Cultural Competency is Needed—Not Tolerance

by Dr. Charles Taylor

The purpose of this article is to help predominantly white campuses address the cultural conflict that students of color face by emphasizing the need for cultural competency skills

To Be Culturally Different Doesn't Mean That One Is Culturally Deprived.

Cultural competency is the ability to work effectively across cultures, understand the dynamics that emerge as a result of cultural differences and create processes to accommodate people from diverse cultural settings (Betancourt et al. 2003). When schools fail to provide cultural support the result is usually cultural conflict. To be culturally different doesn't mean that one is culturally deprived. We shouldn't allow cultural ethnocentrism to cloud how we view cultures that are different from ours. When we do, we are confusing differences with deficiencies. They are not the same.

Kumagai and Lypson (2009) in fact take the idea of cultural competence a step further and demand to include a critical consciousness in multicultural education, where acquiring knowledge about other cultures should be strongly tied to a social justice framework such that discussions on racism form a central part of the education. Furthermore, studying the cultures of 'others' and treating it as static, might make it seem like something novel. Hence cultural education should be placed in a historical context and studied in juxtaposition with the dominant culture to get a more holistic understanding since cultures do not emerge in isolation.

Diversity and Inclusion Aren't the Same

Imagine if you will that every day you turned on the TV there were mainly black faces, the news paper you read was all about blacks and when whites were discussed either a crime had been committed or some white had broken another sports record. You came to school and you only had black teachers and you were the only white in the class room. You wanted so badly to have your culture mentioned but it never was or only as an afterthought. How would you react? Would you feel included? That's why diversity and inclusion aren't the same. We can be diverse while not being inclusive.

Inclusion indeed can be understood as a philosophy of acceptance where everyone is valued for who they are and treated with respect (Carrington and Robinson, 2004). Inclusion therefore is a process and never an end in and of itself especially if culture is perceived as something that is shifting and ever changing. A diverse student body can be considered as the first step or the initial manifestation of an inclusive policy where access is open for all, but inclusion goes beyond merely recruiting students of color to actively creating an environment that promotes learning for everyone.

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Tolerance Means Little More Than Leaving One Another Alone

I think colleges need to pay closer attention to this notion of cultural conflict because college is a critical period in the development of a student's identity. It's the time when adolescence supposedly comes to an end. Students are eager to "fit in" and to be affirmed by their peers. According to researchers (Gibbs, 1974) and (Chickering, 1981) there is evidence that students of color undergo a classic identity crisis on a predominantly white campus that interferes with their academic functioning. That's why we should work hard to make sure our campuses provide the type of cultural, social, and academic support these students need to really feel accepted. And this means more than just promoting tolerance. Charles Gilmer, President of The Impact Movement, a partner ministry with Campus Crusade for Christ says "tolerance has no cohesive nor healing power in society. It means little more than leaving one another alone. It leads to indifference, not understanding. Tolerance allows the gulfs between us to remain in place," (Gilmer, n.d.).

Besides, nobody wants to be just tolerated-we all deserve to be celebrated! Red, black, brown, yellow or white we're all precious in God's sight. As former Senator and Ambassador Carol Moseley Braun said "when all of the cream is allowed to rise to the top, the butter is bound to be better," (Braun, 2007).

Cultural Competency allows your institution to serve all students respectfully

Cultural competency is what we need to replace tolerance with and to combat cultural conflict. For individuals, it is an approach to learning, communicating and working respectfully with people different from ourselves. For organizations, cultural competency means creating the practices and policies that will make services more accessible to diverse populations, (Olsen, 2006).

A culturally competent organization is engaged in an intentional and continuous process of learning about and responding to the cultural communities it serves. Cultural competence ought to be considered as a process that involves numerous constructs. It entails awareness of one's own cultural biases so that one does not impose those biases on others; seeking and obtaining a thorough understanding of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, and the desire to learn from others as cultural subjects, rather than imposing an existing set of cultural practices on everyone,(Campinha-Bacote, 2002).

While Betancourt et al. (2003) specifically focus on health care organizations; their definition of a culturally competent system can be generalized to any system or

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organization. They define a culturally competent system as one 'that acknowledges and incorporates—at all levels—the importance of culture, assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance toward the dynamics that result from cultural differences, expansion of cultural knowledge, and adaptation of services to meet culturally unique needs'.

Culturally Competent Organizations Share These Characteristics

Dr. Olsen (2006) argues that there is no one template or "one size fits all" model of a culturally competent organization. Nonetheless, she identifies some common characteristics shared by culturally competent organizations, including:

• "Valuing diversity and inclusion, and institutionalizing these values in policy." This may include having a defined set of policies that articulate a commitment to equity and access to services.

• "Being self-reflective." Culturally competent organizations build relationships with community partners so they can get feedback about the cultural appropriateness and respectfulness of their services.

• "Weaving cultural knowledge throughout the organization's work." They investigate what would constitute a welcoming environment for the diverse communities they serve, and then try to create such an environment. They do things as simple as having inclusive magazines in their waiting rooms.

• "Supporting staff in expanding their cultural competence." In a culturally competent organization, release time and resources are provided to support learning about issues of culture, inclusion and equity.

• "Commitment to addressing inequities." The leadership of the organization makes it a point to know which groups are not fully receiving the benefits of its services, and actively seeks to understand and rectify any barriers to participation, (Olsen, 2006).

Conclusion:

Organizational practices that promote cultural competence envision diversity not just in terms of the number of minorities that are a part of an organization, but implement structural and institutional measures that create an inclusive space for everyone regardless of their cultural background.

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While tolerance may not be categorically undesirable, the discourse of 'tolerance' continues to be couched in an ideological bias where social status and power is unequally distributed and certain members of the society are encouraged to exhibit the generous quality of 'tolerance' towards others, (Mirchandani and Tastsoglou, 2000). In essence therefore, tolerance continues to create the idea of an other that is definitely different.

A truly inclusive, and culturally competent environment pursues an active anti-racist agenda, where cultural differences are not merely 'put up with', but even desired. Human beings desire diversity in their diet, their clothing, and in almost every aspect of our lives. To desire racial and ethnic diversity in our colleges and universities, therefore is to be truly human.

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