

## **PUTTING OUR DIFFERENCES TO WORK: HOW A SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AT A CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY RESPONDED TO THE NCATE DIVERSITY STANDARD**

Dr. David B. Hand, Dean - Oral Roberts University School of Education  
Dr. Kim Boyd, Associate Dean - Oral Roberts University School of Education

### **Introduction**

As a school of education from a Christian university applying for initial accreditation with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), we were compelled to consider how we viewed the concept of diversity. The accreditation process caused the education faculty to engage in multiple conversations regarding diversity and to expand the definition to encompass more than race or ethnicity. Principles from Joel Barker's video *Wealth, Innovation, and Diversity* (2001) and Debbie Kennedy's book *Putting Our Differences to Work* (2008) contributed to the expanded view of diversity. Additionally, faculty members were challenged to adopt a new paradigm of diversity as "value added," and to discuss the implications of diversity from a Christian biblical worldview and our Kingdom calling.

### **Diversity Defined by Accreditation**

In our new positions as Dean and Associate Dean for the Oral Roberts University School of Education, we were challenged to establish a unit that would be recognized locally, nationally, and globally for its preparation of candidates to work in public and private Christian educational settings. One way of accomplishing this goal was to seek national recognition through accreditation, of which the unit had never previously sought to achieve. To seek national accreditation meant that we would have to meet all of the standards for public accountability, including standard four that addresses diversity.

NCATE's (2008) definition of diversity is differences among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical area. Institutions must demonstrate that candidates have the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions to work with diverse P-12 students to ensure that all students are learning. Acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions are expected to be developed as a result of candidate exposure to curriculum aligned with proficiencies related to diversity and candidate interactions with diverse faculty (higher education and clinical faculty), peers, and P-12 students.

Working towards NCATE accreditation for our teacher preparation program and addressing NCATE's Standard four - diversity made us realize we needed a new and fresh perspective regarding diversity and that we needed to convey a new and expanded understanding of diversity to our faculty. Once the faculty understood an expanded perspective of diversity, it was our goal to develop our students (teacher candidates) with a broader and more comprehensive understanding and even a conviction of diversity. Even if we said that we viewed diversity in a broader perspective and that it was more than just an issue of race or ethnicity, that never seemed to be the way it played out when the issue came up for discussion with the faculty. It became apparent that we were locked into a paradigm regarding our perception of diversity, as were many faculty members from other disciplines within the university. This was not unlike what we

witnessed at other institutions as we began serving as Board of Examiners chairs for NCATE. We were more focused on diversity because of the implications for meeting standard four and not as much because of the value added by diversity.

### **Going Into Every Person's World**

As Christians, we tend to think that we have no biases or prejudices, after all, we are Christians and we know God's principles. We give mental assent that we are all created in His image, but how does that play out in the classroom and in life? Irvine (1990) and McGarthy and Crichlow (1993) suggested that teachers and administrators bring to the education profession perspectives about what diversity means, which they have constructed from their own life experiences. Little have we admitted that we may harbor some negative thoughts, biases, and/or prejudices and that we have failed to see the larger picture of God's plan in diversity.

As we grappled with preparing candidates to work with *all* student learners, we had to answer the following questions: What did we want our candidates to look like when they left our institution; what did we want our candidates to know and be able to do; and how did we want candidates graduating from our Christian institution to behave toward P-12 student learners and their peers? Like most private institutions, the majority of the education majors in our programs are from white middle-class families. Their contextual environment would be vastly different from that of some public school settings. Yet, if we were to prepare candidates to "go into every person's world," we were obligated to embrace the NCATE definition in its entirety.

### **Developing the Professional Dispositions to Appreciate Diversity**

As Dean, I personally had to realize the broader definition of diversity, as defined by NCATE. I did not want to accept this definition only to be politically correct but because I recognized that our teacher candidates needed to understand this broader perspective to be professional in their classrooms and to maintain the disposition that all students can learn. The goal was for our teacher candidates to become aware of their own biases and to learn to overcome them and develop the dispositions that would not only help them professionally but also become strong Christian leaders. Payne (1994) stated that negative attitudes and stereotypes on the part of the educator may act to destroy a crucial bond or prevent it from ever developing, thereby creating student resistance to the teacher both personally and educationally. If we, as a unit, were going to fully embrace the responsibility of preparing candidates to work with diverse P-12 students, it became important for the school of education to develop and incorporate appropriate professional disposition proficiencies, for which candidates had to demonstrate they possessed prior to exiting the program.

Professional dispositions are defined as professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. Combs, Richards, and Richards (1976), after more than 30 years of research on perceptual behaviors, concluded that these behaviors are considered symptoms of underlying beliefs. He noted that perceptual research indicates that if there is a way to measure attitudes, values, and other perceptual factors, one can predict external behaviors. For teachers,

their degree of effectiveness seems directly related to their perceptual orientation or their professional dispositions.

NCATE expects institutions to assess professional dispositions based on observable behaviors in educational settings. The two specific professional dispositions that NCATE (2008) expects institutions to assess are fairness and the belief that all students can learn. It is the belief of the unit that candidates can learn the subject area content needed to help students learn if they have the appropriate dispositions. The appropriate dispositions force one to push past one's comfort level to seek the knowledge and skills to ensure that as an educator one addresses the needs of each student.

Examples of dispositions the unit assesses include caring; fairness and respect; interactions with P-12 students, peers, and faculty; commitment to diversity; dedication to the teaching profession; and reflective practice. Each criterion has multiple indicators used to measure to what extent the candidate meets the criterion. After much research, the unit created the disposition evaluation rubric to assess candidates' dispositions. Assessing professional dispositions can be very subjective in the absence of processes that are fair, unbiased, and administered consistently. Therefore, the unit employs a process that requires a candidate's disposition be assessed a minimal of seven times by several different people, both internally and externally, including the candidate's self-assessment. If there is a pattern of evidence that indicates a challenge with a particular disposition, it is brought to the attention of the candidate and the advisor, and a plan is implemented to address the challenge.

### **A New Paradigm: Diversity Is the Natural Direction of the Universe (God's Design and Plan)**

As we continue to examine new concepts for preparing candidates to work with all learners, the reality is that we need to examine our own paradigms. Our paradigms shifted to a greater extent after a review of Joel Barker's video *Wealth, Innovation, and Diversity* (2008). Joel Barker brought out several key points that are causes for Christian higher education leaders to consider when developing a deeper understanding and appreciation for diversity within a college or university setting.

Barker (2008) told the story of the Irish potato famine, explaining that the conditions developed over a period of years because the Irish farmers had planted the same potato type over and over, year after year until it began to die out. Yes, due to the same genetic make-up and lack of diversity, the potatoes had been so inbred the result was the Irish potato blight that lasted from 1845-1850, killing over one million Irish with another million fleeing the country. However, the Incas of Peru another civilization earlier in history, understood the challenge of the sameness in potatoes and came to understand the value of planting diverse types of potatoes. In fact, the Incas planted over 200 varieties of potatoes; they never lacked for food. These two stories are told to illustrate the value of diversity with the understanding that homogeneous sameness can create decline and impoverishment while heterogeneous, maximizing diversity can stimulate upward mobility, innovation, and even wealth.

Another example for appreciation of diversity is Dr. David Tillman's ecological experiments at the University of Minnesota, College of Biological Sciences at Cedar Creek. Dr. Tillman has been experimenting for several years regarding the impact of biodiversity in the environment. He has divided a land area into 100 plots, 2m X 2m and has planted a variety of prairie flowers and plants in each plot. Some plots have only one or two types of plants while other plots have an assortment of up to 24 diverse varieties. What he and his colleagues discovered was that the plots with fewer varieties of plants do not do as well or survive as long as the plots with an assorted number of a variety of plants. His conclusions listed here give cause to reflect when considering our own thoughts on how we value diversity. Dr. Tillman concludes the following:

1. diverse eco systems are able to deal with large scale shock, floods, and drought, and recover faster than systems without diversity.
2. diverse groups utilize resources better than single groups.
3. diverse groups withstand attacks better and are healthier.
4. diverse groups are more productive and offer a better payback.
5. diverse groups are more stable and predictable during change - variety stabilizes the group.

Diversity, when looked at through the lens of a new paradigm, truly can shift one's thinking from one of a politically correct compliance mandate to one of understanding God's plan for all people and looking at diversity as a wonderful opportunity to be sensitive to differences in individuals and understand their value added to the group. The world is becoming more complex. With increasing complexity comes increased diversity. As educators, we need to see the value of embracing diversity in its full definition; we need to see that diversity will enable us to meet the challenges ahead. Barker pointed out the following:

1. diversity gives us the long-term vigor to survive large scale changes or trauma.
2. diversity increases our options for problem solving.
3. diversity is the natural direction of the universe (God's design and plan).

### **Implications for Christian Higher Education: A Kingdom Calling**

Kennedy (2008) gave insight into how diversity accelerates innovation to everyone's advantage. Key individuals in Christian higher education would do well to take leadership to a new level by understanding diversity as a way of applying people's rich and varied experiences, differences, cultures, and perspectives to attract growth and create innovation.

Kennedy (2008) pointed out the need to appreciate not only a diverse environment but one that is also inclusive. "Diversity multiplies the possibilities for generating creative new ideas and inclusion creates an environment of acceptance for everyone" (p. 83). Leaders in Christian higher education need to understand their role in creating the buy-in within their unit of education as well as the entire university to support diversity and its expanded definition. Diversity needs to be an institution-wide priority so that the university will thrive as well as gain and experience greater innovation. Innovation drives diversity, and diversity will open the doors to new growth in the Christian university community - a Kingdom calling.

**Conclusion: Do Not Go Back but Become**

We have learned and are learning, as we embrace diversity, we allow opportunity for growth and become personally richer. Barker (2008) stated, “Our true nature is not to go back or go to where we came but to go where we *become*” (p. \_\_). As Christian educators, we need to become increasingly understanding of diversity and its value to us. We need to understand God’s purposes for us as a people to utilize diversity for ongoing collaboration, innovation, and advancement in education.

## References

- Barker, J. (2001). *The new business of paradigms: Classic 21<sup>st</sup> century edition*. (DVD). St. Paul, MN. Star Thrower Distribution.
- Combs, A.W., Richards, A.C., & Richards, F. (1976). *Perceptual Psychology: A humanistic approach to the study of persons*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Irvine, J. (1990). *Black students and failure: Policies, practices, and prescriptions*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- McCarthy, C., & Crichlow, W. (1993). *Race identity and representation in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Kennedy, D. (2008). *Putting our differences to work: The fastest way to innovation, leadership and high performance*. San Francisco. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). (2008). *Professional standards for the accreditation of teacher education*. Washington, DC: NCATE.