

THE DIVERSITY ADVOCATE PROGRAM: THROUGH THE PERCEPTUAL LENS

*Elizabeth Matejczyk
Elizabeth Rubin
Shaun Travers*

This study assesses the effectiveness of the Diversity Advocate program at Indiana University-Bloomington, concerning its ability to influence the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of students surrounding issues of diversity. Results reveal that the program did not achieve all of its stated goals. Recommendations include a significant change of the system as well as a redefinition of its role within the residence halls.

Diversity, defined by Manning and Coleman-Boatwright (1991) as students of differing ethnic, racial, religious, or sexual backgrounds, is a serious topic on university and college campuses throughout the nation (Stage & Hamrick, 1994; Wong, 1991). This study looks at the effectiveness of a specific diversity education intervention implemented at Indiana University-Bloomington (IU-B). First, the issues surrounding diversity education and the DA program will be discussed. An overview of the perceptual model of environmental theory will follow. The methods of the study will then be described, followed by an account of the techniques used to analyze the data. Next, the results of the study will be discussed, and limitations will be reviewed. Finally, recommendations will be issued for improving, restructuring, and revitalizing diversity education initiatives at Indiana University-Bloomington.

One way that IU-B has chosen to address the diversity education issue is by establishing the Diversity Advocate (DA) program. The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of this program in its ability to influence the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of students surrounding issues of diversity. Specifically, the researchers wish to examine differing perceptions of the DA program from students living in the residence halls, with regard to its effectiveness and means of implementation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY EDUCATION

In addition to the more traditional white, middle-class college student population, individuals now enrolling in higher education include people of color, people from other generations, and people with varying religious beliefs and traditions (Astin, 1993). New challenges arise from interactions among such groups that do not hold similar core values and assumptions. Education about differences and similarities becomes an integral component in the development and growth of everyone involved (Astin, 1993). However, as campuses have become more diversified, racism and hate crimes have increased (Stage & Hamrick, 1994). There often is very little interaction between members of different racial groups, which can contribute to this racial tension (Jones, Terrell, & Duggar, 1991). Thus, the more diverse an institution becomes, the more important it is to encourage the acceptance of differences.

It seems that student affairs professionals now devote more attention to these cultural diversity issues. This is evidenced by an increase in the number of published articles, programs, and conference presentations surrounding multicultural issues (Pope, 1993). However, if interventions addressing such issues are sporadic and unorganized, educators will not succeed in changing the campus climate or lowering the number of incidents of racism and other forms of oppression (Pope, 1993).

THE DIVERSITY ADVOCATE PROGRAM

One way the residence life staff at IU-B addresses diversity education is through the DA program. This program is comprised of students, hired by the Department of Residence Life, who attempt to educate their residence hall peers about diversity issues. The DAs accomplish this by presenting programs on topics such as race, sexuality, culture, and gender. In an attempt to broaden awareness, they also foster informal one-on-one discussions among the students with whom they live.

The DA program is currently under assessment as its major source of funding, a grant from the Eli Lilly Endowment, expires at the end of the 1995-96 academic year (W. Shipton, personal communication, September 11, 1995) (see addendum). It is, therefore, important to examine its structure so that new ways to fund and manage the program can be examined.

THE PERCEPTUAL MODEL OF ENVIRONMENTAL THEORY

A diverse student population will inherently include a diversity of perceptions. According to the perceptual model of environmental theory, an environment can be considered and defined by the perceptions of those within the environment (Strange, 1991; Walsh, 1978). This approach is appropriate for exploring the DA program and its ramifications. As Strange (1991) writes, "Individual and collective perceptions of an environment are critical in understanding how individuals are likely to react in that environment" (p. 176). Because a study was not conducted to assess the university climate prior to the implementation of the DA program, there is no comparative information available. Thus, this study must rely on the subjective perceptions of residence hall students in order to gain an understanding of the program's effectiveness.

The DA program is designed to provide educational opportunities about diversity issues for students through both formal and informal interactions. However, if the participants (in this case the individuals living in the residence halls) do not view these interactions as educational, then the program has not succeeded. By assessing the DA program according to the perceptual model, one can determine whether it requires restructuring so that it may accomplish what is intended -- knowledge and acceptance of individual differences.

METHODS

IU-B offers housing in large, 1,000 person residence halls, or "centers." Students who reside in these buildings usually live in wings of 40 to 60 undergraduates. These students are predominantly white, Christian, middle class and are from 18 to 21 years of age. In each of the centers examined, a supervising residence life staff member was asked to solicit the students needed to participate in the focus groups, approximately ten individuals per center. While not proportional to the residence hall population, this study intentionally included both men and women, students of color, and differing religious affiliations. The staff member was instructed to find students who possessed wide varieties of experience within the university. Students were to be selected based on these experiences, not by their association with or preexisting knowledge of the DA program.

The researchers requested 10 students each from Willkie Quadrangle and Foster Quadrangle, and 20 students from Read Center. The first 10 from Read were to comprise an initial focus group, with 10 others participating in a final group. The eventual participants, however, totaled 30, with the number in each focus group varying between seven and ten. Seventeen men and 13 women participated. Twenty-four students were white, three African-American, one Asian-American, one Asian-American, and one Latino.

The focus groups discussed the effects of diversity education attempts in the residence halls through researcher-guided questions (see Appendix). The interviewing rooms used were enclosed areas to ensure confidentiality and privacy of the focus groups. The first two focus groups met during the last week in October, 1995; the second two groups met during the first week of November, 1995.

The interviews were audio taped, and the researchers took extensive notes during the interviews. Each of the three researchers selected specific students whose responses they noted, ensuring that every student's response was recorded. The tapes were used to supplement and validate the notes taken by the researchers. The responses were then initially examined for generally shared opinions among the residence halls. These were broken down into individual units, and a content analysis was conducted. This first level of analysis relied on the researchers' notes, divided into individual thoughts, ideas, or concepts. The second level of analysis involved compacting the categories from the initial examination into more clear and succinct divisions. The researchers then analyzed these newly uncovered themes (Merriam, 1988).

RESULTS

The researchers discovered that the participants of the study held greatly varying perceptions of diversity at IU-B. The following topical areas will be discussed: participants' backgrounds; information they have seen; their levels of diversity awareness; their perceptions of the campus, diversity advocate program, and programming; and the degree to which the program has brought about change. The richest information obtained was regarding the DA program itself. Although often negative, these perceptions were reality for the students who held them. Clearly, these perceptions were intrinsically linked to their past experiences.

Participants' Backgrounds

The students represented different environments ranging from small towns in the Midwest to large cities on the East Coast. They often used this information about their background to explain their level of diversity awareness. For example, one woman explained her town's racism by stating that her high school's population was 2,500 with at most "ten black kids." Other differences in background included residing in rural versus metropolitan populations as well as the number of places lived, which was vocalized by the woman of color who said that she is "pretty much aware of what's going on [because] I moved from one culture to another."

Information Seen

One woman noted that seeing flyers which are directed toward one race (the Black Student Union) can alienate persons of other races because they appear to exclude them. Others felt that the high quantity of the flyers alone is a negative aspect of the DA program, as they saturate the atmosphere. "Advertising is just an ignorable part of the environment," one man said. Contrastingly, some perceived that there was "nothing out there." Some students felt that the information that was available was worthwhile; the flyers kept them informed. Bulletin boards sparked their interest in various ideas and programs. One respondent claimed that one of the best benefits was belonging to an electronic mailing list from the Director of Diversity Programs, which kept the student informed of campus programs.

Level of Diversity Awareness

As the participants considered their own levels of diversity awareness, four major themes appeared in the responses. First, some people felt that they were open-minded, such as the participant who stated, "I will never judge a person by the color of his or her skin, nor will I segregate. I will listen to everyone." A second theme revolved around acknowledgment of the limitations surrounding diversity awareness. A respondent implied that his attitudes and values were not as diverse as they could be. The next theme concerned the relativity of awareness. "Maybe I didn't miss what I didn't have," stated an interviewee. The final theme was that college, in fact, had affected some students. For instance, one person stated, "I have come a long

way in college." The levels of awareness possessed by the participants directly impacted their perceptions of their university.

Perceptions of the Campus

Perceptions varied dramatically regarding diversity on campus. For example, one person stated, "There is so much on this campus, so many cultures" while another said, "Everyone else here [besides me] is white and Christian." Students believed that others self-segregate. Almost every participant noted that the Black Student Union (BSU), OUT (the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Organization), and similar organizations, while not explicitly excluding others, do not openly invite those from outside their group. These general perceptions of the IU-B campus directly influence students' views of the DA program.

Perceptions of the Diversity Advocate Program

Some students unconditionally feel that the DA program is beneficial. However, most believe either that it is not as effective as it could be or that it is entirely ineffective. Participants who supported the program in its present condition often identified a specific DA who had influenced them. Others acknowledged its effectiveness only at certain times and in specific situations; for example, a woman suggested that a DA might be best suited to address racial tension on a floor. However, most people in the focus groups had little good to say regarding the DA program.

Most of the feedback the researchers received was negative. Common themes included budget allocation concerns, staffing issues, major obstacles, and various minor concerns. No one was shy or apprehensive in expressing these opinions; in fact, the researchers perceived much rancor and disgust from certain participants. However, the information received was invaluable in its candor and suggestions for improvement.

Budget allocation concerns ranged from the perception that the DAs are not affecting change at all, which is a waste of university money, to the perception that DAs are affecting change, yet the program itself is a waste of university money. Examples of responses include, "All they [DAs] do is get free room and board," (a misconception since DAs are paid with a room fee reduction and small stipend) and "The DA program has not raised awareness.

IU is good at wasting money.” Some students felt that there was money available for DAs with which to program but that they were not utilizing it.

One of the most confusing elements of the DA program is its relationship to the residence life staff as a whole. Resident Assistants (RAs) are a trademark of residence halls and are perceived to be the primary disciplinarian, programmer, and resource person. The presence of the DA confuses some participants: “The DA concept may be good, but in reality aren't two staff members trained for the same thing?” asked a respondent. The confusion between the roles of the DA and RA often produces obstacles inhibiting the program's success.

Four primary obstacles seem to plague the DA program. The first is the name of the program itself. “DA,” for reasons unspecified, “scares people away,” one person commented. The second is the perception that the university is trying to promote a particular point of view to all students, identified by a student as the “thought police.” Another major obstacle incorporates two vital elements, both of which seem to be lacking: time and people. When DAs do make the time in the hall, there is often a perceived lack of consistency in their effectiveness. Finally, a question which many posed: Is the DA to be a friend, resident, staff member, or some combination of the three? The answer is inconclusive.

There seems to be potential for the program's success, yet many people expressed minor misgivings about certain aspects that are inherent to the system. For example, the program fights a lack of student motivation which is seen university-wide. One student said, “Student motivation is hard. People are just not interested. Nobody comes [to programs].” Additionally, information from the DAs is being conveyed to the wrong people, according to some participants: “Information is going to people who are already open-minded.” Others feel that information is simply not getting out at all.

Perceptions of Programming

Programs mentioned by the respondents included: “Crossing the Line” (an interactive diversity game), movies and films followed by discussions, formalized group meetings (BSU, OUT), and international programs. In contrast to the positive experiences some people have had in attending these diversity programs, others expressed negative sentiments. Some people said

that the guilt factor weighs heavily into their reluctant attendance, such as the respondent who voiced, “I feel obligated to go if it is advertised on my floor.” Others said that they had not attended any programs at all. Some resented the food-as-bribe ploy which is often used by programmers. “It sickens me to see people go just for the food -- they won't get anything out of it,” said one respondent. Topics addressed can have a definite impact on attendance as well.

Degree to which the Program has Brought about Change

The residents of the halls held varying opinions regarding how they were affected by the DA program. Some believed the DA program was extremely successful, while others felt it was a waste of efforts. No one expressed that the DA program had a dramatic positive effect on his or her thinking; there were more negative than positive comments mentioned overall. For example, one participant stated, “The DAs didn't revolutionize or change me [but] they did push a button which caused me to think now and then.” Contrastingly, another said, “The program hasn't affected the way I've thought about anything.” Another comment provided insight into an additional concept: that the program has potential. “The DA program hasn't really affected me. It has the potential to, but it hasn't yet,” stated one participant. However, the underlying sentiment towards the program was characterized by comments such as, “It hasn't affected me at all,” and “The DAs are going to have to work really hard to change us.”

Towards Change

All participants in the focus groups agreed that celebrating the diverse population represented at IU-B was important. Many suggestions regarding restructuring and revamping the current program were offered. Many students called for an undefined restructuring. Others felt that “togetherness,” not diversity, should be the primary focus. Another idea for amelioration of the program in terms of staffing was expressed by the comment, “It is hard for peers. The issue needs more time than a student is able to give.” The respondent then expressed that full-time professionals should be used instead. Masking the program's intended purpose was suggested as another means for increasing attendance. For instance, one person said, “Closed minds are hard to reach. Maybe disguising it [would help].” Another stated, “Try free pizza for every program. Maybe it is worth it to bribe.” However, others felt that

these tactics would reduce the program to mere mendacity. The implications of these ideas are issues with which the Department of Residence Life must struggle.

Each of the students interviewed defined his or her reality differently from the rest, and every person's experience was unique in its own right. The perceptions of the DA program, when examined using these parameters of reality, obtain an inconsistent view. No single idea expressed is what "most" or "many" students feel. However, the perceptions, as reported, do represent reality for these students, and as such are valid. They are the subjective observations of the DA program from its intended audience; inconsistencies in opinion and perception were expected by the researchers.

DISCUSSION

The tenets of environmental theory, as described by Strange (1991) and Walsh (1978), allow definition of the environment by the perceptions of those within the environment. The data collected allowed the researchers to deduce several major perceptions concerning the DA program. First of all, according to the respondents, the DA program has not been an overwhelming success. Evidenced by the themes of dissatisfaction with the information presented, the programs produced, and the diversity at IU in general, the program was generally seen as struggling with its identity.

Secondly, there have been certain successes, especially with particular programs (*Crossing the Line*) and particular DAs; thus, the program has not been a complete failure. Not all elements of the program are negative; certain interventions do positively affect people. This appeared to be related either to the degree and quality of contact a student had with a DA or to a program the student had attended. The goals each person understood for the DA position seemed to be in confusion. This was due to the fact that the goals of the program were never made clear to the students. As they were the major participants in the program, perhaps the goals should have been made explicit to them. The Department of Residence Life issues a Statement on Diversity each year; although this defines to some degree what diversity is, it does not mention the role of the DA. This ambiguity was clearly perceived as a weakness by most students, although it is arguably a strength of the position. Since the role of the DA is not narrowly defined, it can be shaped according to the boundaries of a DA's ability.

Finally, the students in general believe that the program should be seriously overhauled or cut completely. The DAs who are currently employed are not available in enough quantity for significant one-on-one contact. The programs are not presented in a manner which appeals to the wide variety of students who inhabit the halls, with a few exceptions.

IMPLICATIONS

Some interventions facilitated by DAs can just as easily and effectively be implemented by RAs. Individual DAs have made connections to individual people, and that appears to be very positive. However, without a tremendous expansion of the present program, widely utilizing this method of education is practically impossible. Training and expecting RAs to make similar contacts on a regular basis, in addition to their present duties, is more practical. Unfortunately, it is less feasible considering the already extensive responsibilities of RAs. Diversity education can, therefore, be facilitated without DAs. Almost every respondent felt that diversity education in the residence halls was, in fact, important. The majority of the respondents felt that the DA program could be changed, or even eliminated. However, the focus groups all expressed that, even without the DA program in its current form, education on diversity should continue in some form. Nonetheless, the form it should take was, and still is, debatable.

LIMITATIONS

The study was challenged by certain limitations. The researchers foresaw possible difficulties in using focus groups, such as having less control of the discussion than the participants and difficult data to analyze. Additionally, the researchers had some inherent biases due to their involvement with the Residence Life department, as they were all Assistant Coordinators who work closely with DAs. Further, the lack of full attendance in focus groups decreased the quantity of responses and weakened the diversity of opinion within the study; fewer students interviewed meant fewer data collected. Additionally, when focus groups did not have satisfactory participation, those students in attendance solicited their friends to participate, which may have reduced the breadth of responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the limitations of this study, the researchers can still provide recommendations regarding the DA program. Specifically, these recommendations can be directed to the Director of Residence Life, the Associate Director of Residence Life for Diversity Education, and the Associate Director of Residence Life for Administration and Personnel. These recommendations offer a broad range of possibilities for the future of the program, are provided to ensure the most comprehensive options available, and are not mutually exclusive:

- Develop clear program goals stemming from student needs and desires. An ongoing process of evaluation can be used to update the program as the needs of students change.
- Define clearly the role of the DA both on the floors and within residence life staff. Differentiating DAs from RAs would stimulate DA effectiveness and allow residents to easily understand the jurisdiction of the two positions.
- Expand the program to one DA per floor. Increasing the commitment to the program would allow for significant one-on-one interactions and would more clearly demonstrate the University's investment in the promotion of diversity awareness.
- Create volunteer leadership positions within the student government which focus on diversity programs. This encourages only highly motivated students to participate and allows student government to tackle issues about which the students obviously have strong feelings.

CONCLUSION

Groundbreaking in its attempts to acknowledge and celebrate the differing aspects of human diversity on a hall-wide level, the Diversity Advocate program was conceived from the heart and implemented with daring. This study was able to draw out and articulate concerns about the DA program in methods not previously attempted. This study offers some evidence that the program has seen success and can offer benefit to the University -- if not in its present form, then in a manner that remains unimplemented. Regardless, the

researchers believe that this study will assist the campus administrators previously mentioned in changing the Diversity Advocate program to better serve the students of Indiana University-Bloomington.

ADDENDUM

At the time of this study, the Diversity Advocate program was being reviewed because its funding by the Eli Lilly Endowment was expiring. Subsequently, the program has been replaced. The new program, to be implemented in the fall of 1996, will utilize 20 Community Educators, whose only responsibility will be diversity programming. Due to this limited number of staff, the program will forego all focus on individualized interactions; instead, RAs will be expected to have these interactions. Despite this challenge, it is the hope of the researchers that this program will maintain diversity education as a high priority at Indiana University-Bloomington.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. How do you define your level of diversity awareness?
2. What types of information have you received/seen about diversity in your center and how has it affected you?
3. Tell me about diversity programs you have attended, both in hall and on campus.
4. What are your perceptions of the DA program?
5. How has the presence of the DA program caused you to think about your own attitudes and beliefs?
6. Is diversity education in the halls important?
(If the answer is yes) If so, then what form should this take?

REFERENCES

- Astin, A.W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jones, A. C., Terrell, M. C. & Duggar, M. (1991). The role of student affairs in fostering cultural diversity in higher education. *NASPA Journal*, 28, 121-127.
- Manning, K., & Coleman-Boatwright, P. (1991). Student affairs initiatives toward a multicultural university. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32, 367-374.
- Merriam, S. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pope, R. L. (1993). Multicultural development in student affairs: An introduction. *Journal of College Student Development*, 34, 201-205.
- Stage, F. & Hamrick, F. (1994). Diversity issues: Fostering campuswide development of multiculturalism. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35, 331-335.
- Strange, C.C. (1991). Managing college environments: Theory and practice. In T. Miller and R. Winston, Jr. (Eds.), *Administration and leadership in student affairs* (pp. 159-198). Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development.
- Walsh, W. B. (1978). Person-environment interaction. In J. Banning (Ed.), *Campus ecology: A perspective for student affairs* (pp. 6-16). Cincinnati, OH: National Association for Student Personnel Administrators.
- Wong, F. E. (1991, July/August). Diversity and education: Right objectives and wrong arguments. *Change*, 23, 48-55.

Elizabeth A. Matejczyk graduated from the CSPA program in 1996. She received a B.A. in Sociology, with a minor in French, from Wheaton College (MA) in 1994. At IU, Elizabeth served as an Assistant Coordinator for Residence Life in Wright Quad, and was an executive board officer of IUSPA.

Elizabeth S. Rubin graduated from the CSPA program in 1996. She received a B.A. in 1994 from Indiana University in English, with a minor in French. At IU, Elizabeth served as an Assistant Coordinator for Residence Life in Read Center.

Shaun R. Travers graduated from the CSPA program in 1996. He received a B.A. in 1994 in Psychology and Theatre Arts from California Lutheran University. At IU, Shaun served as an Assistant Coordinator for Residence Life in Read Center.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN STUDENT LEADERS

Suzanne Mendoza

This paper explores the impact of environmental influences unique to coeducational and single-sex campuses on women student leaders. Recommendations for fostering the development of women student leaders are provided based on the examination of the environmental factors.

The development of abilities such as leadership skills are outcomes often associated with the college experience. Astin (1993) notes the close connection between increases in the leadership skills of undergraduates and the college experience. Among undergraduate women, leadership experiences have been shown to enhance competence and self-confidence (Astin & Leland, 1991). Despite the fact that women account for approximately half of undergraduate students attending colleges and universities today, their male counterparts occupy the majority of campus leadership positions (Leonard & Sigall, 1989; Wilkerson, 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the impact of the environmental influences of a coeducational institution and those of a single-sex (all women's) campus on the development of women student leaders. First, this paper will investigate the impact of negative environmental factors on the development of women leaders on a coeducational campus. Then, the impact of positive environmental factors on student leadership development on a single-sex college campus will be examined. Finally, there will be an assessment of the environmental factors characteristic of single-sex campuses which can be implemented at coeducational institutions to promote the development of female student leaders.

Women on coeducational campuses face many barriers to becoming leaders. One of those barriers is the biased treatment that occurs when women earn less respect than men, which causes their voices to be ignored and devalued (Leonard & Sigall, 1989). A recent study by the National Association for Women in Education on the treatment of women in college