Defining diversity: A mixed-method analysis of terminology in faculty applications

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

A desirable societal goal may not imply a common understanding of that goal. As organizations seek to foster inclusion through a focus on diversity, understanding the operational definition employed by stakeholders becomes important. This study focuses on how candidates applying for employment address their diversity-related qualifications when specifically asked to do so. A model-driven qualitative coding system is used to characterize the diversity-related terminology in the cover letters of 111 applicants to a post-doctoral faculty fellowship position at a research university open to all academic disciplines. Applicants describe their strengths related to developing diversity-related curriculum and scholarship, aiding the recruitment and retention of a broad range of students and faculty, and establishing community partnerships to advance diversity. The analysis of applicants' letters indicates that applicants refer to race, ethnicity, gender, and class dimensions of diversity most frequently, suggesting that operational definitions tend to be more limited to traditionally and legally established taxonomies of human difference.

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1. Introduction

Attention to diversity contributes to an organization's inclusionary climate, increases the potential for innovation, and enriches the experiences of populations served by the organization. Exposure to broad spectrums of human difference can also facilitate prejudice reduction and encourage development of more progressive views toward unfamiliar environments and perspectives (Ferguson & Porter, 2013). In higher education, faculty-led diversity-oriented activities are associated with improved student learning outcomes (Bowman, 2010; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, Mayhew, & Engberg, 2012; Lundberg, 2012; Smith, 2009). The range of students' experiences have been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, including reduced prejudice (Denson, 2009; Engberg, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), improved cognitive development (Antonio et al., 2004; Bowman, 2010), enhanced moral reasoning development (Hurtado et al., 2012), and increased civic engagement (Bowman, 2011). Furthermore, many faculty value their role in contributing

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to these student outcomes (Valentine, Prentice, Torres, & Arellano, 2012). Embracing diversity is, therefore, understood as highly beneficial to colleges and universities.

1.1. Conceptualizations of diversity

However, few existing studies characterize how diversity is defined and conceptualized in higher education. As universities seek to foster inclusive environments (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008), it is important to understand definitions employed in the academy. A pluralistic approach to diversity may facilitate development of an inclusive and supportive campus environment. A shared goal to advance diversity and a faculty representative of many dimensions of human difference and their intersections are crucial to the overall campus climate. This important relationship results from faculty's fundamental responsibilities for instruction, research, and service together with their roles as models for others.

This study focuses on how applicants address diversity when applying for an academic position targeting campus inclusion. Faculty hires, especially for positions explicitly connected to diversity, are central to creating an inclusive climate in higher education. Cover letters for a faculty fellowship geared toward diversity are the research material for this study. This data source is a good exposition of candidates' perceptions and understanding of diversity given that the advertisement specifically requests cover letters include candidate thoughts on the subject.

1.2. Characteristics associated with diversity

Studies demonstrate that race is frequently referenced in diversity definitions. Studies by Banks (2009) and Hon, Weigold, and Chance (1999) find that 62% and 81% of their majority White samples, respectively, included race in their definitions. Other diversity dimensions, such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and sexual orientation are referenced less frequently.

In his review of racial identity models, Nagayama Hall (2010) states, "race is considered one of many important identities, such as gender and occupational identity" (p. 13). Diversity models often examine singular dimensions and do not address intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991); "the effects of the interaction of identity categories . . . race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization. . .".

Loden's (1996, 2012) taxonomy informs this study's approach, which involves two levels: primary and secondary dimensions. Primary dimensions include core characteristics that "impact individuals' values, opportunities, and perceptions of self and others" (1996, p. 14). Her 1996 list includes factors such as race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, physical abilities and characteristics, and gender. Class was added as a primary dimension to the 2012 model. Loden characterizes secondary dimensions – including military experience, education, first language, and other characteristics – as generally less visible and more modifiable, and therefore they tend to have less impact on, values, opportunities, and perceptions than

the primary dimensions (Loden, 1996). However, these factors are thought by Loden to modify one's sense of self, and including them helps to enhance inclusively for organizations. Although her model does not address intersectionality, it was chosen for its comprehensive enumeration of categories.

1.3. Research questions

This study seeks to characterize references to dimensions of diversity in job applications to a diversity faculty fellowship position at a public land-grant research university. The job advertisement states that, "the Diversity Faculty Fellow is expected to devote half time to the development of curriculum and scholarship that enhance diversity and aid in the recruitment and retention of diverse students and faculty and/or help establish community partnerships." Interested candidates are asked to provide a cover letter in which they describe how their academic or professional goals will be promoted by this fellowship, and the strengths they bring to the position. The job advertisement neither defines diversity nor articulates its representation of specific forms at the university.

The current study examines how candidates for this diversity-oriented position respond to the job requirements in their cover letters. Cover letters are chosen because they are a good exposition of candidates' ability to articulate, think about, and advocate for inclusion at an early point in a search process. In addition, cover letters provide evidence of candidates' approach to three of Hurtado et al.'s (2008) key concepts in universities' campus climates: psychological climate, structural, and the behavioral dimension of diversity. This study focuses on how candidates applying for diversity-related employment discuss their related qualifications when specifically asked to do so. This article addresses three research questions: Who applies for a diversity-focused faculty position based on applicant self-disclosures (1) in the cover letter and (2) to Human Resources?; and the main research question, (3) How do candidates address diversity in the context of applying for a diversity-focused faculty position; specifically, what dimensions do applicants reference, which dimensions tend to co-occur, and do descriptors vary by applicant academic discipline?

2. Method

2.1. Institutional context and search process

The university's diversity context is described as follows, using the four climate-related factors Hurtado and colleagues define (2008). The university is a historically White serving institution in a suburban setting near a large metropolitan area. Advancing diversity is one of three goals in the strategic plan, and progress is assessed by various benchmarked outcomes. The campus includes 19.10% underrepresented minority students, 10.7% staff, 14.7% faculty, 48.1% female faculty, and 55.6% female students (State Institutional Research, 2012, 2013). Psychological diversity may be reflected in the results of the most recent climate survey. The item, "This university values diversity,"