

The Importance of Diversity

Most diversity plans start by explaining why diversity is important. But a reading of more than 50 JMC diversity plans reveals how dramatically different the motives can be – ranging from legal obligation to social justice to creating better media.

For example, a Southern program wrote its plan with an eye on the disadvantaged: “In our experience, as an urban university located in an area with one of the highest poverty rates in the country, promoting diversity requires much more than writing syllabi with the right phrases and checking the right boxes on forms. Diversity, to us, is an attitude.... [We] provide students of different backgrounds the greatest possible opportunity to learn and develop themselves as journalists and positive contributors to society.”

In contrast, notice how a Western program in a nearly all-white state focuses on the benefit to its white students: “Without diversity, both in persons and in programs, our students will be ill-prepared to work as journalists, to function as responsible citizens, or to meet the personal and professional challenges of the future in the multicultural collage that our country has become.”

Here are other themes that serve as the philosophical foundation of diversity plans:

From a program in a rural state: “The principle of **social justice** encompasses the legal and moral obligations to promote opportunity, equality, civility and respect for all people. This principle, and the commitment to including all voices and all social narratives in the marketplace of ideas, directs the School of Journalism.”

From a prestigious journalism school: “[We] must be a leader and a role model in the complex process of **integrating media workplaces**, media content, and journalism education.”

From a state university with an Affirmative Action Office: “[We] will act affirmatively to **assure equal opportunity** in employment and in delivery of programs and offerings consistent with federal and state civil rights laws and affirmative action guidelines.”

From a religiously affiliated school: “Diversity is a description of the way God created people. Understanding and respecting individuals who are different from one’s self, whether racially, socially, ideologically or spiritually, is a natural outcome of understanding the vast **diversity of God’s creation**.”

From a Research I school: “Research suggests that diversity can increase an institution’s creativity and innovation... [and] that diverse groups and organizations have **performance advantages** over homogeneous ones.”

From an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities): “[Our mission is to] **prepare African American students** to live and work in a professional media environment and to communicate news and information to a mainly white culture.”

From a private university: “To best **serve the public good**, those entrusted to communicate news, information, insight and entertainment in our society should reflect the diverse audiences they seek to reach.”

Motives range
from helping blacks
to helping whites,
from social justice
to better workplaces

Initially... Only
race and gender

Now... 'True diversity
must be a lot more
colorful' and broader

A history lesson
can provide context
for a diversity plan

Having so many ways to view diversity led one Midwestern department to write:

“It has become clear that 'diversity' is in the eye of the beholder. Even the prior diversity standard of ACEJMC took a view of a world that largely was black and white (and, of course, male and female). We know now that true diversity must be a lot more colorful than that. It must be multifaceted. In addition to race and gender, it requires an exposure to different religious beliefs, national origin, sexual orientation and, some would argue, economic class.”

ACEJMC’s former diversity standard referred only to race and gender. The current diversity standard – Standard 3 Diversity and Inclusiveness, first applied in the 2005-06 accreditation cycle – uses broader language by also referring by name to ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities and underrepresented groups.

This booklet on “Good Ideas for Your Diversity Plan” focuses on ACEJMC’s first indicator for Standard 3: “The unit has a written plan for achieving an inclusive curriculum, a diverse faculty and student population, and a supportive climate for working and learning and for assessing progress toward achievement of the plan.”

Good idea... Clearly articulate in the unit’s diversity plan the value of diversity to the program and to society.

It’s interesting to read self-studies and learn the history of a place.

A large Midwestern school adopted its first diversity plan in 1986, in part to overcome a bad university heritage. The school wrote in its self-study: “The university was a segregated institution until the early 1950s, and the school has been forced to live down that reputation in its urban centers where most minority student candidates can be found. We are making slow but steady progress as a campus, and the School of Journalism leads the way.”

A Southern program explained that its university mandated a “diversity experience” for all students following a series of racial incidents on campus in the 1990s.

A unit in an overwhelmingly white state explained that it is required by state law to engage in special recruiting efforts to attract Native Americans to campus to reach the state’s 6 percent Native level. The African American population in this state is less than 1 percent.

A Western university cited its long-time commitment to diversity, saying it has been recognized “as a national leader in this area for 40 years” and noting that it launched the nation’s first bilingual community newspaper published by a journalism program.

Good idea... Provide historical context in the diversity plan to explain why the program is the way it is.

Sometimes we wonder if an accreditation review really makes an impact on diversity.

Here is an example that it does. When an ACEJMC team criticized a California school for needing to significantly improve the number of women and minority faculty, the school went to work. Six years later, in its most recent self-study, the school reported good news: “Since the last review, the faculty has increased by 15 members and the number of women and minorities now equals nearly half of the full-time faculty.”

The school left no doubt that accreditation was a major impetus for this improvement.