

Access and Diversity: Related but Distinct Concepts

The Issue

The terms “access” and “diversity” are often used interchangeably. And, although they are clearly related concepts, the important distinctions between the two should inform the development of institutional policies. It also goes without saying that the extent to which these distinct but related interests may apply to any higher education institution depends on the unique circumstances of the particular institution. An important question, therefore, relates to the precise interests a college or university seeks to advance, and how it develops and implements strategies to achieve those goals.

Notably, whether policies advancing institutional goals are centered on diversity or access aims (or some combination thereof), they should be supported by strong empirical evidence. This evidence will most often range from relevant social science research regarding the educational importance of achieving institutional goals, to documentation of the institution’s actual experience in (and value of) achieving those goals over time.

The Policy Context

Diversity (defined in additional detail in Tool 3) is a concept that is best understood as a means to an educational end—with an institution-centric focus on enhancing educational outcomes for all students. Informed by the extensive body of social science research that demonstrates the connection between a diverse learning environment and positive educational outcomes, as well as relevant case law that recognizes and values this connection, the conceptualization of “diversity” on any campus should be driven by that institution’s particular history, its education goals, and its relative status in achieving those goals. Diversity is, in other words, often inextricably linked to the kind of success that institutions may seek as they focus on the composition of their classes and the kinds of pedagogical strategies they employ (in light of that composition) to achieve their mission-related goals. Diversity-related policies should always reflect the close

relationship between compositional (or structural) diversity (e.g., the backgrounds, characteristics, and qualities that the student body, as a whole, reflects) and the educational aims for all students in the relevant institution.

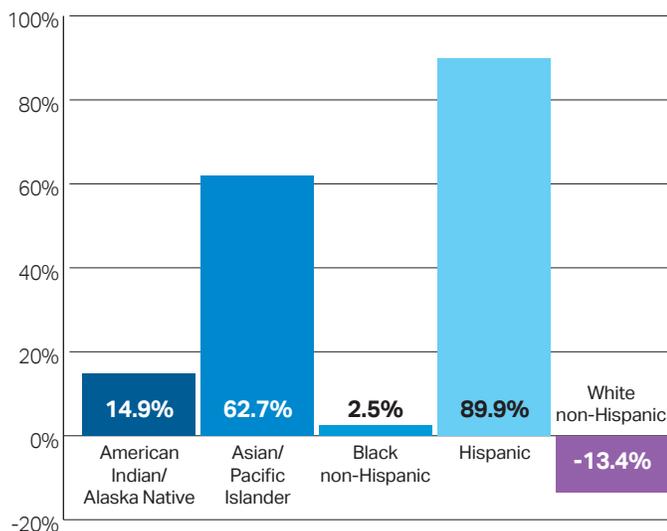
Although diversity interests will vary from institution to institution (as they may from department to department), these interests tend to reflect a number of common principles across most institutions. Central among them is the overarching focus on the question that drives the diversity discussion: What kinds of students do I want to enroll and educate—and what sort of diversity should they reflect—in order to meet core institution-related mission interests?

Access, while closely related to diversity interests in several ways, tends to include more of a focus on the broader set of access and equal opportunity (sometimes characterized as “social justice”) interests that many institutions seek to advance—principally in order to correct for inequities in (relevant) current and recent historical education systems. In relative terms, access goals tend to reflect less of an emphasis on the precise composition of an incoming class or the kind of instructional strategies that might be pursued (though those often are related benefits). Access goals often center on expanding a pipeline of qualified and interested students aspiring to pursue postsecondary education—frequently with attention to individuals within groups that have been historically underrepresented in relevant educational programs. In short, the precise policy aims regarding “access” shouldn’t be confused with those typically associated with “diversity” interests.

National and regional demographic trends and projections are central to discussions around access, given that the number of historically underrepresented students (based on race and ethnicity) in high school graduating classes is slated to grow at a much faster rate than the number of white students. Therefore, higher education institutions must prepare to serve the influx of racially and ethnically diverse students due to a rapidly changing population demographic. For example, Hispanics are projected to

be the fastest-growing ethnic group between 2006 and 2016, growing by 29.9%. By 2016, Hispanics will continue to constitute an increasing proportion of the labor force, growing from 13.7% to 16.4%.

Graph 1: Projected Cumulative Percent Change in U.S. Public School Graduates—From 2004–2005 to 2019–2020 by Race/Ethnicity



Notably, in this context, evidence indicates that in 12 of the 20 fastest-growing occupations from 2006 to 2016, an associate degree or higher is required of most workers.¹

“On the Record: The Imperative Regarding Access and Equal Opportunity

“[T]he diffusion of knowledge and opportunity through public institutions of higher education must be accessible to all individuals regardless of race or ethnicity ... [E]nsuring that public institutions are open and available to all segments of American society, including people of all races and ethnicities, represents a paramount government objective. ... And, [n]owhere is the importance of such openness more acute than in the context of higher education.’ Effective participation by members of all racial and ethnic groups in the civic life of our Nation is essential if the dream of one Nation, indivisible, is to be realized.”

JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O’CONNOR

in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), premised in part on the Supreme Court’s unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954.

Key Action Steps

- 1 Frame institutional goals clearly, with particular attention to distinctions and points of commonality associated with access and diversity interests.
- 2 Ensure that access and diversity interests are defined in relation to institutional context—including relevant demographic trends and projections.
- 3 Ensure that policies and programs designed to advance access and diversity interests are fully aligned (in design and operation) with institution-specific interests.

SELECTED RESOURCES

1. *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).
2. *Roadmap to Diversity: Key Legal and Educational Policy Foundations for Medical Schools* (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2008).
3. “Leading Institutional Change: Key Elements and Strategies for Promoting Access and Diversity Goals,” Access & Diversity Power Point Presentation developed for 2008-09 National Seminars for Higher Education Officials at www.collegeboard.com/accessanddiversity
4. U.S. Census Press Release from August 14, 2008, on National Population Projections (www.census.gov).

CITATIONS

1. See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t06.htm>