

Lessons Learned: Value Differences

by Mary Owens, Ph.D.

As noted in my last contribution, I would like to share some of what I've learned in my twenty plus years' of service in academic leadership roles with those who are in these essential roles of coordinating and leading or are considering taking them on.

One of the most important pieces of advice I offer is to **value differences**. Valuing differences means more than a diverse workforce; it is manifested in the environment the leader creates. Creating an environment where differences are valued is often easier said than done.

Why value differences?

Montgomery College, the community college whose Rockville campus I have worked at for so many years, is in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Its student body is extremely diverse by any measure (race, ethnicity, national origin, age, educational background, educational goals, socioeconomic status, visa/citizenship status, learning styles, etc.). Not only are there many variables at play in every classroom, the variables are constantly changing, with new ones frequently coming into play.

With such diversity and change, it makes sense to value and cultivate differences in the instructional faculty who deliver the institution's mission: ***educating students***.

Instructional faculty members fulfill the mission in their classrooms (real or virtual) over the course of a term. Dealing directly with and adapting to the ever-changing diversity in our students, faculty are the frontline, responsible for effectively teaching them, with all that entails. Instructional faculty with different perspectives, educational backgrounds, and life and professional experiences, as well as different teaching approaches, are essential to effective implementation of the mission, as is ongoing cultivation of faculty differences.

In addition, decisions resulting from collaboration and discussion among people with different perspectives are generally stronger. Different perspectives can help us to vet, test, adapt, and strengthen our decisions. Along with being collaborative and inclusive, academic decision making should also be recursive since continued change is as much a part of the equation as diversity.

Furthermore, good decision making rests squarely, though not exclusively, on accurate information—gathered broadly and given honestly. Information from and the perspectives of those delivering the mission should carry great weight in any decisions affecting that mission, often greater

weight than those who oversee or support the ones in the trenches. Decisions made without paying heed to those delivering the mission are bound to be less effective.

How does a leader ensure broad and honest input?

The leader creates and maintains an environment where differences are valued, where different perspectives are accepted as the norm and it is safe to voice differences and to disagree with colleagues, including the leader.

The leader provides, if necessary, the structures (i.e., course-based and/or discipline-based groups, coordinators) and decision-making processes (i.e., polling/voting), as well as the necessary time and opportunities for collaboration.

The leader must ensure that there is no “payback” or negative repercussions for voicing different opinions. Payback affects not only the individual receiving it, but also those witnessing it, possibly silencing them and negatively impacting the mission.

A leader should ensure all voices are heard, by mediating and refereeing as needed, by hearing all sides of an issue, as well as by providing mechanisms, such as confidential ballots, to ensure that those not comfortable voicing their positions in meetings are part of the decision process.

A leader should model respect for differences. When others’ perspectives are voiced, a leader needs to be open, really listen, consider what is said, and be willing to change his/her own positions. If participating in discussions, leaders should recognize that, simply by nature of their being the leader, their opinions may carry great weight, so they should know when to refrain from voicing their own opinions and let others speak. Speaking too soon, sometimes speaking at all, may silence those holding other opinions.

Creating and then maintaining an environment where differences are valued take sustained time and effort, but the rewards are well worth both: solid information, strong decisions, an open and safe environment, and most importantly, more effective implementation of our mission: ***educating students.***

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