

Institutional Diversity Plan Critique: University of Washington

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Abstract

This investigative essay seeks to analyze the University of Washington's (UW) diversity plan within the framework of the Multicultural Organization Development (MCO) plan, as presented by O'Neil and Wall (2008). Overall, UW has developed a plan that fits within the framework exceedingly well, considering the particular stage the institution appears to be in. There are several areas of opportunity for development discussed at the end which provide some guidance in the advancement of UW as an inclusive university.

Keywords: multicultural; University of Washington; Multicultural Organization Development; diversity plans

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The University of Washington, located in Seattle, Washington, is positioned to be a hub of diversity. Located in the self-proclaimed “Portal to the Pacific” and within the largest metropolitan area in Washington state, UW has the chance to attract students, staff, and faculty from many different walks of life. Of course, it is not simply a matter of projecting city or regional demographics onto a university; there are many other factors at work that may inhibit representation of various populations at all levels. Through UW’s diversity blueprint and plan, the institution carefully outlines its goals, how those goals will be attained, and current metrics and target metrics (University Diversity Council, 2010). Overall, the Diversity Blueprint reflects a modern university’s commitment to ever-changing dynamics with a careful eye to address a broad definition of diversity.

Review of University of Washington’s Diversity Plan

The University of Washington appears to be an organization in Stage 4 of the Multicultural Organization Development (MCOB), according to Obear and Wall (2008). The author arrived at this conclusion after reviewing the complete set of stages. Whereas the Stage 1: Exclusionary Organization “openly maintains the dominant group’s power and privilege” (Obear & Wall, 2008, p. 4), UW claims to have “placed diversity at the center of scholarly inquiry, teaching, and learning” (University Diversity Council, 2010, p. 1). Furthermore, one can see that both the Stage 2: “The Club” and the Stage 3: Compliance Organization do not commit to active change and progress (Obear & Wall, 2008). UW, on the other hand, states that while it is proud of its accomplishments over the last 40 years, the institution has the opportunity to continue to build an inclusive environment (University Diversity Council, 2010).

The Stage 4: Affirming Organization is “committed to eliminating discriminatory practices and inherent advantages” (Obear & Wall, 2008, p. 5). The first step in this is admission that discrimination exists and that privilege is an issue with which to contend. As stated earlier, UW openly admits that it is not a perfectly inclusive university. UW’s first goal states that the institution will provide the necessary communication to make “its commitment visible and clear for all members of its community” (University Diversity Council, 2010, p. 5). Further articulation outlines plans to develop unit and departmental plans which align with the university-wide diversity plan. UW also describes how it will improve data collection and collaboration between institutional members and with outside organizations (University Diversity Council, 2010).

The Affirming Organization also “actively recruits and promotes members of groups that have been historically denied access and opportunity” (Obear & Wall, 2008, p. 5). Throughout the diversity plan, UW discusses how to recruit and retain underrepresented minority populations at all levels: undergraduate, graduate, and staff and faculty. For example, UW’s second goal is to “attract, retain, and graduate a diverse and excellent student body” (University Diversity Council, 2010, p. 6). UW also demonstrates that it will move to actively increase numbers of target populations by use of metrics (University Diversity Council, 2010). Metrics give readers, as well as those tasked with making change, the opportunity to mathematically understand the tasks that UW will undertake. Using these figures is a good way to be accountable in tracking progress.

Obear and Wall (2008) further assert that the Affirming Organization “provides support and career development opportunities to increase success and mobility” (p. 5). One can see that

UW incorporates workshop plans into its diversity blueprint. The university states that it will increase offerings of courses which have diversity or social justice as a theme (University Diversity Council, 2010). One item of concern here is how to reach members of the UW community who may not view themselves as diverse or multicultural. No amount of workshops or classes can reach resistant individuals if those individuals choose not to attend or are essentially forced to attend mandatory trainings.

This concern similarly affects the next point: “Employees [are] encouraged to be non-oppressive ~ awareness trainings” (Obear & Wall, 2008, p. 5). Employees can be encouraged, but they will need to become allies for social justice for UW to progress into Stage 5. However, the MCOB plan specifically states that organizations in Stage 4 should at least make sure that “select faculty, staff, and administrators use a ‘Diversity Lens’ in day-to-day activities” (Obear & Wall, 2008, p. 12). This approach would allow community members to lead by example. UW addresses this approach in its sixth goal, “Creating and Sustaining a Welcoming Climate for Diversity” (University Diversity Council, 2010, p. 12). UW will promote opportunities for dialogues, as well as conducting routine climate surveys. Offerings will be available to help faculty, staff, and teaching assistants understand the impact multicultural climate has on the learning experience, as well as the work experience for faculty and administrators (University Diversity Council, 2010).

Lastly, the Affirming Organization is a place where “employees must assimilate to organizational culture” (Obear & Wall, 2008, p. 5). This seems vague, although it seems to imply that employees must conform to the existing culture, giving care not to rock the proverbial boat too much. One could assume that this aspect is what keeps an organization in Stage 4 rather than

progressing to Stage 5 or 6. Again, a way to advance into Stage 5 would be for UW to continue to train faculty and staff in how to integrate diversity lens in every day proceedings. As an inclusive attitude becomes the norm, members will at least assimilate into an affirming culture in the meantime.

Areas to Consider

Obear and Wall (2008) include a set of questions for groups to consider when analyzing in which stage an organization is currently. One question asks members to think about common patterns in feelings amongst different groups. As mentioned previously, UW plans to conduct climate surveys to monitor the environment (University Diversity Council, 2010). By doing so, UW will be able to track progress and attitudes which may negatively impact diversity goals.

Another question from Obear and Wall (2008) asks groups to consider demographics. UW provides current figures for numbers of underrepresented groups on campus at all levels, and also provides further figures to show percentages of females in all categories. It would be of interest to compare these figures to the demographics of Seattle and the greater Seattle metro area to gauge how UW compares to the population it primarily serves.

Implications for Future Advancement and Conclusion

From the language and depth of its Diversity Plan, UW will move into Stage 5 if it commits to following through with the entirety of its recommendations. Where should UW go from their current place? In order to reach goals, UW will need to demonstrate active engagement with its various populations and support community-wide events. A presence at Seattle cultural events is one way to stay in line with their hopes and goals, for example.

UW, as with virtually any organization, will have to contend with “old school” ways of thinking in which seniority and the status quo are valued over diversity efforts. To move into Stage 5, UW cannot force employees to think multiculturally. The paradigm must shift in an organic way, and understanding the nature of change, this shift could occur slowly rather than suddenly (National Defense University, 2006). By consciously using metrics and assessment methods, UW should be able to ascertain which methods are working the best on its path to becoming a truly inclusive institution.

UW is an institution that is actively committed to the advancement of populations. If it does indeed stay true to its goals and visions as outlined in the “Blueprint for Diversity,” the university will surely continue to be known as a leader in diversity and inclusivity. The care the institution shows in carefully outlining big picture concepts and tactical details will likely be reflected in its approach toward reaching those goals.

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