage point. Drawing on his father's work as a farmer, Scharmer notes that every culture has two worlds, "the visible realm above the surface and the invisible realm below," and the leverage point is "at the interface between the two worlds, where they meet, connect, and intertwine" (p. 7). He further explains, "The realm in between is where the visible world (*what we see*) meets the invisible world (the *source* or place from which we perceive it)" (p. 7). Thus, to create and sustain inclusive learning environments, institutions must attend to visible elements such as symbols and administrative structures, as well as invisible elements such as the unspoken priorities and subconscious attitudes of community members. A campuswide diversity plan is not sufficient to move a culture unless the plan is supported by an implementation strategy that is complex, evolving, and at once both centralized and diffuse.

For the past several years, the University of Connecticut (UConn) has been carrying out an ambitious plan—one that focuses on finding strategic leverage points and changing the culture of the institution—in

pursuit of what AACU calls inclusive excellence. The idea is that excellence should be measured by how well campus systems, structures, and processes meet the needs of *all* institutional citizens, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender, or other characteristics. In essence, true excellence embodies solutions to deep-seated problems.

During UConn's pursuit of inclusive excellence, standard indicators of academic achievement such as SAT scores have risen to an all-time high across the entering class and so has enrollment of historically underrepresented African American and Latino students. UConn is also retaining and graduating minority students at nation-leading rates, and the university has recorded a slight increase in the ethnic and racial diversity of the faculty.

### STRATEGIC LEVERAGE POINTS FOR ACHIEVING CHANGE

**A**LTHOUGH THERE IS NO MAGIC formula for achieving inclusive excellence and we have not yet realized our ultimate objectives, we believe that the UConn experience (as well as the experience of other institutions) offers several lessons for cultivating an environment conducive to learning and success for the entire campus community. Whether one's daily practice involves intersecting with diversity initiatives on a casual basis; through the office of the president; in one of the various schools, colleges, or student communities in the institution; or as a member of a diversity planning committee, the following lessons shed light on ways to advance the ultimate aims of diversity planning.

*Diversity must be a campuswide priority.* At UConn, diversity is an integral part of academic and strategic planning efforts; diversity is regularly discussed at trustee and faculty senate meetings and among senior leadership and has recently been reemphasized in our institutional mission. For example, at a recent meeting of trustees, administrators, faculty, and students on future priorities for the university, a major aspect of the discussion focused on infusing diversity into research and scholarship. Unless diversity is included in discussions at the highest levels of governance, policy, and leadership, change will not occur.

UConn is working from a strategic diversity plan that was formally authorized by its board of trustees and focuses very clearly on identifying problems and proposing several steps for success. Because the plan is authorized at the highest levels of the institution, it applies to the entire university and is designed to withstand changes in leadership, even at the presidential or provost

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levels. Working from the 2002 trustees' plan also gives individuals—whether they are supportive or critical of the effort—a stable benchmark for judging the success or failure of the institution as it moves forward.

Still, to ensure change, institutions need diversity plans at both the campus level and at the unit, school, or college level. Colleges and universities are decentralized environments, and campuswide diversity plans may produce superficial or isolated changes if they do not burrow deep into the culture of the institution. High-profile campuswide plans may be quickly forgotten, shelved, or abandoned because institutional leaders and decision makers are not responsible for implementing the plans. Unless academic deans, vice presidents, department chairs, and others own the implementation process locally, diversity implementation efforts run the risk of being marginalized and limited.

The UConn provost's office recently began requiring each school, college, and division to develop its own diversity plan addressing recruitment and retention, curricular diversity, campus climate, and communication of diversity from its unique perspective. Deans and vice presidents are evaluated, in part, on how well they implement these plans. In order to achieve cultural change that runs deeper than the surface, institutions will need to attach diversity implementation efforts to their financial systems, rewarding individuals, departments, and units for gains they achieve in diversity and holding them accountable for the processes that they use to achieve these goals.

*Institutions need a diversity leadership development process to enhance the skills and shift the mental models of students, faculty, staff, and administrators.* Only by intentionally enhancing the skills of our administrators, faculty, students, and staff can we change standards and practices—"how things are done"—within our various schools, colleges, and divisions with respect to recruitment, admission decisions, hiring, campus climate, and teaching and learning. Achieving long-term success is not simply about doing things differently; it is about doing things better. It's about helping individuals at multiple levels of the institution develop the ability to nur-

ture, leverage, and enhance diversity in service to institutional excellence.

Embedded at the core of many of our institutions is a deep-seated belief that embracing diversity means lowering admissions requirements, which traditionally are heavily dependent on standardized test scores. Other core beliefs resistant to change hold that minority and women faculty and staff are hired into institutional slots to fill diversity or affirmative action quotas and that the introduction of issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and other "disruptive" topics into teaching and learning weakens the curriculum and represents inferior scholarship. Another common belief is that the presence of services and programs targeted to the needs of underrepresented groups balkanizes the campus environment by creating separate spaces for students from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds.

As Adrianna Kezar notes, to truly transform our institutions, we have to intentionally address the mental models that rest at the heart of our institutional cultures and help our college and university citizens develop new ones. One strategy that we use at the University of Connecticut is Conversations on Diversity, a series that involves the president, provost, deans, and other institutional leaders. These briefings feature prominent scholars, researchers, and leaders, who, in a working breakfast or lunch, provide valuable information to university personnel on diversity issues such as interpreting affirmative action-related court decisions; identifying new demographic trends and their implications for recruitment within the state; and recognizing how stereotypes and stigmas may affect the academic performance of minorities and women. This type of "social cognition" strategy is essential for helping individuals understand

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issues of diversity so that they can develop the policies and strategies needed to carry the institution's diversity efforts forward.

Targeted at a level of the organization that is often deeply resistant to diversity training, the social cognition strategy is particularly appropriate for managers and senior leaders because it allows them to be exposed to relevant information without being labeled racist, sexist, or homophobic. Each institution should have a diversity leadership development strategy in place that can build from these briefing platforms and address more difficult self-exploratory topics and individual pedagogical topics such as infusing diversity into the curriculum or creating inclusive and learning-centered classroom environments.

*An empowered, formal diversity infrastructure is essential.* The position of chief diversity officer is critical to achievement of inclusive excellence. By developing such a position, an institution expresses a powerful commitment to diversity. Commitment to diversity is often featured prominently on institutional Web sites but rarely enacted in the institution's offices, systems, and strategic planning processes.

Chief diversity officers are the lead architects of campus diversity efforts. When appropriately empowered, these high-ranking administrators play a key role in advising senior leadership and guiding the decision making of the institution. They also participate in a wide range of projects: leading an academic senate committee to develop a new general education diversity requirement; launching a new strategic initiative to recruit and hire more minority and women faculty; building international relationships and academic programs at sister institutions in other countries. Although chief diversity officers are not the only people responsible for campus diversity, they play a key role in catalyzing the diversity change process and act as the face of diversity issues and the conscience in regard to diversity at the institution.

At UConn, the Office of the Vice-Provost for Multicultural and International Affairs (OMIA) fulfills the

functions of the chief diversity officer. OMIA—which directs nineteen units, including campus cultural centers, ethnic studies institutes, international affairs programs, and affirmative action and equity efforts—extends the capabilities of the university in many important ways. Faculty and staff teach leading-edge courses and conduct research that expands the canon of knowledge of issues of race, gender, identity, globalization, and sexuality. OMIA hosts conferences and symposia that enrich the intellectual life of the institution and explores important current events like the Hurricane Katrina disaster and human rights in South Africa.

With an understanding that UConn is different socially from the inner cities of Hartford, Willimantic, New Haven, and Bridgeport that produce many of our students, OMIA staff place special emphasis on building relationships that support innovative initiatives for mentoring minority students, building retention programs, and conducting research projects. One illustration of UConn's work in this area is a five-year project funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) that has brought OMIA into collaboration with UConn's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and UConn's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, as well as several institutions throughout New England. The project aims to implement a leadership and academic success program for minority students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM fields). More than a standard retention program, this initiative leverages the best research on student identity, academic peer groups, campus climate, and quantitative preparation to increase academic success and develop leaders among African American, Latino, Native American, and first-generation college students studying in STEM fields.

OMIA developed the conceptual model for the program, which requires students to (1) participate in a first-year experience course focused on minorities in STEM fields, (2) engage in a rigorous quantitative tutorial program, (3) attend local and national leadership conferences, and (4) discuss important but rarely addressed topics. For example, students may discuss how

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to develop successful techniques for joining and starting study groups, including groups for students who may be the only people of color in their class and may not be asked to join other groups. Or students may discuss how a Latina female student might approach a white male engineering professor about academic difficulties that she is experiencing, even though she has never had a closed-door conversation with a white male and believes that she is made to feel stupid because she asks lots of questions in class.

Now in its fourth year, the program has enjoyed phenomenal success, with a retention rate of 100 percent among participants and student achievement levels that are better than campus norms for similar groups of minority students. Not only has the project been funded for an additional four-year period, but the university has also been awarded a second NSF grant to continue application of the model and the lessons learned in the first phase, resulting in a jump of more than \$1.5 million in resources available to increase ethnic and racial diversity in the STEM areas. This funding extension and the additional grant dollars will help further institutionalize a method proven to help traditionally under-represented students.

*Diversity needs to be embedded in the symbolic and cultural fabric of the institution.* Colleges and universities are highly symbolic and ritualized environments and focus on these elements to a greater extent than other types of organizations. As a result, rituals and traditions such as commencement, convocation, and presidential communications offer important clues to individuals on what is valued on the campus. To achieve inclusive excellence, institutions must infuse diversity into current traditions and build new traditions that position diversity as a top priority alongside academic, athletic, and leadership excellence.

Recently, UConn hosted a diversity awards celebration focused on achieving this goal. The event, a formal sit-down dinner, featured President Lee C. Bollinger

of Columbia University and focused on the role of diversity and its global and educational importance in the twenty-first century. From the beginning, the event was more than an opportunity to have a nice dinner and hear a good speaker. It was about creating a new consciousness and shared understanding about diversity among those in attendance.

Executed with the seriousness and tradition associated with our most cherished institutional events, the night began with a carefully crafted five-minute retrospective on the history of diversity and inclusion at the University of Connecticut. The retrospective began with the 1800s, when the first women and African American students were admitted and continued to the late 1990s, when UConn received the first North American United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Chair in Human Rights and developed OMIA and the chief diversity officer infrastructure.

Most academic deans and administrative vice presidents, the provost, and even some members of the board of trustees and State of Connecticut government officials attended the inaugural event and, through their presence, helped reinforce the importance of the celebration. Awards were given to students, faculty, staff, alumni, departments, corporations, and scholars who had made significant contributions to diversity both on campus and in the broader community. In a particularly compelling moment, former men's basketball coach Donald "Dee" Rowe brought two of his former players onstage and, eyes welling with tears, accepted the Diversity Pioneer Award for his efforts to field and graduate an entire starting team of African American student athletes in the 1960s. Rowe is an athletic icon in Storrs, and to have him discuss his personal commitment to diversity created a powerful and lasting image.

While this event may have some material yields (a nice plaque, a notation for one's vita, a letter in one's tenure and merit file), more critical is the message con-

veyed to the community about the university's support for and valuing of diversity and its place in the history, culture, and administrative fabric of the institution. While it is true that many institutions invest too heavily in symbols without leveraging the necessary political, financial, and structural resources to enact deeper change, it is also true that the symbolic dimension—when actively aligned with other work—remains vital to achieving cultural change and inclusive excellence.

*Motivational energy and entrepreneurial strategies are vital to change.* With all these important accomplishments, UConn has yet to fully implement a formal program to encourage campuswide engagement with diversity issues, as some other institutions have done.

One program that UConn could emulate is the one at the University of Michigan, where the Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives provides grants to undergraduate students for diversity-related programs, academic projects, and student leadership development opportunities. For example, a grant could fund an undergraduate student interested in conducting a faculty-supervised research project that examines the relationship between student involvement in minority student organizations like the National Society of Black Engineering and academic achievement or successful participation in research. Funding could also be given to a student organization to purchase the Game of Oppression, a board game produced by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. The organization could host a game and discussion night with members of the executive boards of student government and the campus newspaper to explore how issues of identity and privilege intersect with the experience of all students.

Similarly, Michigan State University recently developed an inclusive excellence grant program that encourages faculty and staff to develop curricular initiatives designed to leverage the educational benefits of diversity for all students. The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education is also encouraging innovative diversity efforts through a broad challenge grant process.

Entrepreneurial strategies like these create opportunities for campus community members to lead diversity efforts even if they are not diversity professionals like those in ethnic studies, the women's center, or the chief diversity officer suite. This moves students, faculty, and staff from passive observers of the campus change process to creative initiators of diversity programming and other activities. These programs may also serve as important conduits for empowering white men to participate in a process that seldom recognizes their contributions to diversity and change.

*Administrative systems need to be modified to accommodate the needs of historically underrepresented populations.* UConn's vice provost for enrollment management and its Office of Undergraduate Admissions have implemented a series of new strategies that go beyond the standard fare of adding diverse faces to every Web site and marketing piece. For example, the university has begun hosting "minority yield" receptions specifically designed to spur interaction among prospective students of color and to address questions and issues that ethnically and racially diverse students and their parents have about financing higher education, selecting a major, and living in a nearly all white, rural, and isolated community like Storrs, Connecticut.

UConn's admissions office also works with campus cultural centers to hire diverse University of Connecticut students and has these students call prospective minority students who have been admitted but have not yet accepted the invitation to enroll. Division I athletic programs often use this strategy to recruit blue-chip prospects, but this strategy proves just as useful for prospective students who are not athletes. Ultimately, it personalizes the decision-making process by establishing a one-on-one relationship with prospective students.

Similar culturally aligned strategies are applied at "electronic admission days" held at major urban high schools. On these days, UConn admissions staff visit urban, largely minority high schools to guide prospective students through the online application process. Like most institutions, UConn is moving toward a paperless admissions process in order to streamline systems, create financial efficiencies, and deliver a higher quality of service to prospective students. Undergraduate admissions staff developed this program as a way to achieve our goals for greater administrative excellence without sacrificing participation of potential students who may not have access to a home computer. Without this type of targeted intervention implemented directly in minority communities, we may have seen a dramatic reduction in the number of applicants coming from large urban feeder schools in Hartford and elsewhere across the state. Instead, the number of applications has remained consistent, without any significant decreases from feeder areas.

These recruiting strategies are important for a number of reasons. They allow UConn to validate the unique identities, experiences, and needs that many students of color bring to campus. They also help entering students begin to become integrated into the campus environment and develop a sense of belonging before they even enroll in and begin classes. This sense of belonging is widely recognized as an essential component of retention at the institution. Finally, many stu-

dents of color leave predominantly white institutions with enormous bitterness because they do not have a sense of connection to their alma mater. By entrusting current students with the recruitment role of selling UConn's brand to prospective buyers, the university empowers them as agents of change who are important co-creators of the current reality of the institution and designers of a positive legacy for future students.

## SUSTAINING CHANGE OVER THE LONG HAUL

**A**T UCONN, WE HAVE LEARNED that success is generally uneven and incremental; shifts in one area of the institution may not necessarily lead to changes in another area. Though we have accomplished a great deal and believe we are moving in the right direction, we must remain vigilant if we are to sustain our momentum and continue to make progress.

In order for us to maintain this momentum, several principles should underpin the inclusive excellence strategies identified in this article:

- Institutional leaders must build a powerful definition and rationale for diversity that is at once academic, inclusive, and focused on both contemporary and historic diversity issues. However, diversity planning committees and teams cannot let the often laborious process of defining diversity halt progress on initiatives. Leverage the literature, look to the court decisions related to Michigan's affirmative action, and move forward with a definition and vision for diversity that will continue to evolve along with your implementation efforts.

- Communicate your diversity vision, strategy, and outcomes consistently and with conviction. Efforts to achieve greater diversity outcomes should be a powerful piece of your institutional brand that is marketed and positioned, like a new football stadium or the addition of a Nobel prize winner to the faculty, as a positive point of difference between your institution and others.

- Top leadership must invest in change over the long haul. Diversity cannot be a fad. Institutional leaders must continue to place diversity at or near the top of academic, financial, and social priorities of the institution, even during times of financial retrenchment and competing interests.

- Because financial management will always be a challenge for institutions without extraordinarily large endowments, creativity is essential when formulating a resource equation to drive diversity work. For example, when the University of Michigan launched the Michigan Mandate for Diversity in the 1990s, they taxed each college, school, and division to create a central funding pool for diversity.

- Campus diversity efforts should be tracked and measured, and not simply in terms of baseline demographics and retention numbers. On the contrary, data collection activities should focus on issues of climate, differential levels of academic success, and understanding the implications of diversity for all students in terms of learning, student development, and clarification of values. These data can then become an important tool for organizational learning and continuous quality improvement.

- Higher education's diversity challenges and opportunities do not exist in a vacuum, nor can our strategies for achieving inclusive excellence. Institutions should consistently look to create partnerships and relationships with the pre-college educational community, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and niche higher education institutions like historically black and minority-serving institutions and community colleges.

Achieving inclusive excellence and cultural change is a process of perpetually disturbing and realigning structures and mind-sets; questioning the past; and encouraging students, faculty, and staff to stretch and find new ways to support, nurture, and leverage diversity in service to new levels of institutional excellence.

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