

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Multicultural competence in student affairs: The case of the University of Botswana

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### *Abstract*

Universities and colleges of education all over the world are experiencing student populations who bring diverse values and experiences into the learning environment. Student affairs professionals are faced with the challenge of accommodating each student's unique needs. This paper intends to address the essentiality of multicultural competence in student affairs administration in higher education. It discusses the meaning of multiculturalism; the role of the student affairs in the development of the students; and the importance of multicultural competence in student affairs administration.

### *Keywords*

*Diversity, higher education, multicultural competence, student affairs, student affairs professionals, university administration, Botswana.*

### *Introduction*

The University of Botswana (UB), like many other institutions of higher education, has noted a drastic increase in enrolment since 2006. Students enrolled in this university come from diverse backgrounds, representing various races, ethnicities, disabilities, genders, socio-economic statuses and so forth. A diverse student population involves diverse needs, values, norms and beliefs. This diversity has an impact on the work of student affairs professionals and educators in general, as they interact and work with this diverse population on a daily basis (Lotan, 2006). Higher education professionals must therefore become aware of whether and how their institutions are fully supporting the diverse needs of their student population. A study conducted by Moswela and Mukhopadhyay (2011) has shown that the needs of diverse learners, particularly those with special educational needs at UB, are not being adequately addressed by student affairs professionals. The study findings reveal the following deficiencies: a lack of educational materials, non-accommodating infrastructural facilities, and a curriculum that is inflexible for students with special needs. Another study by Tabulawa (2003) has also shown the need for a culturally sensitive pedagogy and for

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the proficiency of educators in their students' first language. This has been recognised as significant for effective teaching of students who are speakers of languages different from the local language used in schools.

Student affairs professionals are decision-makers and play vital roles in addressing multicultural issues on campuses. Their unique positions call for the integration of multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills into practice. However, only limited research has been carried out at the University of Botswana regarding the multicultural competence of higher education professionals. For example, Molosiwa (2009), in her study *Monocultural education in a multicultural society: The case of teacher preparation in Botswana*, reported that teachers have not received adequate training on multicultural issues. Another study, carried out by Moswela and Mukhopadhyay (2011), indicated that the student affairs professionals lacked multicultural competence to address the needs of students with special needs.

Similarly, Pope *et al.*, (2004) reported that many student affairs practitioners receive very little training in multicultural issues. In addition, work performance evaluations very rarely include multicultural criteria. The ethical implication for the lack of training in this area leads to deficiencies in knowledge, skills, and awareness of unfamiliar cultures. As noted by Ruggiero (2001), critical analysis of an issue or concern is affected and decision-making is usually based on choices dependent upon personal and subjective moral standards. Every culture has a custom that restricts and prescribes the manner in which people behave towards one another; it is based on culture (Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2006). If a goal of student affairs professionals is to promote a diverse and inclusive environment on campus, how can decisions on programmes, goals, and outreach be equitable if individuals in student affairs lack the knowledge, skills and awareness of a diverse student body? According to Papalewis as cited by Cierra (2004), "ultimately, one's ability to lead effectively and efficiently is based on the ability to understand and respect individual differences: to be ethical, one must be respectful" (p. 3). The study by Moswela and Mukhopadhyay (2011) on the voices of the students with disabilities at UB revealed that student affairs professionals, in the special education support services, lack the necessary skills to assist students from all walks of life, particularly those with special educational needs. According to the study, access to equitable educational opportunities is inadequate for students with diverse needs. Nonetheless, studies have shown that such aspects are crucial in the education of diverse learners in order to achieve their potential. Furthermore, Healey, Prestorious and Bell (2011) have observed that the provision of services to students with diverse needs – in particular special needs – is crucial as such provision assists students to develop self-determination and self-management skills, which ultimately assist in their success and improve their career outcomes. Lastly, the study by Nyathi-Ramahobo (2006) argues that multicultural education is critical in cultivating and developing attitudes and value systems for building democratic societies and maintaining peace in the community.

Continuing professional education is therefore needed for student affairs professionals in higher education as they are the ones responsible for making special arrangements to be implemented at the classroom level. Student affairs departments provide the necessary

programmes and services needed by the students to achieve educational goals. Their mission is to enhance learning and personal development. Furthermore, the purpose of student affairs department at UB is to create conditions that motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally purposeful activities, both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, the special education support services professionals are responsible for the assessment of students with special needs, and are expected to provide all the necessary services for the students and make recommendations to the teaching staff and the rest of the university community to make the necessary accommodations for such students. However, lack of multicultural skills hinders their performance. Thus, because of this important role of developing the holistic, individual student, it is important for all student affairs professionals to have the multicultural awareness, skills, knowledge, and sensitivity, needed to offer meaningful services to all the students. Though research, policies, and practices of multiculturalism in education have been vigorous at the international level for a long time, the concepts of bilingual, multilingual, or multicultural special education are unheard of in Botswana. Only a few research studies have addressed issues of multiculturalism in Botswana (e.g., Boikhutso & Jotia, 2013) but none included student affairs professionals. Earlier studies addressing the education of children with heterogeneous languages either examined government policies (Jotia & Pansiri, 2013), or they were mainly conceptual papers on teachers and multiculturalism (e.g., Molosiwa, 2009). Little has been done on examining student affairs professionals and multiculturalism situations in Botswana. This study therefore seeks to add value by making the case for multicultural awareness among student affairs professionals and evoking research to pay particular attention to the student affairs professionals as they play a pivotal role in ensuring that there is equal access to educational opportunities in the universities and colleges of education in Botswana.

### *What is multiculturalism?*

Multiculturalism is a difficult word to define because scholars have various views on what constitutes multiculturalism. This was noted by Komives, Woodard and Associates (2003) who state that “one of the greatest obstacles to discussing multiculturalism is lack of common definition to clarify the concept” (p.425). This view is further supported by Watson (1998): “Another problem when addressing diversity and multiculturalism is that there is no consistency across the profession regarding its meaning” (p. 54). The inconsistency regarding the definition of multiculturalism across professions and nations results in difficulty in addressing this issue in more detailed manner.

Some scholars, like Reynolds (2004) suggest that multiculturalism is “about creating a new world where people, because of who they are (as differentiated from regardless of who they are) are welcomed and celebrated” (p. 104, *our emphasis*). Fowers and Richardson (1996) defined multiculturalism from a psychological perspective, stating that it “is a social-intellectual movement that promotes the value of diversity as a core principle and insists that all cultural groups be treated with respect as equals” (p.609). Similarly, Carson (2009) as cited by Risner and Stinson (2010) stated that:

[m]ulticulturalism is a social and political movement and position that holds differences between individuals and groups to be a potential source of strength and renewal rather than of strife. It values the diverse perspectives people develop and maintain through varieties of experience and background stemming from racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation and/or class differences in our society. It strives to uphold the ideals of equality, equity and freedom on which the United States is based, and includes respect for individuals and groups as a principle fundamental to the success and growth of our country. (p. 4)

In defining the concept of multiculturalism, both authors therefore value the importance of a person as an individual irrespective of race, class, gender, socio-economic status and so forth.

Culture is the key concept in multiculturalism. Culture may be defined as the totality of ways of life of a society: what it believes in and does, all its economic and religious activities, language and so on. Banks and Banks (2001) defined culture as “a group’s programme for survival in and adaptation to its environment [...] the cultural programme consists of knowledge, concepts, and values shared by group members through systems of communication” (p.8). These shared beliefs bind people into a society.

Professionals in higher education must recognise that it is vital to understand and appreciate every person as a unique individual. Multiculturalism values the individual student and recognises that all students – regardless of their gender, social class, ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics should have equal opportunity to learn at school. Accordingly, Parekh (1999) noted that “all cultures are equally rich and deserve equal respect, that each of them is good for its members [...] no culture is wholly worthless [...] no culture is perfect and has a right to impose itself on others” (p 2). Student affairs professionals are to value the individual student.

Multiculturalism in higher education attempts to address issues of racism, sexism and discrimination against people with disabilities and minority groups. According to the Canadian Heritage (2004), “multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding and discourages ghettoisation, hatred, discrimination and violence” (p. 1). The purpose of multiculturalism is to eliminate prejudice and discrimination by educating disadvantaged groups about their culture and history and to learn to accept themselves fully as individuals. Multiculturalism helps the disadvantaged groups to develop a positive self-concept. It ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride of their ancestry and have a sense of belonging.

Multiculturalism does not only cater for minority groups, it also helps to educate privileged students to develop an understanding and appreciation of minority groups. It informs privileged students that acceptance of minority groups gives a feeling of security and self-confidence. *What is multiculturalism striving for* (2006) noted, “people of the mainstream culture must understand and accept those on the outside, because lack of understanding and acceptance fosters irrational and unfair prejudices, such as racism, and sexism, and these prejudices do harm those outside the mainstream” (p. 3). Therefore, multicultural competency is necessary to educate these groups to be open and accept diverse cultures.

### *The role of student affairs in student learning*

Student affairs plays a major role in developing the holistic individual who is, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual. According to Love (2003) “student affairs professionals perform a varied mixture of leading, advising, counseling, educating, supervising, teaching, planning, and so forth” (p. 2). Student affairs professionals are responsible for helping every student to achieve educational goals. The professionals advise students on academic and social needs. Thus, for instance, they assist students with the development of appropriate educational plans consistent with their individual academic, career and personal goals.

Student affairs professionals participate in academic advising, which is regarded as a more comprehensive process that includes an assessment of the psychological, interpersonal and academic needs of students (Wazlelek & Coulter, 1999). Professional counsellors, who are more knowledgeable in identifying students’ difficulties, provide appropriate interventions and assistance as well as referrals.

Student affairs professionals offer co-curricular activities. These are meant to enhance the lives of students outside the classroom. Students learn to socialise and develop leadership skills by participating in different organisations. Through these experiences, students gain knowledge and skills through practical learning.

Student affairs professionals also recruit international students for educational, cultural and financial reasons, and the corollary obligation, which is to welcome, serve, retain and involve in mutual intercultural learning with international students (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner & Nelson, 1999). The international student office staff, in cooperation with other student affairs professionals, must work to create a welcoming environment for international students. They promote intercultural learning on campus and encourage international students to appreciate diversity. The student affairs department provides quality programmes and services in order to retain the students.

Knowledge of multiculturalism is vital for student affairs professionals in order to assist with student learning/development and in creating a campus that supports all students. For instance, according to Boikhutso and Jotia (2013), the marginalisation of the use of students’ mother tongue for ethnic minorities in Botswana, undermines the quality of the education and the curriculum in general.

### *Essentiality of multicultural competence*

Many studies have demonstrated that a multicultural environment on campus has a positive impact on various student outcomes (Villalpando, 2002). Astin as cited in Cheng & Zhao, 2005 identified a clear pattern that emphasises diversity as an institutional policy and provides curricular and extracurricular opportunities to address multicultural issues that are associated with widespread beneficial effects on students’ cognitive and affective development.

According to Pope, Reynolds and Muller (2004), multicultural competence is defined, “as the awareness, knowledge and skills needed to work with others who are culturally different from self in meaning” (p.13). They note that multicultural competence is a

necessary prerequisite for effective, affirming, and ethical work in student affairs. Sims (1994) concurs:

We need to create an academic community where people with different backgrounds view each other as having similar needs, similar aspirations, and similar problems but with different ways of manifesting them. In this kind of community, different clothes, different music, different habits, different skin color, and different self-presentation are viewed with interest and curiosity rather than hostility and suspicion...cultural differences are regarded not as dehumanizing stereotype but as an intriguing variation that we seek to understand. (p. 3)

The notion of multicultural competence puts forward the belief that all citizens should keep their identities. They are to be respected for who they are. Accordingly, Parekh (1999) asserts that, “when dominant culture defines the minorities in a demeaning way and systematically reinforces it by all the institutional and other means at its disposal, they consciously or unconsciously internalise the negative self-image, lack self-esteem, and feel alienated from the mainstream” (p. 6).

Multicultural competence helps student affairs professionals in understanding internalised oppression and its impact on identity and self-esteem. Weng (2005) states that

[c]ultural self-awareness is the key, because it enables us to recognize that as cultural beings [we] may hold attitudes and beliefs that can detrimentally influence [our] perceptions of and interactions with individuals who are ethnically and racially different from [our] selves. (p. 4)

Institutions of higher education with clearly defined and enforced cultures committed to diversity empower their members to feel good about themselves in relation to their uniqueness and role in the institution.

### *Self-awareness*

Self-awareness is the ability to be aware of those values, attitudes, and assumptions that hold inaccurate views of a particular culture in the form of stereotypes or biases (Pope *et al.*, 2004). It is important for student affairs professionals to develop this awareness skill. In doing so, they are able to challenge their misinformation, thus correcting their erroneous assumptions and beliefs. According to Pope, Reynolds and Muller (2004), student affairs professionals should know that differences are valuable and that learning about others who are culturally different is necessary and rewarding. Self-awareness helps the individual to learn to respect differences among people, and to acknowledge the complexities within ourselves and others. They assert, therefore that “multiculturalism should start by observing the self as an initial starting point” (p. 55). Thus Cheng (1990) proposes that student affairs professionals begin by examining and understanding their own unique cultural and ethnic identities. Student affairs professionals should be able to examine their own prejudices and reflect upon how pre-judgement affects their interactions with students and other professionals. Student affairs professionals should self-explore and self-evaluate. Doing so, will help them to improve their ability to learn how to value and respect other cultures.

### *Self-reflection as a necessary skill for student affairs practitioners*

It is important for every student affairs practitioner to conduct self-evaluation. Self-evaluation helps the individual to understand his/her weaknesses and strengths, and therefore, instills a willingness to change for the better. Nottingham (1998) notes that

Self-reflection allows one to identify strengths and limitations in specific environments and the individual personality, learning, and behavioral characteristics that influence one's interactions with others. (p. 71)

The author notes that differing attitudes, beliefs, cultures, ethics, values and life experiences are some important aspects of self-reflection. She further states that professionals must have a meaningful understanding of themselves to maximise their individual effectiveness in the department or division. This is further emphasised by Ramirez (2000). Leaders working in institutions of higher education require more knowledge and skills in working with diverse populations. He asserts that creating institutional capacity for diversity requires authentic leadership with integrity and vision.

Diversity, like leadership, does not lend itself to neat formulas, weekend workshops, or summer institutes where leadership skills for diversity may be modularized and acquired. Diversity calls up the most deeply felt passions about who we are as individuals. (p. 407)

Nottingham (1998) acknowledges the importance of knowing yourself as an individual in order to understand other people. This is supported by Pope *et al.* (2004) who argues that “without self-evaluation, individuals may not realise that they hold inaccurate or appropriate views of a particular culture in the form of stereotypes, biases or cultural based assumptions” (p.15). Accordingly, it is important that professionals who work with diverse population are willing to participate in self-exploration.

### *Multicultural knowledge*

According to Pope *et al.* (2004), “Multicultural knowledge consists of the knowledge about various cultural groups that is typically not taught in many preparation programmes” (p. 15). The professionals should be able to recognise that each individual student has a race, sexual orientation, class, and so forth, which contribute to an individual's personal identity. Student affairs professionals should help diverse students to explore their own histories, cultures, and traditions in order to know themselves. Parekh (1999) affirmed, that

[s]ocial recognition is central to the individual's identity and self-worth and misrecognition can gravely damage both. (p. 6)

This is further supported by Fowler and Richardson (1996), who state that

[a]ll people must be allowed to unfold toward their unique destinies, which requires resisting external pressure and other inducements to mimic and thereby become derivatives of another culture. (p. 612)

It is very important for one to know one's real self to be able to identify one positively. Gay (1994) supports this by stating that "one cannot be human without culture and ethnicity, and one cannot have culture and ethnicity without being human" (p. 7). Therefore, to acknowledge and respect one another, to be fully human, requires mutual understanding and appreciation based on cultural understanding. Having knowledge about other cultures different from one's own helps to eliminate some of the misconceptions people have about other cultures. Gay (1994) contends:

Failing to understand the cultural style of some African-Americans, for example, may cause teachers erroneously to conclude that these students have limited critical thinking and reasoning abilities [...] the reluctance of American Indian children to operate on a tightly controlled time schedule and engage in highly individualistic and competitive activities may be misinterpreted as lack of initiative, motivation, and responsibility. (p. 9)

Knowledge about other cultures is important to all those who work with a diverse population, especially student affairs practitioners.

### *Multicultural skills*

Communication skill is one of the key elements in multicultural competency. Through verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication, student affairs professionals understand how culture influences the content (Pope *et al.*, 2004). This multicultural competency skill helps student affairs professionals openly discuss cultural differences and issues.

As previously stated, multicultural competency is vital for the student affairs practitioners; Howard-Hamilton, Richardson and Shuford (1998) note that multicultural competencies are also important to students. They argue that a set of competencies for students should be developed to enhance and promote the growth of multicultural sensitivity within universities. They suggest that students should have knowledge of self-awareness. The knowledge of self will help students to relate to their cultural identities. This competency may help them to understand issues of oppression and the effect it has on different cultural groups. Like other scholars, Howard-Hamilton *et al.* (1998), emphasise the importance of self even in students. Understanding the self helps individual human beings to accept themselves and also to accept, value and respect others different from themselves.

If the students, staff and faculty, all develop multicultural competencies, we believe the needs of the individual student can be best met. The mission of educating the student holistically may thus be achieved.

### *What needs to be done?*

Education has no age limit. Student affairs professionals at the University of Botswana need continuing education to learn about the diverse student populations that are enrolling in the institutions of higher learning. There are various ways in which student affairs professionals

may learn about diverse student populations. First, they must identify these groups on campus. Examples include: international students; women students; students from minority groups such as lesbians and gays; students from national minority tribes such as Bakalaka, Bayeyi, Basarwa; people with disabilities, etc.; as well as the eight major national tribes such as the Bangwato, Bakgatla, Bakwena, etc. While minority and disadvantaged groups need to be educated about their cultures and histories, and be helped to learn to accept themselves as individuals, the members of majority and mainstream culture need to be educated about their privileges, how to deconstruct and recognise them, and to understand and appreciate the minority groups; and to be informed that acceptance of the minority groups gives a feeling of security and self-confidence.

Potential options for intervention include: planning and implementing lunch-hour sessions designed to educate these different groups about the importance of diversity; conducting seminars for student affairs professionals on diversity/mentoring programmes; allowing student affairs professionals to attend the orientation for international students in order to learn about different groups of students; student affairs professionals conducting presentations about Botswana culture to new students; and establishing a Multicultural Centre at the University of Botswana.

### *Conclusion*

Diversity in the student body makes higher education unique and presents challenges for student affairs professionals. In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, higher education also serves diverse groups of students who are disabled; international students; students of different sexual orientations; and so forth. These groups have different needs that should be attended to by student affairs staff. Student affairs professionals should work hard to assist every student to succeed academically. In this respect, student affairs professionals should collaborate with other departments, such as academic affairs, to ensure that students in their institutions are able to develop holistically. Finally, student affairs professionals should create programmes and offer services that assist students in developing personally, intellectually, socially and spiritually, irrespective of gender, class, race, religion, etc.

More especially, this article has argued that student affairs staff should incorporate multicultural competence in their daily work and decision-making in order to address and respond to the challenges and needs of diverse student populations. Multicultural competency helps student affairs professionals to self-assess in order to understand their strengths and weaknesses. When they recognise their strengths, weaknesses and position of privilege, student affairs professionals are better able to work with and assist people from diverse student populations, especially students who are different from them. Knowledge about diverse populations and other cultures will help student affairs professionals to understand the uniqueness of individual students. As a result, they will respond to students' needs and provide the necessary guidance, advice, counsel and support required to help students achieve success in higher education.

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