



Knowledge of our differences helps us serve a diverse world

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What is diversity? Such a simple question, but how do you answer it? I always assumed while I was in high school and college that diversity was synonymous with race and ethnicity. While these are visible components, I now understand diversity to include many other things. For me, diversity also must include issues of gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation to name but a few.

What is higher education, if not the place where people can explore differing points of view and opinions? What better place to examine this issue than the college union? Our facilities and programs must be a place on campus where all students—faculty, staff, and visitors, also—should feel safe and welcome and be able to find a home.

Diversity is important because it defines us as nations, but also because, like it or not, much of the world is becoming more and more diverse. A report by the Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race (1998) found that the United States is 73 percent white, 12 percent black, 11 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian and Pacific American, and 1 percent American Indian and Alaska Native. Within our lifetimes, those demographics are projected to be 53 percent white, 25 percent Hispanic, 14 percent black, 8 percent Asian and Pacific American, and 1 percent American Indian and Alaska Native. Internationally, our member countries are facing similar forecasts. Canada is 25 percent non-white, and New Zealand is 10 percent

non-white. Both are projected to experience increases in non-white population over the next 50 years.

The world is seeing advances in health care that enable people with disabilities to fully participate in the work force. We also see people of all races living longer and continuing to be viable parts of the work force well past the traditional age of retirement. Society is learning more about homosexuality, making it easier and more accepted for gay men and lesbians to be visible parts of the work force. How are we preparing for this future we know will arrive?

A survey by the *San Francisco Examiner* (Ness, 1998, Nov. 12) found that 43 percent (up from 29 percent last year) of this year's high-achieving high school students in the United States are prejudiced against homosexuals and 15 percent (up from 7 percent last year) are prejudiced against African Americans and Hispanics. We in the college union field have the opportunity to educate our communities about our differences. We do this every day in how we design our buildings, what kinds of music we play, how we decorate, what holidays we celebrate ... the list goes on and on. We must constantly ask ourselves what we can do to help stop the hatred that so often turns into violence.

Diversity is one of our strengths in ACUI. When we look at our leadership and the participation at our annual conference, we know we are a diverse group. But do we really know? From our membership surveys, we know at least 6.1% of our members are African American and 1.9% are Hispanic/Latino. We know at least 0.5% of our members are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. We also know that these

ACUI demographic information

Following are demographic data collected from ACUI members. "Unreported" refers to the number and percentage of total respondents who did not indicate a demographic classification for a category.

DEMOGRAPHICS	NUMBER	PERCENT
Female	2,559	33.7%
Male	2,755	36.3%
Unreported	2,270	29.9%
GLBT	39	0.5%
Heterosexual	489	6.4%
Unreported	7,056	93.0%
African American	461	6.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	50	1.1%
Caucasian/White	3,642	48.0%
Hispanic/Latino	144	1.9%
Multi-ethnic	26	0.3%
North American Native	21	0.3%
Other	18	0.2%
Unreported	3,192	42.1%

numbers don't go far to tell us who we are because 42.1% of our members did not report their ethnicity and 93.0% reported no sexual orientation. In fact, nearly one-third of our members reported no gender.

These numbers raise several issues for me. I can understand people not wanting to report their sexual orientation. Fear over employers getting the information, co-workers seeing the report before it is sent to

to our members. It also would go a long way toward breaking down misconceptions about our differences and the kinds of people who are actually in the work place.

We cannot talk about diversity without also talking about affirmative action. It seems that this concept has been taken out of context. People today have the definition in their heads that affirmative action means guaranteed jobs, positions, etc., for everyone other

process on superficial information. If we agree that the union is the place where everyone should feel safe and comfortable, everyone should be able to see people like themselves in responsible positions. If we want diversity within our profession, we have an obligation to train and nurture people different from ourselves for leadership positions and responsibilities. We have an obligation to ourselves to learn about people who are different so we will not be afraid of the differences but try to understand and appreciate them.

No organization can be all things to all people all the time. ACUI is trying. As professionals, we must continue to educate ourselves about people's differences so we can act in the best interest of our programs, staff, and students from a position of knowledge instead of fear and innuendo. To me this means constantly learning about diversity issues and our own biases and prejudices. Take every opportunity you can. You will be rewarded, as will your staff, students, and institutions.

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the Central Office, and other concerns of discrimination are probably the major issues. We all know these are unfortunately still legitimate concerns in the work place. But why would people be afraid to report gender or ethnicity? If these numbers are true, we have a long way to go to make our profession look more like the students we teach and serve. If not, it is time we ask the membership if our commitment to diversity is only lip service. Having this information would enable the Association to better provide educational programs and services

than a white male. I simply do not buy that. Affirmative action means all people have equal access to the process. A guarantee of equal access does not equal a guarantee of a position. People still need to be qualified and able to perform the duties, but the process must be open.

This does not mean that diversity should not be taken into account when making final decisions. If we hire only people who look like us, act like us, and believe the same things we do, what message does that send to everyone else? It seems we are biasing the

References

Ness, C. (1998, Nov. 12). Gay bias rising among top students: Poll finds prejudice also mounts against blacks, Hispanics. *San Francisco Examiner*, p. A1.

Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race. (1998). *One America in the 21st century: Forging a new future*. Washington, D.C.: Author.