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Diversity in an Information Technology Workplace at Alma College

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Abstract

This paper will explore diversity’s impact on the Information Technology and Library Services department at Alma College as well as the campus community as a whole. Furthermore, the concept of diversity characteristics will also be considered. Additionally, strategic analysis, organizational behavior, diversity management, and financial management will also be explored. Improving workplace diversity, in coordination with Alma College’s strategic goals, can help increase the success and sustainability of the entire campus community.

Keywords: strategic analysis, organizational behavior, diversity, financial management, Alma College, information technology, sustainability
Executive Summary

Alma College is a private liberal arts college founded in 1886 and centrally located in Alma, Michigan. Accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, the institution enrolls approximately 1,450 students from 30 states as well as eight countries (Alma College, 2018). Additionally, Alma College employs just over 100 full-time faculty members and an Information Technology Services department staff of 14.

Alma College’s Information Technology Services department closely resembles the demographics of the College’s hometown as both are predominately white. Additionally, of the 14 members of the Information Technology Services team, 13 of them are male (or 92 percent of the department). Currently, there are vacancies within the department for the positions of Chief Information Officer and Network Administrator. The Chief Information Officer (CIO) position will lead Information Technology Services as well as the Library Services team. Additionally, the Chief Information Officer is charged with being a strong advocate for diversity as well as inclusion while being an engaged member of the campus community (Alma College, 2018).

The Information Technology Services department is responsible for supporting and maintaining the underlying technology infrastructure at Alma College. These resources are critical for core business functions, academic endeavors, and research initiatives. Thus, innovation, efficiency, collaboration, and alignment with the College’s strategic goals are critical to the success of the organization. As this department plays a crucial role in the sustainability of the College, properly managing an increasingly more diverse workforce becomes a key component to achieving strategic goals.
Diversity

“Over the past few decades, academicians, practitioners and organizational researchers have recognized that diversity is a phenomenon that has a wide array of affects within the workplace, and society in general” (Friday, Friday, 2003, p. 1). Indeed, as competition increases and technology reduces barriers to organizational isolation, awareness of diversity’s influence on an organization’s success as well as sustainability are critical to the survival of institutions such as Alma College.

Individual diversity characteristics may include age, race, or gender that mostly represent surface-level diversity, or “differences in easily perceived characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, or disability that do not necessarily reflect the ways people think or feel but may contain certain stereotypes” (Robbins, Judge, 2016, p. 44). Awareness of surface-level diversity traits is important but can often lead to certain assumptions or perceptions about employees without taking into account how they may think or feel differently than other employees. Additional, and often more difficult to see, diversity characteristics that are potentially more important diversity traits part of deep-level diversity (Robbins, Judge, 2016). Deep-level diversity represents a person’s internal values, morals, personality and other feelings.

Organizations such as Alma College, need to recognize the uniqueness as well as the diversity of current and future employees in order to maximize their potential contributions to the campus community. Overall, a rich diversity climate in an organization has shown a number of positive results such as higher employee satisfaction, increased creativity, innovation, and a reduction in employee turnover. Additionally, employees of more diverse organizations tend to perceive their organization as standing for fair practices, fair treatment, inclusion, and integration of all employees.
Properly supported diversity initiatives can have positive, as well as negative, effects throughout the workplace and the surrounding communities. In addition, awareness and avoidance of dangerous stereotyping behaviors can be beneficial to campus leaders, students, employees, as well as the campus community as a whole. Creating a diverse, fair, inclusive, and balanced work environment involves more than just hiring people with different skin colors or nationalities, it involves proper education, training, coupled with the continued organizational support of diversity initiatives. Furthermore, recognizing and reducing potentially dangerous stereotyping behavior can help the Information Technology Services team, as well as Alma College, avoid costly or damaging discrimination issues that are typically prohibited by federal or state laws.

With awareness of diversity characteristics, the leadership of the Information Technology Services team, specifically the Chief Information Officer, can enhance the positive effects and reduce the negative effects of increasing diversity in the workplace. Diversity is an important concept and plays an important role in an organization’s ability to attract as well as retain highly skilled employees. Successful campus leaders will recognize the benefits of diversity such as “greater creativity and higher quality of ideas generated in a brainstorming task, increased innovation, and an increased number of perspectives and alternatives considered” (O’Leary, Weathington, 2006, p. 2). Thus, workplace diversity initiatives require outreach, support, and budgetary considerations in order to recruit, as well as retain, employees with differing diversity characteristics.

**Strategic Analysis**

An effective way to evaluate Alma College’s current workplace diversity culture is to perform a SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis will include Alma College’s, as well as the
Information Technology Services team’s, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Furthermore, the overall goal of this type of analysis is to help campus leaders identify any potential strategies to exploit opportunities, counter threats, identify and build upon the organization’s strengths, as well as to remove any weaknesses (Hill, Jones, Schiller, 2017).

**Strengths**

Alma College was established in 1886 and has a long history of providing students access to a liberal arts education. Additionally, a student-to-faculty ratio of 12 students for every faculty member allows Alma College the ability to focus on the specific needs of its students as well as other members of the campus community (Alma College, 2018). Furthermore, as a liberal arts institution, Alma College has a deep commitment to providing its students with access to a broad spectrum of academic knowledge and interdisciplinary skills.

**Weaknesses**

Alma College’s Information Technology Services department lacks diversity among its employees as 13 out of 14, or 92 percent of team members are 35 to 55-year-old white males. Historically speaking, minority groups have been underrepresented within the Information Technology Services department as well as the campus community as a whole.

**Opportunities**

Due to recent employee separations, the Information Technology Services department currently has openings for Chief Information Officer and Network Administrator. As such, an intentional outreach or recruitment effort into a more diverse candidate pool may offer the department the opportunity to increase its workplace diversity. These efforts may also help the department further align with the College’s strategic diversity initiatives.
Threats

Slow-moving bureaucratic organizational processes, reduced student enrollment, and budgetary constraints are some of the threats facing the Information Technology Services department at Alma College. Additionally, proximity to other higher learning institutions within the geographical region present increased competition for highly qualified staff from more diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, according to Rose and Palma-Rivas (1998), four additional barriers to increasing workplace diversity include negative attitudes to as well as discomfort around people who are different, discrimination/prejudice, stereotyping, and racism.

Organizational Behavior

While student enrollment trends, organizational processes, and budgetary considerations may be barriers to increasing workplace diversity, a focus must also be given towards Alma College’s current diversity climate. Diversity climate is the extent to which people perceive an organization’s culture including the perception of diversity policies and organizational behaviors (Robbins, Judge, 2016). Organizational support structures and transparent communications are key to creating a positive diversity climate.

Increasing workplace diversity can also increase stereotypes, stereotype threats, and other prejudice behaviors. Prejudice behaviors can be either positive or negative, but both forms are preconceived and difficult to change once established. Additionally, negative prejudice behaviors, stereotypes, and stereotype threats create a negative diversity climate. As such, recognition, as well as awareness, by campus leadership are crucial to combating perceived stereotypes and any potentially negative behaviors as the result of increasing workplace diversity.
Managing Diversity

Taking advantage of opportunities, as well as overcoming weaknesses or threats to increasing workplace diversity is critical to the sustainability of the Information Technology Services department at Alma College and the surrounding community. Diversity management is necessary for attracting and retaining more diverse faculty, staff, as well as student populations. Thus, diversity awareness is a critical diversity management tool for campus leaders, specifically the Chief Information Officer, to possess.

However, as diversity management of individuals and departments can have positive or negative ripple effects on the wider campus community, it is important to note that traditional business approaches towards focusing on measurable outcomes may not be sufficient. Indeed, “The mixed results in the existing literature suggest that the proposed benefits of diversity, upon which the business case is based, may not materialize, or are not quantifiable” (O’Leary. Weathington, 2006, p. 6). Thus, managing diversity in the workplace involves the careful understanding of the limitations of quantifiable metrics when evaluating the success of diversity initiatives.

Furthermore, the management of diversity is a continuous process that involves embedded organizational processes necessary to evaluate and communicate knowledge or understanding of the organization’s current diversity climate. Indeed, creating and sustaining a positive diversity climate involve acknowledging diversity, valuing diversity, as well as managing diversity (Figure 1).
Keown, Martin, and Petty (2017) state that “The fundamental goal of a business is to create value for the company’s owners (i.e., its shareholders)” (p. 3). While creating value for the campus stakeholders, the Information Technology Services’ leadership must carefully consider the health and stability of Alma College’s finances due to fluctuating enrollment as well
as the costs of employee turnover. As such, the Chief Information Officer must consider the risks and rewards of implementing strategic diversity objectives. These risks may include increased costs associated with diversity training, diversion of management’s time, reallocation of resources, and increasing staff support structures.

Costs of implementing and supporting new business policies or procedures are typically measured by their return on investment. However, strict adherence to this traditional business case mentality does “little to address the ethical imperative that organizations must confront to create an inclusive workplace” (O’Leary, Weathington, 2006, p. 3). As such, the return on investment (ROI) of implementing the College’s strategic diversity initiatives may not always be easily quantifiable. Indeed, ethical and cultural returns must be considered within the framework of the more traditional business mentality. Furthermore, careful attention by campus leadership must be paid towards the impacts of campus diversity initiatives upon already underrepresented or marginalized groups in the community.

**Recommendations**

In order to reap the positive rewards of a more diverse workplace, Alma College’s Information Technology Services team needs to create a positive diversity climate. Creating a positive diversity climate involve increasing diversity awareness, funding considerations, and increasing outreach. According to Dr. Candy McCorkle, Alma College’s Director of Diversity and Inclusion Center for Student Opportunity, Alma College has already budgeted for as well as implemented multiple diversity initiatives (personal communication, July 19, 2018).

**Diversity Awareness**

As stated by Dr. Candy McCorkle, Alma College will be implementing required diversity education training for all new hires starting in the Fall of 2018 (personal communication, July
Additionally, effective diversity training (see Appendix A) for all current employees should be completed and reviewed on an annual basis. Furthermore, professional development programs regarding cultural inclusion should be offered by the Human Resources/Diversity and Inclusion Center on a semi-annual basis. Work release and continual diversity awareness improvement should be encouraged by all campus department leaders including the Chief Information Officer.

**Funding Considerations**

In order to increase workplace diversity, budgetary consideration and prioritization must be supported by the executive leadership at Alma College. Further funding for the College’s strategic diversity objectives will help ensure that Alma College is an inclusive and diverse environment that recognizes the unique qualities that diverse individuals bring to the campus community.

Policies or procedures allowing increased financial support to individual employees who choose to become more involved in increasing diversity and diversity awareness on campus should be supported by funding requests (see Appendix B). Additionally, collaboration with Alma College’s Director of Grants and Sponsored Programs, Dr. Sheryle Dixon, should be explored for additional funding options for diversity-centered initiatives.

**Increasing Outreach**

Increasing outreach to improve the College’s diversity climate will involve posting open employment opportunities in farther reaching job posting websites instead of just Alma College’s own job posting webpage. These additional employment websites may include Indeed.com, HigherEdJobs.com, and Educause’s job search website. Additionally, the inclusion of diversity language in job descriptions as well as future job postings is key to attracting applicants from a
more diverse talent pool.

**Conclusion**

Creating a more diverse workplace environment at Alma College involves proper planning, implementation, financing, and support from all campus stakeholder groups. Research has shown that a more diverse workplace increases employee morale, innovation, creativity, team cohesiveness, and reduces employee turnover. As such, workplace diversity policies designed to recruit, retain, as well as develop employees from more diverse social groups are reflective of an inclusive campus environment that can increase the success and sustainability of the organization.

A more diverse workforce will allow the Information Technology Services team the ability to adapt to changing technology infrastructure, increased workload demands, and budgetary constraints currently facing the department as well as the College. The hiring of a diversity-centered transformational leader in the new Chief Information Officer position is a step towards creating a more diverse information technology department. Furthermore, increased diversity advocacy from leadership positions such as the Chief Information Officer is key to successfully obtaining the College’s strategic diversity objections.

Finally, careful attention must be paid to the health and stability of Alma College’s finances due to fluctuating revenue sources. Additionally, diversity initiatives’ return on investment may not be quantifiable, however, consideration should be given to the ethical as well as cultural returns gained by the College and the surrounding community.
REFERENCES


Appendix A – Effective Diversity Training (Bucher, 2015)

Focus is on substantive changes, both individual and organizational.
Focus is on cosmetic changes, such as projecting a certain image and improving public relations.

Training viewed as a long-term process that requires a strong commitment from everyone.
Training viewed as an event, done as quickly and inexpensively as possible.

Trainers utilize a wide range of approaches and materials, tailored to the needs of the organizations.
Trainers utilize “off-the-shelf” approaches and train every group using the same program.

Training is well integrated into organizational functions and planning and has the strong support of leadership.
Stand-alone training is offered, along with passive support by top management.

Motivation is linked to bottom-line organizational goals and priorities.
The primary motivation is to minimize the risk of costly lawsuits.

Trainees return to a supportive organizational environment and apply what they have learned.
Trainees do not take training with them.

Accountability and follow-up are priorities.
Little or no accountability and follow-up exists.
Appendix B - Diversity Funding Request Form

Office for Institutional Diversity and Inclusion
Funding Request Form

Date of Request: ________________________________

Name of Person Requesting: ______________________ ID: ________________

Contact Person: ________________________________ Phone: ________________

Local Address: __________________________________

Funding Requested For:

☐ Conference
   Title: ___________________________________________
   Location: ________________________________________
   Date(s): ________________

☐ Project
   Title: __________________________________________
   ________________________________________________
   Date(s): ________________

☐ Workshop
   Title: __________________________________________
   ________________________________________________
   Date(s): ________________

☐ Guest Speaker:
   Name of Guest Speaker: ___________________________
   Date(s): ________________

☐ Other:
   ________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________

Total Amount of Funding Requested: ________________________________

Are you requesting funding from other sources? (Other departments, organizations, etc.) If so, from whom and how much funding are you requesting?

1. ____________________________________________ Amount: ________________________________
2. ____________________________________________ Amount: ________________________________
3. ____________________________________________ Amount: ________________________________

On a separate piece of paper, please briefly describe the goal and/or purpose of your conference, program, or activity, etc. Please also explain how the information you learn will be shared with the campus community.

As a stipulation to receiving funding from the Office for Diversity and Inclusion, you are required to submit a brief written summary of your event and the impact of your event as related to campus diversity issues within two weeks after the completion of your event.

**Please attach any other information that would be relevant to the request**

Submit Completed Form to:
Office for Diversity and Inclusion