A diverse society

Writings about democracy, Walt Whitman said, “It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted.” The word “diversity”—or the term “cultural diversity”—also has a history in Virginia that has yet to be enacted or actualized in some meaningful way. Clearly, a relationship between these two pieces of unfinished business exists, a relationship that is neither acknowledged nor discussed often enough in our public discourses. Still, a number of practitioners have reflected on the issue of cultural diversity in the context of the educational enterprise and have found it to be a challenge. This challenge must be approached somewhat gingerly because the histories and the promises of both our democracy and our diversity have yet to be enacted or even fully embraced. We could ask the question, Can democracy reach its full potential without adopting “inclusion” as the norm? Or can the full benefit of a diverse society be realized without attention to issues of equity?

In their book The Good Society, Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1991) remind us of John Dewey’s concern that “the great society is impersonal and destroys local communities and cultural differences.” For many organizations and communities desiring to become more inclusive and sensitive to differences, it is the very diversity and pluralism in our society that makes it difficult to conduct meaningful public discussion about a variety of important questions. These difficulties could be significantly reduced, however, if various groups would identify common ground and, despite their differences, conduct meaningful business together. As Bellah et al. state, “[T]he real danger is that America, in the form of the great society, continuously undermines pluralism and diversity, ... subverts bilingualism and biculturalism, [and] ... is an agent of homogenization, not diversity. Our most ... influential cultural institutions, television and mass higher education, have been agents of monoculture rather than seedbeds of diversity.”

In applying these observations to Virginia’s educational system, we can ask ourselves several questions. First, why is cultural diversity an important topic for discourses on the teaching and learning process? How does cultural diversity relate to issues of educational reform, educational standards, performance-based assessments, and quality education? An equally academic but pragmatic question is, what are the demographic forces that strongly suggest a need for change in the way we view universal education today? Our renewed interest in a “public education for all” reflects today’s growing concern about the manner in which our politics and our economics seem to steadily erode the common or universal nature of our public schools. Instead of increased access to quality education, too many students today face the opposite condition.

Changing as we speak

Like the rest of the country, the racial/ethnic make-up of Virginia is changing rapidly. Communities are being transformed as a result of demographic, social, economic, and even educational changes that surround us. Those who want— even with good intentions— to “fix” the diversity problem once and for all do not understand that they must fashion a solution that can accommodate the changing nature of the problem. A 1998 Kellogg Commission report on the future of state and land-grant universities predicts, “Access to our institutions will become one of the defining domestic policy issues in coming years. It is already on the public agenda; it will become even more urgent as we move into the 21st century.”
Projections reported in 1995 by the Connecticut Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (CASCD) predicted some of the national trends in student population changes through the year 2000. The report was developed as a position statement by a panel of K-12 and higher education practitioners commissioned to identify major impacts on the future of education. Using a 10-15-year time horizon for its projections, the CASCD position statement discussed demographic trends and their educational impacts, and it examined the changing family, world of work, nature of government, complexity of health issues, age of convenience, information technologies, ethics and values, and globalization. In one way or another, most of the latter trends and impacts can be viewed as spin-offs of the demographic and related cultural changes occurring during the past two decades. The complexity of these trends and impacts warrants closer study by everyone involved in education, particularly teachers and administrators who understand and must be responsive to both the educational and the "non-academic" needs of a rapidly changing student population.

If we examine our diversity more closely in at least two areas, disabilities and race, we will discover that:

- Some 4.3 million Americans have obvious physical and visual impairments, and that is only 10 percent of the 43 million people with a disability of some kind. About 13 million people between the ages of 16 and 64 have disabilities. Approximately 5 million members of this group are both able and willing to work (Carnavale and Stone, 1995).

- The number of public school students from mixed ethnic ancestry will reach 6 million by 2010, a 58 percent increase over 1999. However, the mix of different types of diversity can vary significantly from place to place. For example, while the nation's youth will reflect no majority race by 2025, only 200 of the 50 states' 3,000 counties will reflect this mix. In short, no type of diversity—for example, race, wealth, religion, disability, or age—will be evenly spread across the nation (Hodgkinson, 1999).

- Virginia has the 9th highest population of Asian and Pacific Islanders of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. With 6.8 million residents, the state ranks 10th in total population, 11th in black population, 14th in white population, and 16th in Hispanic population.

- Between 1990 and 1998 Virginia's population grew by 9 percent. However, during the same period, the growth rate for Hispanics was 56.4 percent; for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 53.4 percent; and for African-Americans, 16.6 percent.

**Cultural diversity or affirmative action?**

The term cultural diversity can be defined in a variety of ways. In the past 10 years the term has had increasing currency in the growing body of literature on equity issues. However, we have attempted for decades to define and describe the rich mosaic of differences in this nation and throughout the world. In the 1970s the National Coalition for Cultural Pluralism, an organization of professional educators from public school districts, colleges, and universities across the country and various officials in the U.S. Department of Education, expressed it in terms of several goals:

1. The elimination of all structural supports for oppressive and racist practices by individuals, groups, and institutions;
2. The dispersal of “power” among groups and within institutions on the basis of cultural, social, racial, sexual, and economic parity; and
3. The establishment and promotion of collaboration as the best mechanism for enabling culturally independent groups to function cooperatively within a multicultural environment.

(Stent, et al.)

Whether we use the words “cultural pluralism,” “cultural diversity,” or just “diversity,” most definitions of these terms tend to contain references to certain conditions. For example, there is usually an explicit or implicit reference to the debilitating “isms” that continue to plague our society, or there may be a description of how economic, social, and other means are used to dominate and subjugate. And there is the ever present reference to relationships that result in our arbitrary groupings of people as “innies and outies,” “haves and have-nots,” or “us and those people.”

What is even more complicating and difficult to manage is the tendency of many people to see cultural diversity as the contemporary form of affirmative action, a problem highlighted in the introduction to the report The Affirmative Action Debate, published in 1997 by the Institute of Philosophy and Public Policy:

In recent years, many employers and university officials have placed the idea of diversity, rather than the moral imperative of anti-discrimination, at the center of their arguments for affirmative action. For some, achieving greater diversity is a way of enabling organizations such as police departments, colleges, and corporations to perform their missions better. For others, diversity is a good to be promoted in the service of ideals such as community solidarity and integration.

From an historical and a logical point of view, cultural diversity cannot be a substitute for affirmative action. Diversity extends well beyond the legal basis for affirmative action; it cannot and does not exist in the absence of nondiscrimination policies and practices. The relationship between the two concepts should be viewed as two ends of a continuum that begins with “equal employment opportunity,” which is the legal requirement to remove institutional barriers to individual or group participation.

This continuum can also be viewed as having three parts. The first part, recognizing diversity, is where we not only acknowledge the results of discrimination, but we also take proactive steps to moderate its impact and to prevent future occurrences. The next phase, valuing diversity, is all about understanding, respecting, appreciating, and valuing differences among people. One cannot claim respect for another while discriminating against him or her. One behavior or attitude builds upon the other. The third and last phase on the continuum

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can be called managing diversity (or managing difference), where individual and collective efforts are needed to create and maintain an environment in which progress toward equity and excellence becomes part of the normal process. When a community effectively manages diversity, all its members understand that at least their public behavior will be nondiscriminatory and inclusive, even if their private attitudes vary from that behavior.

In Race Matters, Cornel West (1993) discusses the need for managing our public behavior:

We must focus our attention on the public square—the common good that undergirds our national and global destinies. The vitality of any public square ultimately depends on how much we care about the quality of our lives together.

A component of quality education

Is the education we provide our youth and young adults culturally responsive to who they are? Some feel that this question is as important as asking about the number of books in the library, the ratio between students and computers, the number of teachers with Master’s degrees or better, or the per pupil expenditure for the school district. Topics like these are of great interest to those trying to assess the quality of an educational program. With respect to cultural diversity, the question is whether the teaching, learning environment, materials, and institutional policies are responsive to the types of cultural differences that characterize the population being served.

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) identify four approaches to enhancing the teaching and learning process so that it motivates the student to learn and reduces the fear, conflict, and resistance often found in unresponsive environments. These approaches are establishing inclusion, developing attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence. They are not applied exclusively to culturally different groups. These approaches make sense for all groups and, when applied equitably across these groups, they have the added feature of being culturally responsive. In short, these approaches represent good quality educational practice for all groups at all levels.

Judging the quality of an educational experience by using the lens of cultural diversity can be achieved in part by examining the resulting behaviors and attitudes of the learner. For example, in higher education, graduates are finding themselves entering a workforce where, more and more, managers are expecting a certain level of competence in intercultural and human relations. This expectation results from the rapidly increasing diversity of the workforce, which creates additional opportunities for conflict if not properly managed.

Pope and Reynolds (1997) define multicultural competency as the “awareness, knowledge, and skills” needed to interact effectively with those who are culturally different. People who are competent in this area understand themselves and how a person’s values and beliefs can influence his or her behavior. Specific knowledge of different cultures—in terms of their histories, traditions, and values—is another characteristic of the multiculturally competent person. Multicultural skills are those capabilities, behaviors, and practices that enable the individual to interact effectively and meaningfully with others whose backgrounds are different from their own.

With a focus on students, Howard-Hamilton, Richardson, and Shuford (1999) extend this list of competency categories by adding three other items: attitudes, understanding, and appreciation/valuing. The following are some of the understandings and concepts that emerge from these three competency categories:

- Pride is a characteristic within one’s own cultural group.
- No one group is better than another.
- Discrimination due to one’s cultural status is unjust.
- Assumptions about an individual can not be based solely on one’s group membership.
- One must take risks in life.
- Cross-cultural interactions enhance the quality of one’s life.

Affirming diversity through multicultural education

If Virginia educators incorporate cultural diversity content and pedagogy into educational reform practices, they will join a growing number of practitioners who have adopted multicultural education as a primary reform strategy. The multicultural education movement parallels the origins and growth of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. Because of that historical proximity, it has undergone almost the same level and intensity of scrutiny by both opponents and advocates. The result is a constantly evolving discipline of theory and practice that has the power to transform, refocus, and reconceptualize entire educational systems and institutions.

Sonia Nieto (1996) writes about this not-so-new reform strategy in the second edition of her book, Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education, defining multicultural education as “a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers represent. Multicultural education permeates the curriculum and instructional strategies used in school, as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and parents and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning...” [M]ulticultural education promotes the democratic principles of social justice (page 307).”

Nieto describes the seven basic characteristics of multicultural education as anti-discriminatory, basic education, important for all students, pervasive, education for social justice, a process, and critical pedagogy. These characteristics serve as a set of standards of practice that many educators are adopting, as well as a set of guidelines for other activities within the education enterprise. Educators can find downloadable information on multicultural philosophy, curriculum transformation, promising practices, intercultural activities, multicultural libraries, and superlinks on the McGraw-Hill Company’s Multicultural Supersite. This supersite also features an article written by Paul Gorski that identifies social change as the underlying goal for multicultural education. The pathway toward this goal incorporates three strands of transformation (self, schools and schooling, and society), which the author describes as the context, and a set of standards for the application of multicultural teaching and learning principles both inside and outside the classroom.

Cultural diversity benefits all
Patricia Gurin’s (1999) study, though based only on data from the University of Michigan, has much to inform other institutions about the benefits of diversity. In examining the effect of structural diversity on classroom and informal interactions, Gurin found that

1) Structural diversity had significant positive effects on classroom diversity and interaction diversity among all students. Attending a diverse college also resulted in more diverse friends, neighbors, and work associates nine years after college entry. This study provides strong evidence that structural diversity creates conditions that lead students to experience diversity in ways that would not occur in a more homogeneous student body.

2) The results show strong evidence for the impact of diversity on learning outcomes. Students who had experienced the most diversity in classroom settings and in informal interactions with peers showed the greatest engagement in active thinking processes, growth in intellectual engagement and motivation, and growth in intellectual and academic skills.

3) Students who experienced diversity in classroom settings and in informal interactions showed the most engagement in various forms of citizenship and the most engagement with people from different races/cultures. They were also the most likely to acknowledge that group differences are compatible with the interests of the broader community.

4) Diversity experiences during college had impressive effects on the extent to which graduates in the national study were living racially or ethnically integrated lives in the post-college world. Students who had taken the most diversity courses and had interacted the most with diverse peers during college had the most cross-racial interactions five years after leaving college. This confirms that the long-term pattern of segregation noted by many social scientists can be broken by diversity experiences during college.

From exclusion to inclusion

Undoing all the social constructs we, as a society, have developed to separate one group from another is one of the greatest challenges before us as Virginians—and as Americans. The dramatic change in demographics in the past two decades tells us the challenge will increase proportionately to our delay in dealing forthrightly with the problem. That leaves us facing several questions. How can we be culturally responsive in the education we provide in our schools? What will it take for schools to rethink the way they teach and what they teach? Can our penchant for high-stakes testing in K-12 be moderated to be more equitable in content across racial and economic lines? Will higher education be able to use its research capabilities to help us determine once and for all whether diversity and multicultural perspectives merit inclusion in our list of attributes for quality education?

These and even more penetrating questions will never be fully answered until Virginia is able and willing to reduce or eliminate its “cultural myopia,” defined by Loden and Rosener (1991) as “the belief that one's particular culture is appropriate in all situations and relevant to all others.” Multicultural education is one way for Virginia to begin to make the paradigm shift from a largely unspoken focus on educational strategies for sorting and excluding people to a more publicly embraced concept of inclusion.

A good place to start in Virginia—and in other educational jurisdictions across the nation—is at the policy level. A policy on cultural diversity in education, or multicultural education, could set the tone and the standard for embracing diversity as a critical component of quality education. Properly stated, such a policy could be endorsed by both lawyers and policymakers for the entire K-16 system. Further, it could serve as a badly needed rallying point for a closer and more sensible articulation between the public schools and state-supported universities.

A diversity policy would view cultural differences as assets—not liabilities—within the commonwealth. It would also express the importance of inclusion, equity of opportunity, and respect for multiple perspectives in the development, delivery, and evaluation of learning experiences for students. Finally, such a policy would recognize the increasing, research-based evidence that attention to and the effective management of diversity is very clearly in the public's interest.

If a cultural diversity policy were in place today for our state educational institutions, local policymakers and administrators would have an important standard to use to guide the creation and/or measure the effectiveness of learning opportunities purported to be appropriate and suitable for the development of all students. Designers of education accountability systems—Standards of Learning for Virginia public schools and Institutional Performance Agreements for higher education institutions—would have a clear basis for including specific measures and performance indicators that address the persistent problem of disparities in outcomes between significant sub-groups within the student population.

In mid-July 2001, the Virginian-Pilot reported that officials of the State Council of Higher Education will now require four-year colleges to assess their students’ writing and technological skills. This testing program addresses two persistent problems reported by employers: writing and computing illiteracy for entry level employees. These same employers also report workers’ lack of competency to manage themselves effectively in an increasingly diverse workforce. A diversity policy would set the stage for including diversity competencies in this required assessment process.

Another example relates to the university-level resources in Virginia that train and develop the teachers and administrators who run our public schools. The state could establish a research agenda that focuses on cultural diversity issues (not only in education, but also in other public services). Virginia’s public school systems and the Virginia Department of Education should invite researchers to help develop new or enriched curriculum approaches based on their findings. School administrators could apply multicultural education standards to their institutional reforms and organizational changes to assure the proper environment, resources, and policies for teachers and students as they engage in educational experiences that are relevant, nondiscriminatory, equitable, and just for all.

By viewing diversity as an important aspect of quality, the Commonwealth of Virginia has an opportunity to extend its proud heritage of excellence in education at every level. All the data point to the necessity for strong, relevant, effective educational programs for all citizens in order to enhance the economic and social well-being of the community. Here at the beginning of the 21st century, the question is no longer whether cultural diversity plays a role in educational outcomes. The question and the challenge are how quickly and efficiently we can use it as a vehicle to expand our notions of excellence and quality.
References


