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Making Diversity Programs More Effective

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By Sara Frueh

Increasing diversity among employees is a priority for many organizations, which spend substantial resources on diversity initiatives.

But research shows that most diversity programs don't result in more fair or diverse workplaces, says social psychologist Brenda Major of the University of California, Santa Barbara. "There is no causal evidence that diversity programs as currently implemented are reducing prejudice or discrimination, or increasing the representation of women and minorities in positions of responsibility."

Major was among the speakers at a panel discussion during the most recent NAS annual meeting that explored challenges for diversity initiatives and possible paths to overcoming them.

The Problem of Mixed Messages

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effectiveness, Major explained. For example, her research finds that the mere presence of a diversity program can signal that there is fair treatment at an organization, even when there isn't. Studies show that when whites are made aware that a diversity initiative exists at a company, they are less likely to recognize discrimination against women and minorities — even when shown evidence of poor treatment in terms of hiring and wages — and less likely to support litigation to address bias.

An analysis of 1,000 decisions in federal civil rights cases shows that judges, too, assume that the presence of a diversity initiative at a company means a lack of discrimination — despite an absence of evidence for the program's effectiveness. "A disturbing implication ... is that the presence of diversity initiatives can actually undermine discrimination claimants' access to justice," said Major.

She stressed the need to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of diversity programs. "We shouldn't assume that the mere presence of a diversity initiative at a company will result in a good outcome."

Other studies have shown how diversity initiatives can send mixed messages about inclusion and competence that can also undercut the programs' effectiveness, said Major — for example, by activating whites' stereotypes about minorities. Changing how diversity programs are framed — for instance, combining an emphasis on diversity with an emphasis on merit and equal opportunity — may help lessen these adverse effects, she said.

Deciding How to Frame Diversity

The importance of framing was also stressed by Stacey Sinclair, a psychology professor at Princeton University whose research has examined how colleges and universities communicate why they support diversity.

Some schools convey that they value diversity for moral reasons — motivated

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Sinclair explained.

Her research found that the instrumental frame was preferred by whites but not by ethnic minorities. The instrumental frame was also the one more frequently used by schools. “Ironically...the more prevalent diversity frame is more about whites, and it’s also preferred by whites,” said Sinclair.

She and her colleagues studied whether framing approaches are linked to students’ graduation rates. Whether the university used instrumental or moral framing had no relationship to the graduation rates of whites. But that wasn’t the case for minority students: Universities with low moral framing and greater instrumental framing had lower graduation rates among black and Latinx students.

The mechanisms by which frames may be affecting academic success still need to be determined, said Sinclair. “But...we need to be cognizant about how and why we welcome people from diverse backgrounds into organizations.”

Building Trust by Investing in Students

A fundamental challenge in fostering successfully diverse communities is building trust, said social psychologist Claude Steele of Stanford University. “It involves showing up, listening, responding to, supporting people, and signaling that we invest in their potential.”

Research on interventions shows that it’s important to demonstrate to students that they are seen as belonging and as having the potential to succeed, said Steele. It is also important to reduce cues that may indicate exclusion — for example, math department walls lined with photos of white male mathematicians.

Steele described a study of publication rates among women and minority graduate students in science departments across the University of California,

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the College of Chemistry, where women and minority students did just as well.

The College of Chemistry had decided to invest in making its program really supportive for students, explained Steele. For example, the college encouraged students to publish and conveyed that it was an important part of being a scientist. The college established clear deadlines to move research projects along, scheduled weekly meetings between students and faculty, and monitored whether the meetings happened.

“They were essentially tightening the bolts of their graduate program in a way that signals to everybody that they are really being invested in by faculty,” said Steele. Because of the pressures that women and minority students face, such as stereotype threat, “they need signals that this institution values them and expects them to succeed.”

All faculty — not just minority and women faculty members — can build trusting relationships with students, said Steele. “Trust is a ground game, and people are more interested probably in...someone who’s really invested in them, and willing to support them, than in their identities per se.”

A recording of “Attracting and Retaining a Diverse Workforce: Context Can Build Trust” is available [online](#).

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