

Shifting Student Demographics and Their Impact on the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities' Transformation: Preparing for Change

Christina C. Frazier
Analyst
Office of Institutional
Research
University of Minnesota

Richard D. Howard
Director
Office of Institutional
Research
University of Minnesota

Barbra Banks
Graduate Student
Department of Work,
Human Resource Education
University of Minnesota

John Kellogg
Assistant Director
Office of Institutional
Research
University of Minnesota

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

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Purpose

This study was designed to explore the perceptions and understandings of the potential impact on associate deans, department chairs, and administrative leaders (referred to as academic leaders) about the emerging historically-underrepresented student profile at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. An interpretive orientation to this study was used. By conducting one-on-one interviews with academic leaders across campus between March and April 2009, we hoped to identify strategic approaches and to respond to those needs.

Goal

Our goal was to identify useful insights about possible solutions for preparing for the coming demographic shifts in our undergraduate students. We also anticipated offering strategies for the University to intentionally plan for the transformation of its student population in ways to continue to meet its vision and commitment to excellence. The specific questions addressed through this inquiry were:

1. How do academic leaders adapt to the changing student demographics and their potential impact on the instructional or support services they provide?
2. What is the role of academic leaders to handle the changes in the university's student demographic population?
3. What response is needed by academic leaders to support a future profile of university students?

Method

As a step toward addressing the research questions in this study, we convened an advisory group that included a faculty member, two university-wide directors, two administrative leaders, a graduate student, and a local school district representative. The group met three times throughout the year to assist in the research design, interview protocol, and review and comment about the findings and recommendations. We sought the group members' advice and suggestions throughout the study.

We conducted one-on-one interviews with academic leaders across the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. The parameters used to select participants include (a) pervasiveness of students taking coursework from a particular academic unit to meet graduation requirements, (b) the quantitatively identifiable changes in the students of color profile over a 5 year period, and (c) the administrative leaders who have major undergraduate oversight and responsibility in academic and support service areas. Participants were given demographic profiles of their academic unit, the Twin Cities campus, and the State of Minnesota prior to the interviews. We asked every interviewee the same questions and recorded their answers. After each interview, an external reviewer was sent transcripts of the meeting to verify themes or key categories across the interviews. After clarification and content analysis were completed, themes emerged and were used to inform the results of the project.

Summary of Findings: Emerging Themes

We identified key themes from the one-on-one interviews. We identified the frequency with which each theme emerged. Each interviewee expressed concerns according their particular context, but the following themes remained constant and salient throughout the analysis:

- Evidence through Data
- Shared Understanding
- Only Focusing on a Core Group
- Figuring Out How to Do It
- Island Over Here on the Frontier

Evidence through data refers to the amount, type, and availability of quantitative evidence for substantiation about trends and predictions. Academic leaders want a common understanding and a systematic, data-driven approach to understanding the issue. Evidence-based documentation available to share with their unit colleagues would be a critical step to show actual and predicted demographic shifts. Academic leaders want the detailed demographic data integrated into future analyses by the Office of Institutional Research in order to provide a consistent understanding of what the situation is and will be in the future.

The phrase *shared understanding* describes the pendulum of academic leader's awareness about the emerging demographic shifts and its affects in the classrooms and services provided. Their awareness about changes in the student profile were based on (a) teaching general requirement courses that include students from a variety of majors and colleges, (b) minimal contact outside departmental courses and the academic unit, or (c) diverse clothing attire seen on campus. They perceive their colleagues as having limited knowledge about the projected demographics changes and that the shifts would have nominal impact on their instructional practices and services. Further, few academic leaders consider the percentage of students of color may have nearly reached its peak, or plateau, and question it growing at a higher rate than the state or region. Lastly, academic leaders want "higher level, top down" leadership that will strategically increase the importance of educating historically-underrepresented students, which in turn may lead to more emphasis for their colleagues to follow, conform, and feel supported.

Only focusing on a core group appeared as a common theme among the academic leaders as a limitation to diversity related definitions. Academic leaders refocus their perspective

of student of color to consider gender and or socio-economic status. There are academic leaders who (a) consider a particular racial population as not historically-underrepresented, (b) reclassify the meaning of under-represented as “historically-underrepresented, white students, from working class backgrounds,” (c) or merge specific racial populations with international students. Further, confusion exists for how to academically serve first-generation, new immigrant students versus historically-underrepresented students. Overall, academic leader redefine students of color to meet their academic and programmatic needs for the academic unit.

Figuring out how to do it refers to the ability to educate students in an inclusive, multicultural learning environment. Faculty development and renewed training of pedagogies were absent from academic leaders comments unless specifically asked. “Figuring out how to do it before I encourage other people to do it” highlights the desire for institutional innovative options needed for academic leaders. There are varied levels of motivation to engage in development or teaching renewal initiatives and convening like-employee groups and existing gathering venues lends to a captured audience and learning environment. Further, there are various types of efforts occurring across campus (e.g., Human Resources and Equity and Diversity), but their impact or influence across academic leaders calls into question assumptions about traditional academic methods, gaps in curriculum, and differences in services.

The level of strategic work to modify curriculum or services varies amongst academic units. Academic leaders are (a) actively engaged in strategic curricular reviews, (b) consider multiculturalism and diversity already embedded within their curriculum, (c) have reached barriers or resistance for change from colleagues, or (d) do not see it necessary to make changes. For a few academic leaders, it was less of a curricular modification need and more of enhancing technological capabilities and options within their instructional practices to meet a new generation of students.

Island over here on the frontier was an overarching theme when academic leaders highlighted specific programs and initiatives to serve historically-underrepresented students. Academic leaders are isolated from initiative efforts across campus and without a forum to discuss concerns, programmatic efforts, or share new ideas. Academic leaders have faced poor outcomes in their efforts and many unit activities were initiated and maintained by a single faculty member. Diligent attempts to recruit students to their unit through national programs, local collaborations and partnerships, and even some faculty initiated efforts were short-lived due to (a) the time intensity involved to promote and carry out the activity, (b) high costs to keep the program quality sustained, (c) lack of interest on part of the academic unit, (d) little return for their effort, or (e) poor experience and unfortunate outcomes as a result of collaboration or partnership. Academic leaders want institutional-level support and resources for these efforts to be sustained or even just started.

Academic leaders emphasize the importance of central administration’s student support programs (i.e., Access to Success) for students of color to relieve units from meeting some of these student needs. Academic leaders want greater cohesion and holistic approaches amongst central support service units rather than the units operating as separate entities.

Results: Answering the Research Questions

Five emerging themes identified in this study illustrate that there are differences and

commonalities between how the academic leaders view the impact of the emerging demographic student profile. The results of the study follow:

1. How are academic leaders adapting to the changing student demographics and their potential impact on the instructional or support services they provide?

Academic leaders' adaption to the emerging undergraduate student profile shift involves understanding what information is needed or lacking in order to comprehend the current and future environment on campus. Understanding the historical trends and anticipated predictions of the changing demographic environment, therefore, requires quantitative evidence to develop a common understanding and starting point for discussion among academic leaders. In several instances, academic leaders commented that their faculty colleagues are not exposed to quantitative data or opt to not consider other communications strategies. An academic leader stated, "My faculty are kind and good people. They are also evidential based; they want hard numbers. One of my challenges is to give them that hard number if I can, that is what they need and part of it is understanding the data." Hunches or guesses for decision making about academic programs and services for historically-underrepresented students are occurring, but would be more valuable when partnered with statistical trend information.

Making a *case* for altering instructional or support services by academic leaders requires not only comprehending the predictions that will become reality, but also having a shared knowledge about the emerging demographic shifts and their affect. An academic leader stated, "I showed graphics of the changes [to faculty members] and you see their jaws drop. They say, 'You're making this up!' We are a group of people, scientists, that respond to data. You see wheels beginning to turn." Currently, the perspective about the possible shifts in the historically-underrepresented student population is based on what the person *sees* or who the person comes *in contact with* internal to or external from the academic unit. Further, by perceiving the percentage of students of color may have peaked or rate of change in the student profile will be slow-coming, efforts to accommodate a change will linger at all levels of the institution. Academic leaders, thus, continue to be challenged to make a case for a far-reaching change in instructional or support services and its impact on the institution and academic units.

2. What is the role of associate deans, department chairs, and administrative leaders to handle the changes in the university's student demographic population?

In order for academic leader's to handle the changes in the university's historically-underrepresented student profile, it requires them to interpret the situation, predict actions necessary, and strategically plan for the future impact on the unit or institution. In a broad sense, university leaders are working and making adjustments but academic leaders or their unit faculty members, specifically, run into barriers that negate their ability to move forward. One academic leader stated the following:

Maybe when as more and more students of color come to this university it will become recognized more as part of our job to help those students graduate from this university. We'll provide support for them and become more of a natural way of conducting our business. What I doubt is that faculty think that it is part of their job.

For some academic units, continual efforts by faculty members or unit leaders to recruit students of color result in high cost for the academic unit with few applicants matriculating. Academic

programming internal to the unit is considered beneficial if given pointed attention by faculty or mentorship options, paid student work or leadership opportunities within the unit, and or scholarship or stipend awards provided as a result of service and engagement back to the community. Academic leaders support faculty members' work or their personal efforts, as time permits or on their own time, to support the shifting undergraduate student profile. On a broad spectrum, academic leaders' frustrations and agitation are evident across the units, but anticipation for the new or emerging challenges ahead exists for several leaders.

Though the university defines historically-underrepresented students and other diversities based on federal definitions, academic leaders educating and serving historically-underrepresented student populations consider or select specific groups as those requiring specific services or needs. An academic leader stated, "It is just not historically-underrepresented students of color, its historically-underrepresented, white students, from working class backgrounds." Changing the meaning about what groups are considered historically-underrepresented or the attributes for diversity and who is impacted depends on the academic unit. Apparent confusion exists from academic leaders about *if* and *what types* of services are needed for historically-underrepresented versus first generation immigrant students and also international students versus students of color. To address this uncertainty, redefining students of color or focusing their efforts to gender groups or socioeconomic status is an avenue for academic leaders to predict a future profile and conceptualize current efforts and future priorities.

3. What response is needed by associate deans, department chairs, and administrative leaders to support a future profile of university students?

Academic leader's response to the emerging historically-underrepresented student profile is based on their perceived need to act on new instructional and student service opportunities. Actions and developing possible strategies to respond to meeting the institution's strategic goals are a result of academic leaders gaining new knowledge about the situation. Their initiatives to consider new pedagogies, scholarship options, and recruitment initiatives are strong evidence about efforts to create greater diversity within their academic unit. For some, past collaborations and programmatic efforts proved unrewarding and a disappointment. An academic leader stated:

I think there is potential for collaboration on campus...There are natural barriers...We are sitting in a perfect storm. In some ways, with the economic environment for with it is and the stresses on the college, [it] tends to lead to a bunker mentality...and we have to protect our turf, close the ranks....Talking about collaboration, you have to be confident in yourself or your organization to expose it, take a risk.

There are other academic leaders who are taking up new efforts, though on an individual basis, to slowly educate their faculty members about the changing demographics, offer courses that include diversity discussions, or create research projects and mentorship opportunities for students as a way to engage students in a diverse manner. Few academic units, however, are strategically preparing for the future student profile through a calculated approach, but their actions to make a difference signal their perceived need to strategically think about the future student profile.

Academic leader's emphasized that institutional support is required as the primary foundation, along with university-level leadership as champions, for accommodating, educating, and supporting increasingly diverse student populations. For some academic leaders, their immediate supervisor was the driver behind their efforts, while others sought the motivation,

resources, and information from university-level leadership. In particular, a budgetary response to support programs and their other unit efforts are critical since many feel isolated or inconsequential to the larger university strategic diversity work. From technology resources to personnel to program and services, fiduciary needs were identified as critical for addressing their efforts and movement toward strategically addressing the future diverse student body. Further, through faculty renewal and development opportunities for academic leaders, specific pedagogical, instructional, and collaboration strategies are available, on a limited basis, to attend. As a critical resource to academic leaders and their unit faculty members, the means to participate and the rewards for attending are minimal. Without institutional support, academic leaders are challenged to move forward to make a greater impact and strategic effort to act on the emerging shift in demographics.

Recommendations

As described in the themes, we developed a conceptual way to group suggested recommendations: (a) awareness building, (b) skill building, and (c) institutional balance. The following suggestions are based on the categories identified in this study:

Awareness Building

Consistently throughout the study, academic leaders expressed the need to be aware of and acquire information about current trends and predictions about the emerging historically-underrepresented student profile. Academic leaders provided suggestions about how to address the emerging shift in the student profile or their efforts to be prepared for the change if necessary. Review of the literature and conversations with diversity leaders throughout the country led to several approaches to address this issue. Below are key suggested approaches:

- a. *Become data-informed* through sharing of data and resources across the institution and within academic units and knowing how well students are doing, what they say about their experiences and at what rates they progress and graduate.
- b. *Dialogue* in an open and safe environment to explore and ask questions as a means to reduce biases and stereotypes. For example, at Ferris State University, the dean holds weekly brunches with faculty to discuss shared readings on diversity-related topics.
- c. Grant *time and focused study* to dialogue with peers (Musil, 2000)¹. “If we...ignore where people *are at* and where they *are coming from*, we drastically diminish the potential power of education” (Beckham, 2008, p. 12)².
- d. *Provide release time* to serve as faculty diversity coordinator to recruit small groups of colleagues to work on diversity issues and organize academic unit-wide faculty forums to brainstorm new directions.
- e. *Develop mentoring or matching up* faculty with other faculty or external community members to offer an alternative way to increase diversity awareness, knowledge, and skill-building through the development of a professional relationship.

¹ Musil, C.M. (2000). Faculty development and democratic spaces of possibility: Building communities of knowledge, inclusion, and commitment. In E.F. Beckham (Ed.), *Diversity, democracy, and higher education: A view from three nations* (pp. 89-116). Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

² Beckham, E.F. (Ed). (2000). *Diversity, democracy, and higher education: A view from three nations*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

- f. *Create an environment for faculty to convene* to discuss current practices, programs, and initiatives for supporting, recruiting and or educating students.

Skill Building

Training, professional development, and faculty programming were absent in the interviews. Though academic leaders emphasized curriculum challenges and integration of multicultural efforts as strategic work within their unit, developing as a faculty member was inconspicuously absent. Several approaches to strengthen academic leaders' professional development and renewal are identified below. These suggestions have been identified as practices at numerous institutions across the country.

- a. *Offer a series of sustainability, pedagogical, community engagement, accountability, and transformation seminars* to assist faculty in their own transformation along with creating and innovating courses, alignment and sustainable communities and activities, and research initiatives and outcomes that is inclusive of diversity *and* encourages reflection. This effort should be aligned with reimagining and reframing of equity and diversity at the University (http://www.academic.umn.edu/equity/pdf/ReimaginingED_Dec2009.pdf).
- b. *Offer professional development collaborations* between academic and student affairs departments, such as sponsoring seminars or research projects, that allow faculty and staff the opportunity to work together over a period of time (e.g., one semester) on issues of diversity, globalization, local and global connections, student-centered pedagogies and transformative education. As a way to create a greater sense of community, encourage participants to apply new knowledge to revise courses, programs and ways of teaching. This practice is a model from the New Jersey Campus Diversity Initiative at Bloomfield College.
- c. *Identify and convene pre-existing groups* to focus on diversity related issues and topics.
- d. *Broaden and strengthen faculty connections* with the Center for Teaching and Learning.

Institutional Balance

Across the institution, academic and programmatic activities and initiatives have occurred by small groups of academic leaders or individual faculty members. Many of these activities have revolved around recruitment and retention of diverse students. In all, there needs to be an acquired and ever-widening support from the institution to sustain academic efforts. To do all this, it requires a considerable group of academic leaders and faculty members to understand the emerging shifts in the diversity of the University's student profile. It necessitates the institution to foster an understanding of the changing demographics as documented in writing, communicated through data information, and rendered into action.

As discussed in the interviews, with national diversity leaders, and in scholarly resources, there are three primary suggested strategies to consider for creating a balanced environment that works toward a university embracing diversity in all aspects of work and efforts. The suggestions are as follows:

- a. *Communicate information, empirical facts, and anecdotal stories* about diversity programs, initiatives and research. Providing opportunities and initiatives for academic leaders and other faculty members to engage in professional development should enhance their knowledge of diversity erudition.
- b. *Use communication strategies in various venues* to articulate the dependence of their work on larger support for a powerful strategy to conjure institutional support.

- c. *Consistent assessment and evaluation of initiatives and efforts* to allow for the formulation and implementation of concrete actions in order to grow and evolve.

Conclusion

Researchers identified an emerging issue that was evident through national, regional, and state data information. Data-based evidence consistently showed trends and predictions toward a shift in the historically-underrepresented population geographically across all sectors of the nation. The Midwestern region, specifically, is on the border for change in regards to its demographic population of students graduating from high school. With a greater number of racially and ethnically diverse students graduating from high school *and* an overall fewer number of students graduating from high schools, it calls into question for postsecondary education leaders to not only be attentive of the fewer numbers of students available for higher education, but also their preparedness for and financial resources for those potential applicants to enroll at an institution. These trends remain accurate for the State of Minnesota. It is uncertain how the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities will apply the predications in order to make sustainable shifts in the way the academic leaders address the probable change in the undergraduate student profile.

Evidence about the demographic population shift was provided to the academic leaders, and the dichotomy of their understanding and strategic preparation or action throughout the public university is evident. Consistently, data provided to the academic leaders was a critical visual tool for them, as many referred to themselves as “scientists” requiring evidence, in order to instill an understanding about the trends and predictions. Sharing the data information broadly with their faculty colleagues was deemed important to them, but it was not a specific action or request as part of this study. Even so, skepticism exists by several academic leaders. Their tremendous efforts to enhance the units’ student diversity profile had been faltered by high expense with little results for their efforts. Further, in view of change occurring gradually over time at the institution, many academic leaders expect the demographic shifts to be slow coming in the future, if at all. Repeatedly, academic leaders asked for data information as evidence as an ongoing tool for a basis to understand the movement within the student profile.

Going forward, Institutional Research at the University has positioned itself over the past few years to provide demographic resources within its Institutional Planning Profiles (found at <http://www.irr.umn.edu/profiles/>). As an annual planning tool for academic leaders at the institutional and collegiate levels, refinement of the demographic information presented within the Profiles will be a critical effort to support the planning needs of academic leaders. University leadership’s forthrightness to apply suggested recommendations is a key step. These recommendations, however, should be coupled with the strategic work in the Office of Equity and Diversity, Center for Teaching and Learning, and Office of Student Affairs. As a result, this will further strengthen the preparedness of the Univeresity community for an emerging shift in the undergraduate student demographic profile and broaden academic leaders and other members of the Univeristy community’s awareness and preparation for the future.

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