Evaluating the Culture and Climate in a University Academic Department: Conducting a Preliminary Diversity Audit in Sport Management Courses

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The publication of the Hudson Institute Workforce 2000: Work and Workers in the 21st Century report in the late 1980s (see Johnston & Packer, 1987) greatly contributed to the crystallization of workplace diversity scholarship as a management subfield (Konrad, 2003). Since that time, the emphasis on diversity and social justice in American society and its various social institutions and industries has intensified. In particular, scholars have stressed the need for colleges and universities to embrace diversity because of the significant role institutions of higher education play in preparing students for career opportunities, leadership roles, citizenship and life in an increasingly changing society and global marketplace (Astin, 1993; Brown, 2004; Garcia & Baird, 2000).

Several sport management scholars in these institutions of higher education have focused on diversity and the effective management of it (Cunningham, 2007, 2011; Cunningham & Fink, 2006; DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). In her Earle F. Ziegler Award address over two decades ago now, Joy DeSensi (1994), one of the pioneers of diversity scholarship in the field of sport management stressed the “tremendous need for our sport management programs to make a commitment to reflect and directly address multicultural issues and education toward that end” (p. 63). Indeed, a focus on diversity and social justice issues in some sport management academic programs has been reflected in the compositional diversity of the faculty, the scholarship they produce, and the curriculum students in a few of these programs are exposed to. The sport management program at our university is one such example where there has been a critical mass of faculty and graduate students who focus on diversity and social justice issues, and there are courses in the graduate (i.e., Masters level) and undergraduate curriculum that focus specifically on the topic of diversity and social justice. These courses provide us an excellent opportunity to embrace the challenge set forth by DeSensi (1994), and create “real world” practical experiences for students to engage with critical diversity management issues in a safe learning environment.

In this regard, the purpose of this presentation is to discuss a group project assignment we created that involves the collaborative efforts of the instructors and students in our undergraduate and graduate level diversity in sport classes to conduct an ongoing diversity audit of the academic department in which our sport management program is situated. In general, a diversity audit is designed to assess where an organization stands in regard to whether or not it is meeting legal requirements and fulfilling any mission related to diversity initiatives in the organization (Gresham, 2014). It not only assesses the diversity of the personnel in the organization, but also how the organizational culture and the various structures, policies, processes, and practices that emanate from this culture impacts the climate and equity issues among the personnel. Our more specific objectives for this presentation are to:

1. Provide a brief background into the diversity discourse at the university and how it has impacted various initiatives/activities within the college and department in which our sport management program is housed

2. Describe the assignment, and discuss some of the actual tasks/activities our students have completed from semester to semester

3. Share and discuss some of the triumphs, challenges, pitfalls, limitations, and current/future directions of our diversity audit project.

Our initial efforts at embarking on this diversity audit over the past few semesters has provided a great starting point for considering the next steps we should take going forward. The goal is to build off of this early work and continue to involve both the graduate and undergraduate diversity classes going forward. This will allow our students to gain valuable educational experiences in helping the department to address real world issues and problems related to
diversity, climate, and equity. Moreover, it will also provide a solid foundation if the department leadership ever decided to solicit the assistance of external contractors in continuing the diversity audit.

Finally, as it relates to sport management education in general it is our hope that this presentation will encourage our colleagues in academic departments at other institutions to adopt similar projects that will not only provide useful educational experiences for their students but also challenge the faculty, students, and staff to critically examine the diversity culture of their respective academic programs. It is our belief that by doing so it will better position us all to understand where we are and what we need to do to become those multicultural organizations (DeSensi, 1995) that take a proactive approach (Fink & Pastore, 1999) to managing and addressing diversity, climate, and equity issues.