

MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF DIVERSITY DIRECTORS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

BY PATRICIA ROMNEY, KARLENE FERRON, AND JENNIFER HILL

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ost independent schools have made a serious commitment to diversity — to developing an inclusive community at all levels, and supporting it with clear policies and a multicultural curriculum. In order to facilitate the necessary changes, many schools have also embraced the role of the diversity director (or a similarly named position). Indeed, a diversity director knowledgeable in diversity issues, with a proven ability to work with students and adults, and with a commitment to diversity and multiculturalism can be invaluable to a school seeking to grow in the 21st century. These schools have what Dennis Bisgaard, head of the

Kingswood-Oxford School (Connecticut), has called 2020 vision — an ability to keep the school community focused on where it wants to be in the near future.

The success of diversity practitioners varies widely in independent schools. Our experience with diversity work reveals that many schools have excellent diversity directors and wonderful diversity programs, yet more than a few schools have woeful tales of choices gone wrong. This disparity raises some obvious questions. What are the qualities of a good diversity director? What should schools look for when hiring a diversity director? Is personality important? Does title matter? What about specific job skills? How does the school context itself shape the potential success or failure of diversity directors? What conditions within a school are necessary to support a diversity director in his or her work? In short, how can a school maximize the success and effectiveness of diversity directors?



Pearl Rock Kane and Alfonso Orsini's *Color of Excellence: Hiring and Keeping Teachers of Color in Independent Schools* is particularly helpful in terms of teacher recruitment and retention. Various chapters provide helpful observations and suggestions about diversity directors as well. Many organizations provide resources to assist schools in the overall work of creating a diverse environment. The National Association of Independent Schools website (www.nais.org), for example, abounds with sample job descriptions for diversity directors, mission statements for diversity offices, and strategic plans for promoting school diversity. William Kirwin and Frank Hale, Jr.'s book, *What Makes Racial Diversity Work in Higher Education*, is especially worth mentioning because of its wisdom about diversity directors in higher education. To date, however, there is not much research that relates specifically to diversity directors in independent schools.

In an effort to begin to better understand the job of diversity directors in independent schools, we were able to explore key questions with the help of the SPHERE Consortium in Eastern Connecticut. SPHERE, a 10-school consortium in greater Hartford, began in the 1970s. Dedicated to strengthening diversity in member schools (Avon Old Farms, The Ethel Walker School, Kingswood-Oxford School, Loomis Chaffee, Miss Porter's School, Mooreland Hill School, Renbrook School, Suffield Academy, Watkinson School, and Westminster School), SPHERE's focus has been clear — "the admission of students and hiring of faculty of color, education of school communities about the complexities and value of diversity." Their ultimate aims are enhancement of the shared appreciation of diversity in their academic communities and the future health and vitality of their

schools. Indeed, SPHERE's dedication to diversity has been sustained over the last three decades and they continue to demonstrate excellence in diversity efforts. For example, in a recent initiative SPHERE responded to a goal of Hartford, Connecticut's mayor, who wanted "to have more young Hartford residents attend and complete college by way of indepen-

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dent schools." In response, SPHERE made a commitment "to provide necessary financial aid and academic support to enable bright, committed Hartford students to attend SPHERE schools."

In conjunction with preparation for a diversity workshop with SPHERE's coordinating committee group, we developed a survey that was part needs assessment and part pilot research. Our goal was twofold. First, we wanted to get to know the group through a preliminary needs assessment. Second, we, in conjunction with SPHERE, were interested in advancing our understanding of what makes for successful diversity leadership in schools. To that end, we conducted a small pilot study designed to shed some light on that topic.

The three authors of this article developed an online questionnaire about diversity. We asked demographic questions, and we asked questions about schools and diversity directors. Our questions about schools focused on their definitions of diversity, their diversity priorities, their commitment to diversity, and the extent to which their commitment moved them to "really take action on diversity." Our ques-

tions about diversity directors centered on length of service, activities, skills, and their level of success in the work. We sent these surveys to the 10 heads of school, the 10 diversity directors, and the 10 deans of faculty at SPHERE schools.

We examined the data as a whole and looked at success ratings, school by school. Some schools rated their diversity efforts as more successful than others, and we were interested in the variables that seemed to make a difference between schools. Here, we share some of the findings in hope of enlightening schools that are involved in diversity director searches or schools that may be considering new directions for diversity directors already on the job.

Diversity Definitions Matter

We asked respondents how "diversity" was defined in their schools. Three quarters of the respondents noted that their schools included race, religion, socioeconomic status, nationality, and gender in their definition of diversity, and 67 percent of the respondents said that their schools included sexual orientation in their definition. Less than half of the schools included diversity of ability as an aspect of diversity in their schools. Interestingly, when asked about their *personal* definitions of diversity, all respondents included people of color, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, gender, nationality, and ability in their own definition of ability. Eighty percent of the group also included diversity of ability in their personal definitions.

We found that the more inclusive the school definition of diversity, the stronger the success ratings of the diversity director. Specifically, if a school's definition of diversity included more than three areas of diversity, the diversity director's success level was rated as higher than moderate. Also, in schools where the diversity director was rated as more successful by

respondents, we saw that there was significantly greater agreement among respondents about their perceptions of the school's definition of diversity. This meant that — in schools in which the head of school, dean of faculty, and diversity director agreed about the school's definition of diversity — they were also significantly more likely to rate the diversity director successful.

We noted that personal definitions of diversity did not matter in and of themselves; they all tended to be quite inclusive. However, greater congruence between a school's definition of diversity and the personal definitions offered by the head, dean, and diversity director were significantly correlated with greater diversity director success. Ultimately, in this study, successful diversity work is related to an inclusive definition; shared definition among head, director, and dean; and having personal and school definitions that are in agreement.

What Makes a Diversity Director Successful? What Impedes Success?

At the time of the study, most of the SPHERE Consortium schools had part-time diversity directors. However, part-time diversity directors also had other roles at their schools. In addition to their work as diversity directors, they also functioned as teachers, coaches, and dorm parents. In their roles as diversity directors, they were responsible for the following activities: advising, faculty development, working with parents, educating the school community, and doing diversity programming. Over half of the directors also were involved in the recruitment of students of color. Another third mentioned that they were involved in other tasks, as needed. In this sample, being a full-time diversity director correlated with greater perceived success than being a part-time director. One respondent directly addressed part-time status as a problem for her work and made the case for the "diversity position to become a full-time, non-

teaching position that is included in the senior leadership team." In addition, "lack of time" and "competing priorities" were often identified as major impediments to success, and diversity directors often said they were "stretched too thin."

The title given to the person tasked with leading a school's diversity efforts also made a difference in how respondents rated the success of the diversity director. On the whole, though not in every case, those who had the title of director or dean were viewed as more successful than those who had the title of coordinator.

Priorities

Given the dimension of activities of diversity directors, it followed that the diversity priorities of individual schools were also extensive and varied. The numerous priorities named were grouped into the following three overall categories:

- hiring and retaining faculty of color, and recruiting and supporting students of color (and, to a lesser extent, recruiting and retaining international students, and supporting women and GLB students);

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- creating an inclusive community that "celebrates and appreciates diversity";
- educating the community about diversity.

When comparing schools, we noted that the diversity director was rated as more successful in schools where there was agreement among respondents about the school's diversity priorities. Where there was a sense of confusion or where there were disparate priorities named, the diversity director was rated less successful.

School Climate, Commitment, and Action Matter

Not surprisingly, respondents often mentioned "institutional support" as a factor contributing to diversity director success, and "lack of money," "institutional inertia," or "lack of institutional leadership and commitment" as impediments to success. We also found that rating the diversity director "successful" was somewhat related to the school's commitment to diversity, and that a successful rating of the diversity director was also significantly related to all of the respondents' perceptions that there was action (not just talk) regarding diversity issues in their schools.

Defining the school's "diversity vision," having an environment of "fundamental trust" and "taking action" emerged as key criteria related to a success rating of the diversity director. One respondent cogently described action as "moving the school from Point A to Point B in their commitment to institutional change." While ratings of diversity director success were partially related to school commitment, school commitment and school action were, in turn, related to perceptions of

a common diversity vision and a shared atmosphere of trust. The converse was also true. Discrepancy among the perceptions of school commitment to diversity and, to a lesser extent, action and trust around issues of diversity were correlated with less success

Personality, Experience, and Skills

Certainly, the role of diversity coordination is complex. Representing the under-represented and building bridges between groups is never an easy task, and, as with any leadership role, bringing different constituencies together to coexist, as well as take action, is an ongoing challenge. In our survey, diversity directors described the evolution in their own words, among them: "meeting people where they are in their journey of accepting their part in this work of diversity,"

“getting leadership to define a ‘to be’ picture for the next 10 years,” and “warding off complacency.”

As one might expect, a good relationship with the supervisor to whom the diversity director reports is correlated with success. Time and experience also mattered in our sample. Our results showed that more time in the position of diversity director was related to greater success. Those with 1–2 years or less were rated *moderately successful*, whereas those with 6–10 years or more were rated *moderately* to *very successful*. More time working in independent schools also correlated with greater reported success. Those with 1–2 years were rated *moderately unsuccessful*, whereas those with 3–5 years or more were *moderately* to *very successful*.

In our study, attending an independent school did not correlate with greater success among diversity directors, but having prior experience

as a teacher or as a division head did seem to make a difference. It was not necessarily helpful to have been in admissions or to have had “other” experiences in independent schools. (Again, these findings should be understood as limited to this sample. It is noteworthy

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that two of the best diversity directors we have worked with began in admissions.) Overall, respondents often mentioned “experience” as a contribution to diversity director success. When given the opportunity to describe relevant experiences, respondents named “a record of getting things done,” “expertise in the field of education and diversity,” “credibility,” and “good and continuing training and education.”

Some personality variables among diversity directors also correlated with success in this study. Approachability, patience, flexibility, sense of humor, creativity, and ability to grasp the big picture were positively correlated with success in the diversity director role. Extroversion, however, was not. “Strong communication,” “collaboration,” “commitment,” “passion,” and a “personality that is at once insistent but not strident” were phrases used to describe the qualities of successful diversity directors.

Three specific skills rose to the top of the list when considering specific helpful skills for diversity directors. The skill of “trust-building” was number one and was significantly correlated with ratings of success. “Conflict-management skills” and “group-facilitation skills” were close seconds and thirds, though they did not reach statistical significance. Although, in hindsight, these diversity director skills may be seen as common sense, they may also be helpful

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variables to explicitly consider in job descriptions and interviews.

Patrick Lencioni describes trust as the foundation of all successful teamwork. It makes sense that trust in the diversity director and a trusting atmosphere overall would be an invaluable and even necessary part of the equation, especially given that diversity and social justice work is unfortunately still controversial and progress is often hard won.

Toward 2020

It is important to remember that these findings are merely suggestive. A large-scale study is necessary to get the clearest picture nationwide and across the K-12 spectrum — one with a larger sample, as well as one that would include students and families among respondents. A longitudinal study examining diversity development over time and looking at increased community understanding of diversity, success factors among

diverse students, and the hiring of diverse faculty would also be helpful. There are more questions to be asked as well. Do the race or gender of the diversity director make a difference, for example?

For now, this study gives us a few take-home points worth considering. An inclusive and shared definition of diversity seems to improve success. Trust-building, conflict-management, and group-facilitation skills appear to be helpful skills for diversity directors. Prior experience in the roles of teacher or division head correlates with success in these diversity directors. Finally, the more schools share a common diversity vision, make a genuine commitment, take action, and maintain an atmosphere of trust, the more successful the diversity director is judged to be. When examining the success of a school's diversity director, the director's skill and personality are important. Clearly, the effectiveness of diversity directors is also closely related to the context of diversity in the school. Strong experience and skill on the part

of the diversity director, clear school-wide diversity priorities, and choosing to go beyond words to real action may make all the difference.

Patricia Romney is visiting associate professor of psychology and education at Mt. Holyoke College. This research was completed with her former students, Karlene Ferron and Jennifer Hill. Ferron is now a counseling psychology graduate student at Seton Hall and Hill currently works for Accenture Consulting.

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