
57. Focusing on assets: action research for an inclusive and diverse workplace

Leo Hwang

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, efforts to diversify the workforce and create a more inclusive and representative environment for students and employees have often been stymied by institutionalized racism, a lack of resources, and a lack of institutional energy. In this chapter I discuss an action research intervention, inspired by diverse economies scholarship, that was aimed at valuing and strengthening diversity and inclusion in a community college setting. A starting point for the project was the recognition that within the workplace there are multiple forms of work being performed, and associated ways of being, that fall outside of the traditional identity of a waged worker being paid for services rendered. For instance, the work of creating an inclusive workplace relies on volunteering, college service, gifting, mentoring, professional development, sweat equity – all practices that help create a sense of community that is larger than just an educational services enterprise in which teaching is delivered in return for monetary payment. In a complex organization like a community college, the business orientation of the ‘enterprise’ thus sits alongside non-capitalist orientations. In a climate of increasingly limited resources, it is the combination of non-capitalist practices and diverse identities that has the potential to engender change and drive the mission of the workplace to become more diverse and more inclusive. This chapter describes the context and process of using an assets-based approach to highlight diversity and enhance inclusion in a community college setting.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE EDUCATION WORKPLACE: THE CASE OF GREENFIELD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Within higher education in the United States, the term ‘diversity’ has become synonymous with quality. Diversity has become a commodity that links the institution to a multitude of quality connotations when applied to the student body, the demographics of the faculty and staff, or when describing the curriculum. As an indicator of progress and a purported vision for a post-racial student body or workplace, diversity, within the context of higher education, has value on a superficial surface level. This purported value is in stark contrast to the increasing segregation of neighbourhoods, the widening gap in income, life expectancy, and actual representation of people of colour at colleges and universities (Chang 2016).

The reality is that colleges and universities are less representative than they were in 1980, ‘despite decades of proactive efforts aimed at recruiting individuals from marginalized backgrounds’ (Golom 2018, p. 16). There appears to be a disconnect between the purported value of diversity, and the actual enactment of diverse and inclusive staff hiring, student recruitment and curriculum development. The evidence of implicit bias, the lack of representation

in employment, and the achievement gap in graduation rates between white students and students of colour, is damning. As Richard Prystowsky states, ‘Without such introspection and concomitant actions, our good-faith, conscious intentions to create meaningful, lasting change could be severely undermined by our unexamined biases and initiative-crippling self-deception’ (Prystowsky 2018, p. 94). So, while the values of diversity are touted in the workplace, in higher education, without systemic change that is community focused, we risk hypocrisy.

Greenfield Community College is a small associates degree granting institution in rural Massachusetts in the United States. It employs a wide range of faculty and staff, totalling approximately 307 employees. As an Asian American member of the senior staff and also a community economics action researcher, I have been keenly interested in the diversity makeup of the college and how to promote an inclusive workplace. I am a second-generation Korean American who identifies as a person of colour and, while born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the United States, I still relate closely to the first-generation immigrant experience of my parents and many of my relatives. For the majority of my career, I have worked at Greenfield Community College, first as an English faculty member, and then as an administrator. Like many of the students of colour at the college, throughout my life I have struggled to strike a balance of fitting into a predominantly white educational, work, and residential environment, and honouring, celebrating, and finding strength in my own identity as a Korean American. Within the context of the college, my role as Dean of Humanities enables me, to a certain degree, the privilege to shape my own work agenda and reach beyond the usual academic silos that typically house the humanities. I try to utilize my own flexibility and access to resources to help foster interdisciplinary work with faculty, who in the community college system do not typically have as much flexibility with their workload and are less likely to engage in college-wide work without incentives or assistance. Additionally, because of my positionality, until recently, as the only administrator of colour, I have been allowed wide latitude in integrating college-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion activities into my workload.

The region surrounding Greenfield Community College is predominantly Caucasian but is undergoing fairly rapid change in its demographics. In the early 2000s, Franklin County, the college’s primary service area, was 5.8 per cent people of colour (US Census Bureau 2018b). At that time, the college’s student population, as well as the demographics of the faculty and staff, nearly matched that of the surrounding region at 6 per cent. However, in the time since then Franklin County has increased to 9 per cent people of colour in 2015 (US Census Bureau 2018a). Meanwhile the faculty and staff at the college has stayed at 6 per cent (or slightly less) people of colour, but the student body has risen to 21 per cent people of colour (Greenfield Community College 2018). This highlights a potential disconnect between the experiences and backgrounds of the people teaching, working and making decisions at the college, and the lived and experienced lives of the students attending the college in increasing numbers.

Within the complex intricacies of staffing at the college, work is accomplished by a complex combination of salaried employees, part-time hourly wage earners, and work performed for a stipend. Faculty and staff belong to one of two unions or may belong to a non-union classification. Faculty are divided into full-time faculty who are eligible for tenure, and adjunct faculty who are contract workers employed semester to semester. Duties are drawn out in job descriptions, incorporated into college service (work deemed beneficial to the college), volunteer work (often with community organizations or the boards of local non-profits), and gifted work, which in the context of an educational institution can be when faculty and staff

go beyond their job description or generally accepted college service to help a student or community member, or to contribute to the sense of helping the college as a whole. Within the college community, there are informal networks of barter and trade through online networks and at various ‘free table’ locations. There is gifting or gleaned food from college functions. Food grown in the college’s permaculture garden is utilized in the cafeteria and sold at a ‘farm stand’ in the lobby, and an active food pantry serves students who cannot afford to purchase food for themselves or their families.

The college is structured around a mission and vision that is decidedly egalitarian. Community colleges are open enrolment institutions, which means that they accept anyone with a high school diploma (and also dual enrolled high school students), and serve everyone from traditional age students to retirees. At the very core of the community college is a design for access and equity, therefore all the structures of the institution are, theoretically, designed to help students to be successful. While some of those structures are not as helpful as originally intended, and on particular days the core of the mission is obfuscated by various distractions, still, the mission is there and it is helpful for all the faculty and staff to remember that everyone who works at the college wants to strengthen the community and help students. While community colleges are often viewed as primarily sites for workforce preparation, at Greenfield Community College, this has been interpreted as a mission to prepare students to be healthy, active citizens in our communities, and this is accomplished through a strong focus on the Liberal Arts. Therefore, critical thinking, communication skills, civic engagement and social justice are central to the mission and identity of faculty, staff and students at Greenfield Community College. This shared identity is a helpful touchstone when conversations become heated.

With a growing realization that the future of growth in rural Franklin County and at Greenfield Community College will be driven predominantly by people of colour, I began to engage the college in a process to rethink diversity and inclusion at the institution. As the outmigration of Caucasian youth continues in the rural United States and the remaining population ages, it is the new immigrants that will drive the economy and fill the local public schools. Greenfield Community College seeks to position itself as a welcoming workplace and educational environment for these new cohorts.

ACTION RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF WORKPLACE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The work of diversity and inclusion is most often driven by a deficit-based approach. Various identities are categorized as ‘other’, and certain measures are used to identify each identity’s relative attainment or deficit in comparison to a white control group. The greater the disparity, the greater the deficit; the greater the absence, the more powerful the data. This deficit-based approach prioritizes problems and lacks and emphasizes the inability of communities to address disparity and a lack of equity. It highlights the intractability of the situation due to the lack of available resources in the form of personnel, funding, or time to change things. The end result is a loss of agency and a general inability to enact change.

At Greenfield Community College, we were keen to employ action research as a means to promote, not diminish, agency among faculty, students and staff and to help them have ownership and authority of the diversity and inclusion endeavour. This was enabled by starting with

an asset-based approach (see also Chapter 46 by Rodrigues, and Chapter 56 by Cameron and Gibson in this volume). Looking at diversity and inclusion from an asset-based perspective, in the same way Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) use it to refocus community development, it is much easier to imagine what one can do with available and existing resources than to imagine how to overcome the absence of needed resources, policies, activities, etc.

The assets-based approach is a form of reading for difference (see Chapter 52 by Gibson-Graham in this volume). It brings to the fore and values endogenous knowledge creation and solutions. In the context of diversity and inclusion work, by helping a community recognize that it is doing good things that strengthen diversity and inclusion, it allows for an ownership of the endeavour. It allows a community to overcome initial feelings of shame, blame or persecution. What at a regional or national level feels like an insurmountable crisis, at the local level is revealed as, not only surmountable, but something always in flux and something where progress is being made in many valid, countable and map-able ways.

Working from assets engages J.K. Gibson-Graham's theory of possibility (Gibson-Graham 2008, p. 14). Ultimately, working with possibilities is infectious and makes it easy for more people to become engaged and participate in the work that furthers diversity and inclusion, and when more people become engaged, more assets are brought to the table. By asking students how they are successful, we are building on an already solid foundation (Harper 2012). By focusing on the strengths rather than the weaknesses, one can engender a grassroots approach to change that is customized to the culture and history of a particular institution.

Action Research Cycle 1

At Greenfield Community College the assumed starting point was that everyone at the college was engaged in work that impacts diversity and inclusion in a positive way. The first task, then, was to find out what those practices were and share them with others so we could learn from one another. I formed an ad hoc group of staff, faculty and students called Beacon that existed outside of the regular governance and committee structure. The group met on a volunteer basis over lunch and I provided the only incentive, which was salad and pizza. Beacon started a process of creating asset maps. Beginning with maps of personal assets the members of the group brought to diversity and inclusion work, the group then moved on to creating asset maps of the college. They made lists of people, offices and practices that worked to strengthen diversity and inclusion. These were grouped into categories and then used to identify potential areas for collaboration when engaging in diversity and inclusion projects.

At the same time the Beacon group engaged in a language project of creating living definitions of terms related to diversity and inclusion. We recognized that words or terms have multiple definitions, multiple connotations and multiple associations, and that these definitions, connotations and associations change depending on context, perspective and how they are used over time. The intervention sought to develop empathy for how different people respond to words and terminology that we might have initially ascribed with a fixed understanding. For example, when mapping the term, 'Black Lives Matter', we not only focused on how the phrase has been used by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi to rally people to fight against the killing of black people by police officers in the United States, but we also diagrammed how, for some people, the term triggered feelings of anxiety and upset paradigms of power that then produced terms like 'All Lives Matter', or 'Blue Lives Matter'. By deconstructing where these, often confrontational, responses came from, we could begin

to understand some of the insecurities and fears that were underlying those responses and why people might react negatively to the Black Lives Matter movement. Depending on the makeup of the group of people present, and their ability to inhabit intersectional identities, the living definitions could then possess different multiple definitions. These living definitions were, by nature, dependent on the people defining the words and terms at a specific moment in time and their ability and willingness to see how definitions might be interpreted differently for people who had different perspectives.

Collective Action Initiatives

Both of these activities began to shape new senses of what was possible. Utilizing some of the assets and capacities identified in the asset mapping, the Beacon group then spawned several initiatives. The first, called Just One Thing, focused on fomenting collective change through individual action. A website was created where people could submit their One Thing they could do each year to strengthen diversity and inclusion. By sharing the submissions on a public website, if someone was unsure about what to choose as their One Thing, they could get ideas from other people. Importantly, the whole college could collectively feel the impact of individual actions, and there was now the potential to track the number and kinds of submissions over time and see real shifts that occur at the college.

Another initiative emerging from Beacon was the First Minute Response. After seeing a similar programme at Framingham State University, the group recognized the value of preparing to respond to traumatic events before any specific event occurred. Instead of hastily pulled together last-minute responses, the college would have a thoughtful and resourced first minute response where students, faculty and staff could gather and discuss their initial feelings, fears and concerns, and have a place to turn to, to find out more information. The college gathered a core group of people that included the Dean of Students, the Dean of Humanities, the Director of Student Development, the Coordinator of the Library, and faculty and staff who coordinate the kind of response the college might have for an event or issue. This includes finding appropriate articles or other sources of information, utilizing on-campus expertise or bringing in outside speakers to address an issue, or facilitating a discussion. One noon hour each month was set aside for a First Minute Response event.

In an environment where the President of the United States was initiating immigration policy changes that seemed counter to the mission of an open enrolment college, the Beacon group initiated an inclusion pledge that stated, ‘The undersigned, faculty, staff, and students pledge, in the spirit of the Greenfield Community College Statement of Inclusion, to help “create a culture that values, encourages, and embraces a wide range of individual and group differences”’. Copies of this pledge were posted in the two main buildings at the college along with a large sheet of blank paper where people could add their names and make a clear visual statement for Greenfield Community College’s immigrant students and employees, that they are supported and embraced. The power of these documents was generated by the community participation and the gradual filling of the sheets of paper by community members.

Action Research Cycle 2 and Further Initiatives

Working with a sociology faculty member, Professor Linda McCarthy, we began a further action research initiative that involved training 12 students in co-facilitation. This tight-knit

group of students was selected primarily for their diversity of identities, for their previous interest in sociology classes, and for an ability or willingness to look at issues from an asset-based perspective. After undergoing training, these students recruited some of their peers to attend one of four focus groups with students where we asked, ‘What and where is Greenfield Community College doing well with diversity and inclusion?’ With a smaller group of students, we analysed the transcripts and tried to note what people, offices and policies were identified. We then invited faculty and staff who were identified, or were from identified offices, to a focus group to share what they thought they were doing that encouraged a positive environment for diversity and inclusion.

We then decided to formalize this peer-to-peer learning by creating a series of workshops called Let’s Talk Shop, where one faculty member and one staff member, both of whom had been identified by students as supportive of diversity and inclusion, tackled a specific diversity and inclusion issue, sharing their own practices and facilitating a discussion with their peers about the topic. These workshops were conducted on a voluntary basis; I again provided lunch as the only incentive. The fact that the faculty and staff selected to run the workshops had received recognition by students was a strong incentive to participate.

Professor McCarthy and I also started a student group called Collective Voices–Common Ground that focused on talking about issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and identity, and how to move beyond discussion into action. After exploring topics that included gun control, toxic masculinity, and the #MeToo movement, a decision was made to focus on #MeToo for the coming semester. The students designed an interactive bulletin board that explained the #MeToo movement and gave space for other students to add their story to the board or to symbolically demonstrate their solidarity by colouring in a segment of the board. Professor McCarthy then pulled together a panel discussion of local academics and activists that was incredibly successful and filled the college’s largest lecture hall.

The strength of all of these activities emerged from community participation in the generation of data in the form of creating community generated definitions of diversity and inclusion terms; asset maps of where the college is doing well with diversity and inclusion; cataloguing those assets by asking people to share their own personal initiatives; preparing for crisis or trauma in advance by creating a mechanism to respond; fomenting peer-to-peer learning through workshops run by faculty and staff sharing their best practices; and helping students explore topics centred on diversity and inclusion and transforming that into action. The fact that all of this was accomplished primarily over the lunch hour and largely through voluntary participation speaks to the capacity of people to engage in work that they feel is meaningful and has the potential to transform the community.

CONCLUSION

Greenfield Community College is a workplace and an educational environment that aims to inspire lifelong learning for students and to model what lifelong learning looks like. The action research we conducted and continue to conduct on diversity and inclusion provides an opportunity to model what lifelong learning looks like. Subjects are able to reclaim their agency by generating and analysing their own data. The researcher’s role shifts from traditional data collection and analysis, to that of moderator and facilitator. Action research facilitates learning, critical thinking and the development of potential solutions so that communities can

develop natively designed, developed and performed approaches to strengthening their own communities.

Value is generated in the collective assets of the whole, rather than the tokenized novelty of the individual. When we are open to looking for diversity in race, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexual orientation, and also class, veteran status and life experience, we enable greater participation. Additional assets enable greater empathy, greater understanding, and greater opportunities for transformational change.

As a college we are collaboratively creating living definitions, knowledge that evolves, changes and transforms in different contexts, times and environments. If we embrace this notion of continual transformation, we can be more generous with forgiveness; with helping others understand; with creating an environment that allows people to ask questions and share their experiences and expertise; and with recognizing those experiences and expertise as things of value. Through the use of action research, the workplace then becomes a location of opportunity to create social change in ways that can strengthen diversity and inclusion.

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