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Managing Diversity in an Information Technology Workplace at Alma College

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Abstract

This paper will explore diversity management skills and Alma College’s Information Technology and Library Services team as well as the campus community. Diversity management skills may include cultural awareness, communication, flexibility, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. Improving these diversity management skills can help increase the success and sustainability of Alma College.

Keywords: diversity management, Alma College, information technology, cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, diversity
Executive Summary

According to the college ranking website, College Factual, 81.6 percent of Alma College’s student population is white and 92.7 percent of its faculty members are also white. Additionally, College Factual (2018) ranks the small liberal arts college 2,255 out of 2,718 institutions nationwide in the ethnic diversity of its student population. However, Alma College is ranked 988 out of those 2,718 institutions for a male-to-female student ratio as the undergraduate population is 589 males to 796 females (College Factual, 2018). These diversity figures place Alma College below the national average for the ethnic diversity of its campus community, but above average for gender disparity between female and male faculty as well as students.

Alma College is located in Alma, Michigan, the largest city of Gratiot County. Furthermore, according to the 2010 census, the City of Alma, Michigan, has a population of 9,383. Of those 9,383 people, 95 percent are white with 55 percent of Alma’s population being female (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). As such, the City of Alma as well as Alma College are both predominantly white with a slightly higher ratio of females to males.

Additionally, the Information Technology Services department at Alma College closely mirrors the ethnic diversity of the campus and surrounding community as 100 percent of its workforce is white. However, almost 92 percent of the Information Technology Services team is male, contrasting with the 26 percent of males in the College’s student population. As the Information Technology Services team plays a crucial organizational role, properly managing diversity within the team is key to the success and sustainability of the College as a whole.
Diversity Management

In today’s world, diversity is looked at as the collection of characteristics that make people different from one another. Individuals and cultures are becoming less isolated from each other as the world becomes more interconnected due, in part, to the increased use of Internet-based technology. Widespread adoption of information technology, as well as its underlying infrastructure, has created a need for a more efficient and innovative campus workforce.

Furthermore, increased international recruitment efforts for students and staff have also reduced cultural as well as individual isolation within institutions of higher education. Increased competition for students as well as highly-qualified faculty or staff members, has created a need for increasing diversity initiatives throughout the campus community. Additionally, the need to retain more diverse students, faculty, or staff has increased demand for institutional programs designed to support a more diverse population.

As such, practical organizational strategies designed to identify effective diversity management policies and procedures have become key focal points for business organizations as well as institutions of higher learning. Indeed, human resource literature is focused on “understanding how diversity management practices at the organizational level affect employee well-being and effectiveness at the individual level or effectiveness at the organizational level” (Guillaume et al., 2014, p. 6). An understanding of how individuals, as well as teams, in an organization manage diversity is critical to the successful implementation of Alma College’s diversity strategies.

Proper management of an increasingly more diverse workforce is critically important to the success and sustainability of the organization as a whole. Bassett-Jones (2005) defines diversity management as “the systematic and planned commitment on the part of organizations
to recruit and retain employees with diverse backgrounds and abilities” (p. 170). Much of the recruitment responsibility of creating a more diverse workforce relies on an organization’s human resources department and its leadership. However, individuals, as well as other departments on campus, must play a key role in retaining, supporting, and developing diverse employees.

**Integrating Diversity Management**

Proper integration of diversity management within an organizational unit or department involves more than lofty goals and initiatives issued down to departmental leaders from the College’s executive committee. Indeed, diversity management is a “developmental process that happens in the moment and includes all employees, and that is inclusive of all aspects of diversity that matter to the employees, not just those mandated by or sanctioned through organizational directives or legislation” (Bouten-Pinto, 2016, p. 141). Thus, it is extremely important that a collaborative process exists between all layers of an organization to identify, implement, and evaluate campus diversity initiatives.

However, each individual team or department within the College is responsible for proper diversity management. Teams, as well as individuals, are key contributors to the overall success of Alma College’s ability to manage diversity. Indeed, Guillaume et al. (2014) suggest that the work group rather than the organization should be the focus here because it is likely to be the most salient unit, the most likely focus of attachment, and the most important instance for control, and might therefore be also the best predictor of employee innovation, effectiveness, and well-being (p. 9).

As such, the Chief Information Officer of the Information Technology and Library Services department must be a strong advocate for diversity as well as inclusion while being an engaged
member of the campus community.

Specifically, there are two diversity skills that the Chief Information Officer must possess in order to integrate diversity management: flexibility and emotional intelligence. Flexibility will allow the Chief Information Officer the ability to adapt and respond to varying institutional situations with an increasingly diverse department. Bucher (2015) states that “Flexible thinkers do not lock themselves into one mode of thought. Rather, they can adjust mentally to different situations” (p. 45). This flexibility can allow for greater team creativity, open communication, and stronger team cohesiveness. Flexibility from the Chief Information Officer will help foster an innovative culture within the Information Technology and Library Services team.

Additionally, emotional intelligence is an important diversity management skill for any organizational leadership to possess. Doe, Ndinguri, and Phipps (2015) define emotional intelligence as “the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, as well as the ability to effectively manage our feelings as we interact with others” (p. 105). Emotional intelligence is a diversity management skill that helps create a solid foundation for building trusting relationships, increasing effective communication, and establishing a more cohesive team.

The ability to recognize, value, and manage feelings in oneself as well as others is a key leadership skill to effectively integrate diversity management within an organization. Indeed, a leader such as Alma College’s Chief Information Officer (CIO), who is successful at being flexible, adaptable, and effective in managing their own emotions will, ultimately, increase the diversity of the organization’s workforce.
Diversity Management Skills

A positive effect of the increased interconnectivity is that people from different cultures tend to analyze problems with a different way of thinking using a variety of perspectives (Martin, 2014). Differing perspectives among organizational team members can lead to more creative and innovative ways of solving organizational problems. Innovative and creative solutions to organizational problems can help the Information Technology Services team drive the College’s strategic information technology initiatives.

Additionally, in order to adapt to changing environmental variables or situations, it is important for campus leaders to have the skill set necessary to properly manage the increased diversity of their workforce. Management of diversity involves more than just being conscious of the differences between surface characteristics of other people or cultures. Besides the obvious surface-level characteristics such as skin color, age, or clothing choices, other areas of diversity exist that are harder to see. Some of these additional deeper diversity characteristics may include personality traits, learning styles, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation.

Diversity consciousness involves the understanding, awareness, and skills in the area of diversity; it is not: ignoring differences, treating everyone the same, a passing fad, common sense, important for only some people, or simply some “feel-good” activity (Bucher, 2015). In order to better develop diversity consciousness, it is important for leaders of the Information Technology and Library Services team to develop appropriate diversity skills.

Some of the diversity consciousness skills include cultural awareness, communication, flexibility, teamwork, and emotional intelligence (Bucher, 2015). These skills can help improve a team’s overall performance and effectiveness. In addition, ongoing self-reflection coupled
with evaluation will help Alma College’s Information Technology and Library Services team leaders continue to develop their diversity management skills.

However, Guillaume et al. (2014) state that the “literature on policies, procedures, and practices of diversity management in organizations is currently fragmented and often contradictory in highlighting what is effective diversity management, and which organizational and societal factors facilitate or hinder its implementation” (p. 4). Thus, it is critical for leaders of the Information Technology Services team, specifically the Chief Information Officer (CIO), to develop appropriate diversity management policies and procedures. Additionally, the department’s diversity management policies must be consistently evaluated and adapted to be responsive to relevant campus conditions. Furthermore, alignment with the College’s mission and vision is paramount to the success of the diversity management strategies.

Finally, diversity management involves proper understanding and awareness of the different types of diversity traits briefly mentioned above. Additionally, Shin and Park (2013) define three different areas of diversity within an organization that includes demographic diversity, organizational diversity, and socio-cognitive diversity (Figure 1.). Demographic diversity includes surface-level traits such as age, gender, or nationality. Organizational diversity includes employee job duties or functions, seniority level, and hierarchical placement within the organization. Lastly, socio-cognitive includes deeper diversity characteristics such as an individual’s religion, morals, and other personality traits.
Diversity Management Challenges

The idea of diversity management comes with challenges as well as shortcomings. Bouten-Pinto, (2016) argue that

the shortcomings of the managing diversity initiative, in that it is positioned as something that needs doing through controlled mechanisms and operationalized in narrow managerialist terms. Workplace diversity thus, is framed as a problem that needs to be controlled (managed) and accordingly designated as a job for managers only; reinforcing the tradition of command and control top-down management processes (p. 140).
Indeed, frequent and transparent communication among team members may help alleviate any perceived top-down management initiatives. As such, communication skills are critical to the management of diversity in the Information Technology and Library Services team as well as the campus community.

All too often, internal resistance to top-down management policies and procedures can spell disaster for the success of an organization’s initiatives, including strategies to increase diversity. Without proper communication skills, the unique characteristics and diverse talents of individual team members may never be fully utilized. Proper communication will show all team members that their input is valued and welcome within the diversity management process.

As pointed out by Bouten-Pinto (2016), an additional challenge to diversity management in organizations is that diversity initiatives are “invariably lumped into an already overflowing basket of things to do for middle managers and hence likely to only receive attention when diversity is considered to have an adverse effect on productivity and other associated bottom-line objectives” (p. 140). Indeed, the Information Technology Services team is already tasked with supporting rapidly changing technology with limited time and resources.

**Diversity Management Improvement**

Diversity or cultural “Awareness and understanding make it possible for you not only to recognize cultural differences and similarities, but also to grasp their meaning and significance” (Bucher, 2015, p. 46). Grasping the meaning and significance of cultural differences while embracing those differences is increasingly more important as the institutions of higher learning compete for faculty, staff, or students. Cultural awareness is a critical diversity management skill for the Information Technology Services team leaders to possess. In today’s global landscape, it is imperative to be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences in order to increase
individual as well as organizational success.

Not only is it important for leaders of the Information Technology Services team to improve their diversity as well as cultural understanding, focus should be given to the underlying psychological impacts diversity has on their current employees. Indeed, Guillaume et al. (2014) state the following regarding current diversity management literature, “there is little consideration in this literature for as to how diversity affects individual employees, and how this in turn affects their effectiveness, innovation, and well-being; the few studies that are available are inconclusive” (p. 6). Increasing diversity within the Information Technology workforce necessitates increased communication and support within the existing departmental framework. Attention, coupled with consideration, towards the impacts on current individual employees can improve the implementation and management of campus diversity initiatives.

Improved diversity management of individuals and department teams can have ripple effects on the wider campus community. Indeed, positive processes and results of diversity management within the Information Technology Services department can model behavior for other departments at Alma College. Guillaume et al. (2014) suggests that the extent to which diversity leads to more or less favorable work-related outcomes will depend on employees’ perceptions towards the importance of their employer’s efforts to integrate differences, treat all employees in a fair and equitable way, and empower them to contribute to the effectiveness of their work group – in other words their organization’s climate for inclusion (p. 8).

As such, a key variable in the successful management of diversity at Alma College is the overall perception of that organization’s diversity climate from current employees. Additionally, the perceptions of Alma College’s sincerity and commitment towards diversity impacts current
individual employees’ feelings towards campus diversity initiatives. Positive responses to Alma College’s diversity climate from current employees include increased motivation and tolerance towards implementing diversity management strategies.

Conclusion

Properly managing diversity in an increasingly interconnected world is critical to the success of the Information Technology Services department at Alma College and the campus community. Increased competition for student enrollment as well as highly qualified faculty or staff, has necessitated the need to support a more diverse workforce and student population. An integral part of supporting a more diverse campus community is developing diversity management skills in campus leadership that allow people to interact with others in a way that respects and values individual differences.

In addition, broadening the definition of the characteristics that make up a person’s diversity traits will help expand diversity management skills. Indeed, diversity includes more traditional characteristics including race, gender, and age as well as additional diversity characteristics such as morals, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation. Furthermore, diversity management is a dynamic skill requiring a continuous commitment to experiencing new ideas and understanding the cultural differences of individual members of the campus community.

Finally, consideration and awareness of the impacts diversity have on current employees are critical to sustaining as well as supporting a more diverse environment. Additionally, the importance of critical diversity management skills cannot be overstated; the ability to recognize the uniqueness of other cultures, values, or customs can lead to the success and sustainability of Alma College as well as the surrounding community.
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