

Diversity in Academic Careers

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The Rise of the Chief Diversity Officer

By BEN GOSE

Pullman, Wash.

Michael J. Tate runs an operation with the kind of resources that many small colleges would envy. He has an annual budget of \$3-million and a full-time staff of 55, including two people focused exclusively on communications and a development officer who's angling to raise \$10-million. All this is in a unit — the office of the vice president for equity and diversity — that didn't even exist here at Washington State University in the summer of 2004.

Nearly every university, it seems, is racing to appoint a chief diversity officer. Although their titles vary, these administrators often are vice presidents or vice provosts and manage larger budgets and more people than their predecessors of a decade or two ago, when the top administrator in this area was often dubbed "minority-affairs director."

Harvard University, Texas A&M University, and the Universities of California at Berkeley, Texas at Austin, and Virginia, among others, have created chief-diversity-officer positions in the past two years.

"Every year since I began doing searches, there's been some kind of a sea change," says Jan Greenwood, who has headed an executive-search firm focused on higher education since 1992, and has recently helped six universities hire chief diversity officers. "Right now, it's really going on in the area of diversity."

But is it really a sea change, or a public-relations campaign? Are universities making a serious new commitment to diversifying the faculty, curriculum, and student body, or are these high-profile appointments a way for university presidents to appease minority students and professors who have been clamoring for a stronger voice on campuses? The answer — at least here at Washington State — appears to be both.

Washington State, a land-grant institution of about 19,000 students in a predominantly white area close to the Idaho state line (an additional 4,000 students are enrolled at three other campuses in the system), came relatively early to this trend when it opened its equity and diversity office in September 2004. University President V. Lane Rawlins and Mr. Tate both concede that part of the goal in creating the office was to show the campus that the administration was serious about diversity.

Minority professors make up 12 percent of the faculty here, and minority students account for 15 percent of enrollment. The creation of the office "is a clear statement to the community that diversity is a high priority," Mr. Rawlins says.

But it isn't only a statement: Along with Mr. Tate's fancy title came new resources. One member of his office's large staff is an assistant vice president who focuses on research related to diversity. That allows the university to analyze its progress in meeting goals related to enrollment, graduation rates, and recruitment of underrepresented minorities for positions on the faculty.

The equal-employment office, known here as the Center for Human Rights, is also now part of Mr. Tate's operation. It is headed by Raúl M. Sánchez, a Harvard-trained lawyer, and is adding two new staff members so that Mr. Sánchez can work more closely with hiring committees to attract minority professors to the campus.

Mr. Tate's office also has offered diversity training to more than 1,000 people at the university, and it is renovating two university houses so that cultural centers for African-American and Hispanic students will have homes for the first time. This month several employees in the equity and diversity office traveled to Seattle for a "diversity luncheon" that preceded a Washington State football game. The luncheon doubled as a recruiting and fund-raising event, and drew several hundred minority high-school students as well as donors interested in supporting a scholarship program.

The office doesn't focus just on minorities and women, the traditional domains for such efforts in the past. The new researcher is monitoring the enrollment of men, who make up just 47 percent of undergraduates at Washington State. The office also is putting together a curriculum for a group of Chinese mayors who want to come to Washington State to learn how American mayors operate. And Mr. Tate talks about the diverse perspectives that low-income and international students, as well as students from various faiths, bring to the campus.

"We're socialized to be leery of difference," Mr. Tate says. "At a university, you learn to embrace difference, and that helps prepare you for a global society."

The most important part of the equity and diversity office may be Mr. Tate's high-ranking status as an executive officer. The equity and diversity offices are on the first floor of the French Administration Building, the same one where the president works. When university executives gather to assemble their biennial budget request for the Legislature, Mr. Tate is at the table. "Having Mike there forces us to ask, 'How does diversity relate to the budget?'" says Mr. Rawlins.

Minority students, administrators, and faculty members say Mr. Tate is making some smart changes, although sentiment is mixed about whether the office's work will have an impact universitywide.

"The current developments represent the highest level of commitment to diversity that I've ever seen," says Barbara J. Aston, an assistant to the university's provost and a member of the Wyandotte tribe who serves as the university's liaison to American Indian tribes.

But Lorraine Parrish, a senior and an Alaskan Native, says the campus retains "an air of ignorance and a little hostility" toward minority students. "They've improved, and the office of equity and diversity has a lot to do with that," she says. "But there's still a helluva lot more that they could do."

Mr. Tate, whom Mr. Rawlins says he handpicked for the job because of his administrative savvy, knows appearances are important. He welcomed every new student to campus this semester with a postcard featuring a photograph of 30 employees from the equity and diversity office. But he also says the office has an important role to play in helping the university meet its diversity goals.

"I'm not interested in being a symbol," says Mr. Tate, who is black. "I'd be out of here in a day if I thought that's all it was."

Steve O. Michael, vice provost for diversity and academic initiatives at Kent State University, has compiled a list of people who oversee diversity efforts at colleges. The database includes 400 names, and he estimates that about 80 of those people are chief diversity officers — meaning they have titles such as vice president or vice provost.

Mr. Michael and others are organizing a new group called the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. They plan to hold their first national conference in Washington, D.C., in February to piggyback on the American Council on Education's annual meeting.

Several trends are driving the new appointments. In some cases, controversial incidents that angered minority and female students and professors sparked a demand for a stronger voice. Harvard hired its first senior vice provost for faculty development and diversity in July 2005, on the recommendation of a committee formed in the wake of former President Lawrence H. Summers's controversial remarks about the scarcity of women in science. The University of Texas at Austin appointed a vice provost for institutional equity and diversity in May 2005 (it has since become a vice-presidential position), after the post was recommended by a committee that investigated a string of racially charged incidents on the campus.

No single incident led Mr. Rawlins to create the position at Washington State, but protests that were centered on diversity and race relations seemed to occur every few years here. In 1997, 19 black students and faculty members left the university, citing reasons such as lack of opportunity for advancement. In February 2005, a few months after the equity and diversity office was created, an Asian-American student accused two basketball players of racial harassment. The players were ultimately found not guilty, but a follow-up review by the Washington State Human Rights Commission found that the "lack of clarity" over why the two students were not punished was viewed by some students as "symptomatic of an administration historically callous to issues of discrimination and bigotry on campus."

Many campus-diversity experts believe that universities are following the lead of the corporate world, where chief diversity officers have been in vogue since the 1990s. William B. Harvey, vice president and chief officer for diversity and equity at the University of Virginia, convened a meeting of corporate and academic chief diversity officers in 2003, when he was vice president of the Center for Advancement of Racial and Ethnic Equity at the American Council on Education. "From my perspective," he says, "corporations were ahead of us in terms of making diversity a comprehensive part of the organizational structure." The appointments are also being spurred by the U.S. Supreme Court's rulings in 2003, when it cited the educational benefits of diversity in allowing the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor to continue to use race in admissions decisions.

"The Supreme Court decisions caught a number of institutions off guard," says Damon A. Williams, assistant vice provost for multicultural and international affairs at the University of Connecticut. "I don't know if they fully grasped the educational benefits of diversity on their own campuses." (The rulings had less effect on Washington State, which is in one of the few states that have banned the use of race in admissions.)

Some critics of racial preferences question whether chief diversity officers should be in charge of measuring the educational benefits of diversity. "I think this is probably a task that is best done by a university official who doesn't have a vested interest in the continued use of race and ethnicity," says Roger B. Clegg, president and general counsel of the Center for Equal Opportunity.

Even some strong advocates for diversity question how effective chief diversity officers will be in higher education, given the lack of clarity over their role in faculty hiring.

"Frankly, in some cases, this is going to be a disaster," says Christopher J. Metzler, director of the EEO, diversity, and inclusion practice at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. "The chief diversity officer is going to bump up against the process for the hiring and promotion of faculty. That is a sacred process."

There has already been at least one train wreck. In June 2005, the University of Oregon scaled back a proposed five-year diversity plan after two dozen professors balked at certain aspects of it. The most controversial aspect of the plan was the addition of assessments of professors' "cultural competency" in tenure and post-tenure reviews. Several professors, including some on the committee charged with preparing the plan, said they were blindsided when Gregory J. Vincent, vice provost for institutional equity and diversity, released the draft document. Mr. Vincent, who maintained that faculty members had plenty of time to weigh in on the draft, is now the vice president for diversity and community engagement at the University of Texas at Austin.

"Oregon may have tried to move too fast," says Mr. Williams, the assistant vice provost at the University of Connecticut. "They should have done more relationship work and tackled the low-hanging fruit first."

Even before the Oregon debacle, many universities tapped people known as consensus builders for their top diversity positions. Mr. Rawlins, Washington State president, turned to Mr. Tate as a consultant when he decided to create the office in 2004. At the time, Mr. Tate was serving as Washington State's dean of extension, a division with 300 faculty members, a \$54-million budget, and offices in every county in the state.

Mr. Rawlins eventually asked Mr. Tate if he'd like to take on the job himself. "The most important thing is to find someone to occupy the office who is not an isolationist," Mr. Rawlins says. "You need someone who can work across the university."

Mr. Tate has been in academe his entire adult life, and his graying hair and beard testify that he's put in his time. He spent 26 years as a professor and administrator at Michigan State University and earned three degrees there before moving to Pullman in 1998. His speeches are not fiery monologues on racial inequities; instead, he provides historical perspectives on diversity, citing the contrasting views of Plato (who preferred homogeneity) and Aristotle (who believed that differences would help democracy thrive).

In April 2005, a student put on a play filled with racial jokes that he described as intentionally offensive. Protesters shouted during portions of the performance to interrupt the play. To some, the incident highlighted the perception that the Pullman community remains culturally insensitive. Others, including the playwright, saw the heckling as a free-speech issue.

Mr. Tate stayed above the fray, and to this day, he describes the incident in measured tones. "Universities are places where students come to learn, and that learning process includes experimentation," he says. "What we had here was a student experimenting with a provocative play."

Mr. Tate takes heat from both sides. Occasionally a white male professor marches into his office to accuse him of engaging in reverse discrimination. And some minority students think he should be a greater advocate for their cause. The widely varying criticism actually makes him think he's doing something right. Though he chafes at the suggestion that he's a moderate, he wants the office to be known as a place for everyone at the university.

"I've done the carrying of the protest signs," Mr. Tate says. "Here in this role, activism takes the form of you and I sitting down and talking about what's best for all students."

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Section: Diversity in Academic Careers

Volume 53, Issue 6, Page B1