Chapter 10
The Diverse Voices Conference:
Expanding Diversity Education Beyond the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

As diversity higher education courses and programs continue to increase on university campuses in the United States, research remains scant on the role that diversity education conferences can play in furthering higher education students' diversity learning beyond the classroom. The aim of this chapter is to introduce the Diverse Voices Conference as a successful higher education diversity initiative in Michigan that has for seventeen years provided a safe environment for students to learn more about and speak out in support of valuing all aspects of human diversity. This chapter will highlight 1) the history of the Diverse Voices Conference; 2) the components of the Diverse Voices Conference; 3) the lessons learned regarding sponsoring the Diverse Voices Conference on a university campus in Michigan that is free and open to the public; along with 4) future directions for expanding the conference and its visibility beyond its current state.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States higher education system over the past sixty years, multicultural, multi-ethnic, and diversity education focused courses have become widely established as a primary strategy to educate college students on aspects human diversity and workforce diversity in their various forms (Bank, 1981; Banks, 2002; Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; Thomas, 2010). Examples of the historical and contemporary factors that are responsible for validating the need of these types of diversity education courses in higher education institutions in the United States include the following:

- The 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education Supreme Court decision that ruled it was unconstitutional and a breach of the 14th Amendment to prohibit children from attending public schools based on race (Congress on Racial Equality, 2013).

- The passing of the Civil Rights legislations in the 1960's which prohibits all forms of bias and discrimination as it relates to race, gender color, religion and national origin (Bennett-Alexander & Hartman, 2007).
- Changing demographics in the United States which has resulted in the population of the United States becoming more diverse (Schaefer, 2010).
- Along with the requests of many academics, business professionals, and the general public who have been calling on institutions of higher education to better educate today's college students to live and work in our diverse society (Bowen, Kurzweil & Tobin, 2005).

Although multicultural, multi-ethnic and diversity higher education courses have continued to increase in focus and scope on university campuses throughout the United States in the 21st century (Limburg & Clark, 2006; Byrd & Scott, 2014; Scott & Sims, 2015), research remains scant on the role that diversity education conferences can play in higher education institutions in broadening students' diversity education beyond their diversity course experience. In an attempt to fill this void in the literature on this topic, the Diverse Voices Conference (DVC) is introduced in this chapter as a seventeen-year-old higher education initiative in Michigan that has been effective in providing a safe space for students to learn more about and speak out in support of valuing all aspects of human diversity. In this chapter I will discuss: 1) the history of the DVC, 2) the components of the DVC; 3) the lessons I learned regarding sponsoring the DVC on a university campus in Michigan that is free and open to the public, along with 4) future directions and recommendations for expanding the DVC and its visibility beyond its current state.

BACKGROUND

In order to understand the need for a higher education initiative like the DVC in the 21st century, it is essential to understand the evolution of this conference to date. Therefore, in the next section, the history of the DVC will be shared along with the core objectives of this conference.

The History of the Diverse Voices Conference

In 1998, I began teaching a workforce diversity focused course in the department of human resource development at Oakland University (OU) located in Rochester, Michigan. OU is a predominantly white public university that grants doctorate, masters' and undergraduate degrees and currently serves a student population of 20,711 (Oakland University Home, 2015). OU also values the importance of diversity education and the concepts of diversity and inclusion as noted by George Hynd, President of Oakland University (Oakland University Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Homepage, 2014). However, while teaching this workforce diversity course several times during the 1998 -1999 academic year at OU, I began to notice that critical real world human diversity topics such as racism, discrimination, sexism, ageism, classism, and homophobia were being candidly discussed on world news programs on television and in the newspaper, but scarcely discussed, if at all in workforce diversity higher education focused textbooks. Because of the complex nature of many real world diversity and workforce diversity social issues such as the ones mentioned above, I realized that my students desperately needed a space on campus, but outside of the classroom to candidly discuss critical real world diversity issues that continue to plague our society.

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