

Study: Campus diversity offices often formed in reaction to crisis; faculty interactions influence climate

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Credit: KU Marketing Communications

A University of Kansas professor recently published a pair of articles examining how chief diversity offices are formed to deal with university

campus issues of race and ethnicity and how students' interactions with faculty influence their perceptions of campus climate.

Gene Parker III, assistant professor of educational leadership & [policy studies](#) at KU, studies [campus](#) climate, diversity and organizational behavior at institutions of higher learning. In recent studies, he has found that chief diversity offices, which are commonly established to promote institutional diversity goals and objectives, are often formed in response to crises. He also found that such offices lack industry standardization and that how students interact with their [faculty](#) members outside of the classroom affects how they perceive campus climate.

Chief diversity officers

Chief diversity offices, or administrators dedicated to overseeing campus efforts at diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and promoting social justice, have become increasingly common in the last decade. Yet little research has been conducted on how the offices are formed, their job descriptions, missions and who such officers report to. In a study published in the Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education, Parker performed a qualitative study of how two [research institutions](#) inaugurated their offices and compared that to existing literature on such offices.

In both cases, the offices were formed in response to persistent perceptions of unwelcoming climates. School leaders felt they needed to address issues of unrest by putting an officers in place that could address such issues. Two potential problems with that approach are being reactionary instead of proactive and using familiar, structural responses that have long been used for academic purposes but might not be as effective for cultural issues, Parker said. The offices are often structured similarly to chief information officer, chief financial officers or provost-level administrators.

"What schools are doing is responding to cultural issues with a structural response," Parker said. "They do that because it's what they've always known. They'll take a look at what other institutions are doing and implement something similar. But there's no industry standard."

Fortunately for the field, organizations have formed to professionalize and provide guidance to chief diversity offices and leaders. While that lack of professionalization has been a challenge, such guidance will help institutions implement proven measures and avoid potential mistakes through tested standards and best practices, Parker said.

Parker also found that campus personnel and community stakeholders, including alumni and policymakers, played an important role in shaping the office. That can lead to ambiguity in job roles and reporting lines. However, when the officers were able to build successful relationships with those constituencies and others, including students, they felt more successful. Where the officers were placed in university structures also proved important.

"There were clear benefits shown to being part of the president's cabinet and having a seat at the table," Parker said. "Reporting to the provost was fine, as long as they also had the ear of the president. That gave them agency to help promote change."

The findings show further research is needed to address social identity as it applies to chief diversity officers as well as work attitudes, organizational commitment and challenges such as burnout, Parker said. The results show that practitioners would be well served to be proactive in implementing such offices instead of waiting to react to crises. And when inaugurating such offices, a thorough assessment of campus climate should be at the forefront, while the offices are tailored to work with their specific campus in culturally responsive ways.

Student-faculty interactions and perceptions of campus climate

Universities have long known that whether students feel welcome on campus goes a long way toward their academic achievement and if they persist to graduation. Yet less is known about what specific factors determine if students indeed feel welcome. In a study published in the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, Parker and Teniell Trolan of the State University of New York-Albany, examined data about student attitudes toward campus diversity. The findings showed the type and frequency of interactions students had with faculty outside of the classroom played a role in how they viewed their campuses.

"I'm looking at who is affected by these perceptions of campus climate as well as outcomes," Parker said. "I try to look at more nuanced versions of outcomes, such as did students skip class or work on projects with other people outside of class. We've traditionally looked at cognitive growth, retention and those types of measures. But in terms of interaction, I want to push the button on how we think about faculty engagement. What we're considering are the many ways faculty interact as a continued relationship. With many students, such as minority students, there is a cultural element to consider as well. I call that equity-minded faculty engagement."

For the study, the authors analyzed data from the 2014 Student Experience in the Research University survey, a national dataset that included information from more than 33,000 students at research universities. The students reported on 12 different types of interactions they had with faculty and their perceptions of the campus [diversity](#) climate.

Overall, the more students interacted with faculty, especially outside of

class, was positively associated with positive perceptions of campus climate, but context mattered. The authors argue the type and context of experiences students have with faculty are very important. Frequently communicating with a professor by email or in person, experiencing equitable and fair treatment, having faculty who frequently provided prompt and useful feedback on student work and being satisfied with access to faculty outside of class were all indicative of a positive perception of climate. However, engaging in research, working with faculty on activities other than coursework, talking outside of class on issues derived from a course and knowing a professor well enough to ask for a letter of recommendation were all negatively associated with a positive perception of campus climate. Those relationships varied by the type of student responding. For example, engaging in research was negatively associated for white students, but not other racial or ethnic groups, and the same was true for engaging in creative activities. Social class and gender also played a role in whether students found varying types of engagement indicative of a positive campus climate.

The findings show that frequent and respectful interactions between faculty and students are very important in whether they perceive a positive campus [climate](#). However, the types of interactions are vital as well and show that simply interacting with students outside of class is not sufficient to making students feel welcome. Parker said in future research he hopes to dive further into [student](#) characteristics and how certain interactions are perceived for minority students, by race and ethnicity and for other characteristics such as gender or sexual identity. Above all, it reinforces the importance of interactions not just in the classroom but across the spectrum of college experiences.

"This is all providing support for my claim of the importance of intentional and thoughtful engagement between students and faculty," Parker said. "It should be more involved than just how they interact with faculty in the classroom or at one point, but how they engage over time."

Provided by University of Kansas

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