

Beyond a Buzzword: Diversity and the Classroom

For FIU's *Diversity* Magazine

by Mark B. Rosenberg

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Throughout the United States, colleges and universities are grappling with the implications of rapid change. One of the most significant dimensions of change is the emergence of diversity groups: thought, perspective, and experience are significant dimensions that characterize diversity.

At Florida International University, we have long realized that multiculturalism is a major component of our environment. Indeed, nearly a decade ago, long before it was fashionable elsewhere, the university embraced "diversity" as a strategic management theme.

As stated in "Reaching for the Top," FIU's most recent strategic plan, the university would develop programs that explore and engender an appreciation of the differences among men and women of different ages, economic backgrounds, races, ethnic groups, creeds, philosophies, cultures, preferences, as well as those with varying mental and physical abilities.

A recent study on diversity underlines the wisdom of this approach. Patricia Gurin, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan, pointed out that diversity is crucially important in helping students to become conscious learners and critical thinkers. She argues that students learn more and think in deeper, more complex ways in a diverse educational environment. She concludes her analysis by stating that "students who experienced the most racial and ethnic 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."

FIU has established a significant track record in the development of co-curricular and student support activities geared to the appreciation of diversity. But a major arena for diversity appreciation is of course through the curriculum. Debate over curricula has been intense during the past few decades. At FIU, faculty have chosen to address diversity issues through the Comparative Culture dimension of the core curriculum. A course must be taken from numerous offerings. The intent is to ensure that students have at least some appreciation for international and /or diversity issues.

Given the diversity of FIU's student body, I am concerned that we may be missing excellent opportunities in the classroom to further extend our students' learning. If education is about examining assumptions and broadening perspectives, then diversity in the classroom can be a powerful motor to enhance this process.

At this point in the evolution of higher education, the fundamental question relating to diversity that needs to be posed is this: Can we develop teaching and learning strategies that more fully engage classroom diversity? Related questions: Are we taking full advantage of diversity to enhance teaching and learning through the classroom at all levels of instruction and through all disciplines? Can we generalize diversity awareness and sensitivity beyond the core curriculum and some specialized courses in the humanities and social sciences?

Weaving diversity into the fabric of our courses and classrooms, through content infusion and teaching and learning strategies, can enrich significantly the learning enterprise. Yet, there are few explicit efforts made to take advantage of this diversity. Even the Academy for the Art of Teaching at FIU has not yet developed modules or approaches that are being systematically discussed and diffused throughout the academic units.*

Diversity ought to be more than a buzzword to describe who we are. As FIU develops its new 10-year plan and initiates undergraduate curriculum review through the Faculty Senate, those involved should take seriously the significant learning and teaching opportunities that the university's diversity affords.

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***Please refer to <http://www.fiu.edu/~academy> for further information. Click "Resources," "Books" and/or "diversity."**

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