Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education
Two Case Examples

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Higher education has taken an active role in pursuing inclusion and diversity. It is well-documented that lower-income and minority students face significant barriers to higher education. It also is well-documented that problem solvers from a diverse and inclusive group are able to come up with higher-quality solutions than those arrived at by a more homogeneous group (1).

Almost all universities, colleges, and technical schools have inclusion and diversity programs, but two universities of different sizes and demographics share a commitment to the success of their diverse student populations. In the center of the country lies the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville (UAF), and on the West Coast is California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). A look at the diversity and inclusion programs at these institutions offers an example of the kinds of programs many universities and colleges have embraced.

Northwest Arkansas includes the city of Fayetteville (population 90,000) and the surrounding rural area (population 535,000). However, outside of any one of the four major cities, the setting becomes very rural. In 2010, Fayetteville itself was more than 80 percent white, and the university reflected a similar lack of diversity. In 2019, approximately 27,000 students (including undergraduate, graduate, and law students) were enrolled at UAF, and more than 20,000—just under 74 percent—identified as white. About 55 percent of the students are from within the state, with a number of out-of-state students drawn from UAF’s reciprocity agreements with neighboring states and Native American tribes.

In Southern California, the city of Long Beach has a population of nearly 479,000 and is home to North America’s second largest maritime trade gateway. The greater Los Angeles area, which includes Long Beach, has a population of approximately 19 million, of which nearly half are Hispanic/Latino.

CSULB—one of the California State University System’s 23 campuses—has...
more than 38,000 enrolled students, 90 percent of whom are from within the state and a vast majority of whom live off campus. CSULB draws the eighth largest applicant pool of all universities in the United States. As part of its mission, the California State University system seeks individuals with collegiate promise and who face numerous barriers to assist them in advancing to the highest educational levels they can reach. CSULB is actively engaged in implementation of the Beach 2030 Strategic Plan, which identifies building a community of diverse students as a strategic priority (2).

CSULB reflects the community it serves: Of its students, 46 percent are Hispanic/Latino; 21 percent are Asian American; 16 percent are white; 7 percent are Black or African-American; and 5 percent are multiracial. Despite the opportunities afforded by the region’s and the state’s diverse economy, poverty remains a barrier to accessing education for many of Long Beach’s residents. Long Beach has an 18 percent poverty rate, a number likely exacerbated by California’s high cost of living.¹

As a result of Long Beach’s poverty rate, CSULB has made it a priority to close the achievement gap. In 2008, it helped launch the Long Beach College Promise, which aims to increase college readiness and improve graduation rates among Long Beach students. The Promise is a partnership of Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach City College (a community college), CSULB, and the city of Long Beach itself. The Promise provides for a guaranteed transfer admission pathway from Long Beach City College to CSULB for students in 10 majors who meet the university’s entrance requirements.

UAF also has purposely pursued programs intended to help underrepresented student populations. The university’s Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion envisions “a world committed to inclusivity, where diversity, equity, access, and civility are valued as a part of our culture, climate, and everyday lives (3).” In addition, the office urges all community members to be responsible “as engaged citizens to consistently incorporate behaviors and practices that support an inclusive environment on campus, in Arkansas, and everywhere.” This vision and charge are supported with various workshops, programs, and training opportunities offered to students, staff, and faculty.

Every week, the division sponsors many on-campus events that highlight the university’s commitment to inclusion and diversity. For example, disability awareness events, a Native American cultural celebration, and an LGBTQ+ History Month celebration were held virtually—because of COVID-19—the first week of October 2020. At the beginning of the fall 2020 semester, Chancellor Joe Steinmetz stressed the importance of health and safety precautions because of the pandemic. He also emphasized improvement of the campus racial climate, based on nationwide protests sparked by the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020.

The university-level commitment at UAF percolates down to the college level. In 2007, the College of Engineering established the Engineering Career Awareness Program (ECAP) (4). The goal of ECAP is to recruit students who are underrepresented in the field of engineering. A significant part of this goal is achieved by providing the students the support they need to feel comfortable, confident, and ready to succeed.

ECAP involves multiple programs, including an in-residence summer bridge program for new students, renewable scholarships, opportunities for cooperative or internship experiences, peer mentoring, a freshman engineering program, and a living learning community of students who share a common academic interest. A National Science Foundation grant initially supported ECAP, but over the years support has shifted to industry and private donations. Between fall 2014 and fall 2020, the College of Engineering saw a 2.4 percent increase in enrollment of minority students. It is not possible to attribute these changes to any one effort, but university- and college-level initiatives have no doubt helped (A. Braham, personal communication, Nov. 12, 2020). One example of college-level outreach in the community includes engineering summer camps designed to engage children in

¹ For statistics on Long Beach, California, visit U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts at https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/longbeachcitycalifornia.
Cabrillo’s class of 2020 is the first class to complete four years of instruction within the AGL framework. Approximately 800 students have been part of the program over that time. There are no prerequisites, but there is currently a wait list for students at Cabrillo to join the academy. Among students in the program, there was an increase in advanced placement course enrollment from 6 percent in 2016 to 16 percent in 2020 and—over the same period—a decrease from 24 percent to 10 percent, which includes program design that links academic curriculum with industry skills and knowledge needed in the workplace.

Cabrillo High School’s close proximity to the Port of Long Beach means that freight traffic has a major presence in this heavily industrial community. AGL creates opportunities for workforce development in the trade and transportation sectors while addressing underlying issues that face residents of West Long Beach: poverty and low educational attainment.

With a calendar of celebrations that include Gay and Lesbian Pride Month (in June) and Gay and Lesbian History Month (in October), UAF sends a clear message that—within its halls and on its grounds—all are welcome.

At UAF, targeted events such as National Parkinson’s Awareness Month (in April) and Disability Employment Awareness Month (in October) extend the reach of students with disabilities.

STEM disciplines. These camps are held throughout the state and are available to 2nd through 12th graders (5).

CSULB has similar initiatives that target specific students. In addition to The Promise, CSULB recognizes that their goals of diversity and inclusion will be successful only if students in middle school and high school—and their parents and guardians—understand what it means to be college-ready and see the link between college education and employment in the local economy. In response, Long Beach Unified School District partnered with the Port of Long Beach to establish a career pathway academy at Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo High School in West Long Beach. Called the Academy of Global Logistics (AGL), the program—launched in 2016—offers education that is connected to key employment pathways in the community through certificates and degrees from Long Beach City College, as well as CSULB.

What makes AGL different from similar programs is the port’s role: including financial sponsorship as part of its broader educational efforts and its commitment to developing local talent for the future port and logistics workforce. CSULB supports the effort through the College of Professional and International Education and two of its units: the Office of Professional and Workforce Development and the Center for International Trade and Transportation. The university’s role is technical support, including program design that links academic curriculum with industry skills and knowledge needed in the workplace.

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The Port of Long Beach—shown just months before the opening of the new Gerald Desmond Bridge—partnered with the Long Beach Unified School District to create the Academy of Global Logistics. The educational program offers a trade- and transportation-related career pathway to students at Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo High School (located near the port), all with a goal of supporting them through CSULB and other colleges and—eventually—into the port’s workforce.
percent in the number of students identified as chronically absent.

A study that compared graduation rates of Black students to those of the entire CSULB student body from 2003 to 2013 also showed how effective CSULB’s efforts have been: CSULB was one of 51 institutions (out of 232 in the study) that improved the graduation rate of its overall student body (by 11.9 percent), as well as its Black students (by 17 percent) (6).

An important takeaway from the CSULB and UAF diversity and inclusion programs is that they have been built to foster enduring change with an eye toward seeing real benefits five to 10 years down the road. Relying on university funds, industry funds, and private donations, these programs have built and benefited from strong public–private partnerships.

Another key element for success has been to combine for-credit classroom learning with noncredit professional development skill building. An important component to these professional development skills is internships that allow students a glimpse into the professional world and bring the concepts they are learning in the classroom to life.

Finally, it is vital that all students are carefully tracked as they participate in these programs for their entire four-year journey through the university so that they do not fall through the cracks. The combination of academic and professional skill building with internships and sustained support programs significantly increases the probability of success for each student.

Whether in the private or public sector, contributions to such diversity and inclusion initiatives—through time, financial resources, or internships—will make a significant impact on the next generation of transportation professionals.

REFERENCES

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