

Diversity Plans and Assessment

Diversity plans come in all shapes and sizes. Some are highly textual, philosophical and reflective. Others are a complex matrix of goals, strategies and action steps. Some emphasize process; others focus on percentages. Some are lengthy treatises; others are only a single page.

While each diversity plan should have its own look and feel, our reading of more than 50 diversity plans did lead to four broad recommendations:

Show a real commitment. Some diversity plans are written in a way that reflects a genuine appreciation for diversity goals. Others leave the impression of mechanically going through the motions. For instance, one school's diversity goal is to "work harder to support minorities and other marginalized groups." That's it. Work harder. The diversity plan provided nothing of substance to indicate this pledge would be pursued. A diversity plan should indicate that the faculty thought deeply about why diversity is important to their programs, to their students, to communications professions, and to society at large.

Set realistic goals. The timeline for achieving diversity goals primarily should be within the time frame of the next accreditation visit. One school set a diversity goal of having 30 percent international and U.S. ethnic minority student enrollment by 2016. The program is nowhere close to this goal now, and there's no way an accrediting team in a few years will be able to assess success at that time. It's not a reasonable goal that can be measured at the time of the next site visit. Of more interest is what the unit's diversity plan said would be done six years ago, and what actually was accomplished.

Be specific. Too many departments pledge to "Develop innovative mechanisms to attract underrepresented groups" without ever describing what those innovations will be. Compare these two recruiting goals from the same department. This one offers no specificity or measurable outcome: "Continue exploring ways to recruit more minority students." The other is specific and subject to a known outcome: "Develop a program in which students from the department mentor journalism students at a local high school, with half of the student body representation coming from racial or ethnic minority groups."

Take some initiative. While an impressive matrix of diversity goals and objectives looks good, it can't hide lack of content. One school's matrix posted this objective: "Actively recruit and retain diverse faculty." But there was nothing active about the four strategies listed: adhering to the university's Affirmative Action Plan, maintaining yearly data on minority percentages, encouraging faculty participation in conferences related to minority media, and supporting faculty seeking tenure and promotion. Not an initiative in the lot. A diversity plan ought to include some proactive elements.

Excellent diversity plans abound in a variety of formats. The most common format lists goals and action steps with an introduction. A few plans are in essay style. Some programs create complex matrices that list objectives, responsible parties, dates to achieve, and benchmarks for success. For example, a state university lists the objective "Develop a partnership with an HBCU for ongoing mutual activities." The dean is responsible for achieving this objective by a stated date, with the benchmark for success being "Letter of agreement signed."

In four words:
commitment, goals,
specificity, initiative

Bravo to programs that list both goals and outcomes

The problem with diversity plans, of course, is that they are *plans*. They focus on the intended achievements of the future rather than describing successes and failures in the past.

About a dozen JMC programs also provided us their self-study text for the diversity standard. It was a delight to see some of them provide the goals in their diversity plans in linear fashion and proceed to list outcomes. One school's diversity plan listed the goal "Actively recruit minority students through personal visits by faculty and alumni and through direct mail and phone contacts." In the self-study, the school specified its active recruitment efforts that led to an increase in the number of minority-entering students for three consecutive years.

Another self-study listed curriculum goals paired with outcomes. For example, a goal about inviting guest speakers who offer minority perspectives is paired with this outcome: "Each year during Communication Week, majors are invited to attend a panel of female and minority media professionals who discuss their experiences working in the media. Other minority speakers are invited to individual classes throughout the year." A list is provided of the speakers.

Standard 3 consists of 13 questions. The first four ask for completion of seven tables, a copy of the unit's diversity plan, a copy of the institution's plan if any, and the unit's progress toward achieving the plan's objectives. Standard 3 then asks questions about curriculum (is it inclusive in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation), student climate, student recruitment, admissions requirements, minority retention, faculty recruitment, faculty climate, adjunct hiring, and visiting professors and guests.

Half of all tables in the self-study focus on the diversity standard

Overall, the accreditation self-study contains 14 tables spanning the nine standards. Half of them are part of a single standard – "Diversity and Inclusiveness." This could leave the impression that this standard is primarily about numbers.

Table 4: Area Population. This important table requires the unit to define its "service area." ACEJMC does not specify what percentage of student enrollment needs to come from the service area, but surely it would be more than half. A state university typically lists its state as the service area. A regional institution lists its region of the state. Some universities list only their home county or a few surrounding counties, while others draw heavily from across the nation and therefore list the United States as the service area. The U.S. Census Bureau permits a person to check more than one demographic category (for instance, "Hispanic/Latino" and "Two or more races"). As a result, racial and ethnic percentages consistently total more than 100 percent.

Table 5: High School Population. This table is more nuisance than benefit. Numbers are hard to gather, harder to interpret, and seldom of use. The table asks for a head count of graduating seniors, by racial/ethnic category, in the service area. However, state education departments gather high school enrollments in different ways – sometimes annually, sometimes not; sometimes counting both public and private high schools, sometimes only public schools; and sometimes even having different racial/ethnic categories. These inconsistencies may not be apparent for the unit gathering data for only a single county or state, but the inconsistencies become glaring for units that must gather data on multiple states. The end result is a table filled with head counts gathered in different ways state-to-state. Frankly, the percentages of Tables 4 and 5 are going to be roughly similar, with Table 5 showing a slightly higher minority percentage because of a younger minority profile. If this were a NASA launch that required absolute precision, then a second table like this might be necessary. But an accreditation team simply wants a sense of minority population in the designated service area in order to broadly compare it to the unit's student and faculty diversity, and Table 4 provides that broad comparison nicely.

Table 5a: Geographic Sources of Enrolled Population. All this table asks is whether the geographic home of the unit's student body mirrors the geographic home of the university's student body. Perhaps 75 percent of the unit's students come from a particular state, compared to 78 percent of the university's students. The table asks for no minority breakdown and seems disconnected to the diversity standard.

Table 6: Student Populations. This important table reports the percentage of minority students in both the JMC unit and the university at large. It allows the unit to see whether it attracts its share of minority students within the university, and how that percentage broadly compares to the minority population in the service area. A common goal in JMC diversity plans is to match or exceed the university minority enrollment percentages.

Table 7: Faculty Populations. This table is important, but often badly mangled. It asks for a breakdown of JMC faculty by gender and race/ethnicity. For instance, the faculty might be 40 percent white men, 40 percent white women, 10 percent minority men, and 10 percent minority women. It's startling, then, to see a self-study list a total of eight faculty members, with the four white men representing 31.4 percent of the total. Huh? Another self-study categorizes *half* of its faculty as "two or more races." To date, we've never known an accreditation team to start asking individual faculty about their racial/ethnic backgrounds to verify the accuracy of these tables. With this particular department, a team might have a basic curiosity.

Tables 6 and 7 Breakout of International Student and Faculty Statistics. Because of the Accrediting Council's action in May 2007, units now must separate U.S. minorities from international students and faculty. The Council said the goal of "seeking redress for past underrepresentation of domestic populations" is more important than the goal of "providing enrichment through increasing internationalism." If this is true, then the direction of the Council seems at odds with the diversity plans by many of its own institutions.

Table 8: Full-time Faculty Recruitment. This table requires units to report the number of faculty openings, the total number of applicants in the hiring pool, the number of females in the hiring pool, the number of female finalists considered, the number of offers made to female finalists, the number of offers accepted by female finalists, the number of minorities in the hiring pool, the number of minority finalists considered, the number of offers made to minority finalists, and the number of offers accepted by minority finalists. This must be done for each of the preceding three years. The problem is, the table relies in part on self-reported and speculative data. A state school reported that it received 200 applications for faculty positions in one year, but only a quarter of applicants returned the voluntary data card seeking personal characteristics. Question 10 in the diversity standard asks units to describe efforts to recruit women and minority faculty. That can be done well textually, without having to use either incomplete or unverifiable numbers.

Table 9: Part-time/Adjunct Faculty Recruitment. Similar to Table 8, this table requires the same compilation in 10 categories across three years. However, many schools do not conduct formal searches for part-time faculty but instead rely on local availability. Question 12 in the diversity standard asks the unit to describe its efforts to hire women and minority adjuncts and to list them by name. That seems quite sufficient.

Three tables appear to be sufficient to designate the service area and its demographics, the diversity in the student population in the unit and university, and the diversity in faculty composition. Having so many additional tables could send the unhealthy message that the diversity standard is primarily about creating a right set of numbers.

**Three tables
seem sufficient;
ACEJMC should
rethink the rest**

Embracing diversity means more than tables and numbers

1st step: Create a good diversity plan

2nd step: Assess how well the goals are achieved

Good idea... Think of diversity and inclusiveness as a human endeavor, not as a set of quantitative tables. JMC programs need to embrace diversity in its fullness.

Good idea... Tell your success stories. As an example of embracing diversity, one school told about making its new multimedia lab more accessible to wheelchair-bound individuals by installing a wireless networking system with a laptop computer that can simulate the controls mounted in the console.

Good idea... Hold feedback forums with minority students to learn more about student recruitment, retention and academic climate. Several diversity plans list feedback forums as an intention, but none of the self-studies indicated such sessions had been conducted.

Good idea... Make sure your diversity plan goals can be assessed – and, in fact, do that assessment.

The National Survey of Student Engagement asks hundreds of thousands of students each year about their college experiences, from the amount of time spent studying to how often they have serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity.

Overall, 774 colleges and universities in the United States participated in the spring 2008 survey, and home institutions could extrapolate results for the unit if a sufficient number of JMC students participated to provide validity.

One JMC school did just that. A NSSE question asks if diverse perspectives (such as race and gender) are included in class discussions or assignments. This unit found that 71 percent of the responding 105 JMC students said *often* or *very often*, compared to the NSSE national average of 60 percent. This is a highly effective way to show that JMC students assess the curriculum and instruction positively in terms of diversity and inclusiveness.

Other assessment tools also can be used to help a faculty evaluate the state of diversity in the unit, from internship evaluations to senior exit interviews to alumni surveys. The key is to recognize that creating a meaningful diversity plan is only a first step, to be followed by assessing how well the goals and objectives have been achieved.

The 2007-08 ASJMC Diversity Committee hopes this publication will help stimulate ways of thinking about diversity and specifically provide a number of good ideas when you revisit your diversity plan.