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Back to the Basics: Meeting the Needs of Marginalized Populations on Campus

Joshua Moon Johnson, Ed.D.

In the last decade higher education and diversity centered organizations have become focused on inclusive language, microaggressions, and cultural appropriation. Although these previously stated are all real issues and have direct effects on the lives of those marginalized, the lack of attention and efforts directed towards addressing macroaggressions is alarming. Many college campuses assume that hate crimes, sexual violence, and extreme poverty are non-existent. As institutions aim to create welcoming and celebratory spaces for diverse communities, they must remember some basic needs of students; safety, food, shelter, and resources to survive. The future of higher education not only depends on using inclusive language, but also on an ongoing commitment to ensuring all students have the resources to succeed in an environment that keeps them physically and emotionally safe.

Current Trends in Diversity and Inclusion Efforts

Organizations and offices committed to diversity and inclusion have become highly focused on addressing microaggressions, discussing cultural appropriation, and educating on inclusive language. Microaggressions can cause anger and frustration, sadness, shame, and embarrassment (Nadal, 2013). Current debates on cultural appropriation revolve around who has the right to control culture and why cultural depictions matter to current populations who have been historically marginalized; throughout the last century White-America has repeatedly confiscated marginalized people's cultures and identities (Tosie, 2002). Utilizing

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inclusive language directly impacts how a campus climate can feel welcoming or marginalizing. According to Schlossberg (1989) when students know they matter and are included they are more likely to succeed. However, in a study examining microaggressions and macroaggressions, it was found that macroaggressions have more negative impacts (Donavan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicie, 2013).

It is relevant for diversity organizations to discuss microaggressions and inclusive language; however, the neglect of tragic experiences of many students has been pushed aside to discuss topics that might feel more current, visible, and/or safe. Intense aggressions and hate still exist on campuses; hate crimes, sexual violence, and poverty are issues affecting the lives of students across the nation. Instead of discussing policies, procedures, and efforts to end hate crimes and sexual violence, efforts have been spent discussing Halloween costumes and alternatives to phrases such as “That’s so gay.” Prior to discussing aspects of language, microaggressions, and cultural appropriation the conversation should focus on levels of institutionalized oppression happening on campus. The focus has been moved to address the symptoms, but rarely addresses the root causes making these micro events relevant.

Safety

In current diversity discussions addressing safety, the conversation has revolved around making students feel emotionally safe by using words that include all people and words that do not offend—all of which are relevant and necessary. However, the conversations on physical safety have drawn quiet. Before organizations discuss how to make people feel safe to challenge each other and the latest episode of *Glee*, campuses should discuss students’ physical safety on campus. Although there is much progress in the United States for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, there are alarming numbers of hate crimes occurring, and campuses are not exempt. In the latest national campus climate survey for LGBT people on campuses, 21% of LGBT people stated they experienced harassment within the past year on their college campus (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). These crimes and incidents were more severe for transgender people and people of color (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). LGBT hate crimes sadly occur often, however, 52% of all hate crimes that occur are race based, with a majority of those being anti-black (Anti-Defamation League, 2012).

In addition to the direct physical impact of hate crimes on the survivor, there are lasting mental health issues that affect not only the individual attacked, but also others in their community. In the LGBT campus climate survey, 43% of trans-spectrum and 13% of queer spectrum respondents feared for their physical safety (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). News of a hate crime can

spread quickly and instill fear in anyone else who has a similar identity. There are other mental health challenges associated with hate crimes including high levels of psychological distress, sleep disturbances, increased drug use, deterioration in personal relationships, shame, and internalized self-hate (Bard & Sangrey, 1979).

In addition to hate crimes towards people of color, religious minorities, and LG-BTQ people, there are still rampant amounts of sexual violence, mostly targeted towards women and females. Many campuses have left the conversations of sexual violence and assault to the police, women's centers, and Take Back the Night organizations. If diversity circles make it a point to talk about sexism the conversation often lands on equal pay, sexist language, and balancing family and careers—all of which are real issues. However, the impact of sexual violence on college students is catastrophic and still continues to happen at alarming rates. A study by Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (2000) was published by the National Institute of Justice stating that between 20-25% of women on campuses had been raped or were victims of attempted rape. This sad fact has become normalized to the point where people do not react to the reality of what is happening on college campuses. As campuses aim to make students emotionally safe, the discussion on direct violence towards populations should not be dismissed and should be made a top priority.

Shelter & Financial Resources

In order for students to be fully able to achieve success academically they need a safe, secure, and stable place to live. There are populations on campus who still do not have spaces to live in that allows them to fully focus on long-term goals; two specific populations are low income students without permanent living spaces and LGBTQ students. As we consider low-income college students we often assume that financial aid will cover the basic needs such as tuition, books, room, and board. However, a growing number of college students are ending up in situations without steady housing (Gross, 2013). According to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (2013), last year there were over 58,000 homeless students on campuses nationwide. However, this number is likely much higher due to the stigma associated with being without a home and research typically does not include those who are temporarily displaced.

Another population which struggles to find adequate housing is the LGBTQ community. Many students who are still residing at home can face extreme levels of violence from parents and be forced to leave because of their gender or sexual identity. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (2009), 20% of homeless youth are LGBT identified. Once these students are homeless they are at higher risks of victimization, mental health problems, suicide, and unsafe

sexual practices (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). There are some social service agencies to support LGBTQ homeless youth; however many of them have age limits that exclude most college students.

If a transgender or gender queer person does have the financial means to live in a residence hall there are still complications with finding safe housing. Most residence halls have rooms, floors, or buildings that are segregated by sex. This forces transgender and gender queer students to live in spaces that do not meet their gender identities. In addition to places to sleep in the residence halls, restrooms and showers cause additional complications. Numerous institutions have created plans to meet some of the needs of transgender and gender queer students, but those institutions are still in the minority.

A related issue is the need for financial resources; many do not have enough to survive at an institution. With the lack of financial support for low-income students, many basic needs such as food, dental care, and health care—specifically for dependents of students and transgender students—are not met. Food needs of college students are often neglected as many people still have this idea of new students putting on the “freshmen 15.” Not all students have adequate food, and although many people make light of student diets consisting of ramen noodles—which is still nutritionally lacking—some students do not even have those college staples as options. A study by the City University of New York found that 39% of their students reported going hungry because a lack of money (Freudenberg et al., 2011). A lack of food or nutritious food does affect the ways in which students are able to perform academically. As institutions aim for students to not only excel academically but also gain a better sense of identity, develop as leaders, and become global citizens, institutions need to ensure basic needs of students are being met.

Recommendations

In order to meet the needs of marginalized students action needs to happen. Many spaces focused on diversity perform tasks that lead to immeasurable goals. Responding and aiming to prevent hate crimes, sexual violence, and a lack of food and shelter should be made a priority. As institutions aim to support students facing violence and poverty there are numerous actions that can be taken, some of which include:

- Engage in intentional and regular conversations about the safety and needs of marginalized populations.
- Create assessment plans to understand campus climates of community members.
- Develop a task force addressing economically distressed students, which could address emergency housing, emergency loans, and a food

bank.

- Create housing and adequate restrooms to meet the needs of trans gender students.
- Ensure there are hate crime and incident policies in place that protect identities most commonly attacked—gender identity, race, sexual identity, and religion. Ensure policies and reporting systems are properly communicated.
- Provide training to faculty and staff on responding to hate crimes and sexual violence.
- Ensure diversity programming is focused on social justice, roots of oppression, immediate needs, and the symptoms of injustice—micro aggressions, cultural appropriation, and inclusive language.

The action items listed to support marginalized students are the basics to begin to ensure all community members have the basic needs of food, shelter, and safety. The conversations on hate and poverty in higher education have been ongoing for decades, and it is naïve of educators to assume that the issue has been resolved and the focus should now only be put on micro level issues. Truly serving marginalized students includes keeping them safe, providing adequate resources, and creating environments that value their cultures and identities

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