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The Training of People of Color Who are Multicultural Affairs Professionals in Y2M

Irma Almirall-Padamsee
Syracuse University

“Students of color must continue to be nurtured as insightful leaders for our community and White students must be trained as allies in change. As professionals we must excel in our ability to make both things happen.”

It's a given that although your ethnic and cultural identity makes you an authority on your particular life experiences, it does not make you an authority on what all people who share your identity believe, experience or support. Thus, we tell our students of color that the educator role they are often asked to fill by professors or staff are useful and valuable only in so far as they can use their own personal experiences to enlighten the White community. "I do not know what all Black women think, but I can tell you what I think." However, as professionals in higher education, we often do not hold ourselves to the same guidelines. That is, in our official and unofficial roles as advocates for the student of color community, we do not have the luxury to speak only for ourselves. We feel the pressure of representing the interests of our students in whatever arena possible. This responsibility is ongoing and constant. So as a Latina Director of an Office of Multicultural Affairs, I must feel confident in representing the needs of not just Latina students, but African American, Asian American and Native American as well. My behavior on campus during working hours as well as off campus on my own time has to be consistent.

The challenge professionals face in the new millennium is twofold. On the one hand, universities are being faced with a broader definition of who disenfranchised students are. They are no longer simply of a particular race or ethnicity. Already strained resources are being further challenged in response. As professionals of color we need to be better educated to work with a more inclusive model of multiculturalism in order to respond better to all our students. On the other hand, the students of color who do make it into the higher education arena have the increased burden of succeeding academically without forgetting their identity. As staff, we must take special care in helping them to maintain the balance and take pride in whom they are. Very focused programmatic efforts must be complemented by very broad-based diversity outreach.

Both of these challenges imply that multicultural student affairs professionals must:

- commit to supporting both the community of color and the white community on a campus as intertwined voices in the race dialogue.
- be formally trained in anti-oppression theory and skill building.
- be able to document the need.
- be perseverant in working to impact institutional racism such that educational structures which privilege students, faculty and staff of particular identities and further disenfranchise others are gradually dismantled.
- work to develop policies, procedures and programs which respond to the need impactfully and systematically.

Social justice and educational equity are more pressing and crucial needs as we finish the century precisely because we have been unable to completely realize the hopes of the civil rights era. The raw fire of that time has translated itself into a sense of futility, defeat and success at the expense of one's cultural identity for many of our students.

As professionals of color working at predominantly White institutions, our existence says that we are individuals who refuse to accept a racist world. Our students, all of our students, deserve the very best we can offer. Students of color must continue to be nurtured as insightful leaders for our community and White students must be trained as allies in change. As professionals we must excel in our ability to make both things happen.

PRESENTER:

Irma Almirall-Padamsee is a Puerto Rican from New York City. She has her doctorate from Cornell University in Spanish Linguistics with specialties in Languages in Contact Phenomena and Sociolinguistics. She is presently the associate dean of Student Relations and director of Multicultural Affairs at Syracuse University. In this position, she is responsible for a university central office housed in the Division of Student Affairs focused on responding to the needs of about 1,700 undergraduates of color each year and working with the White undergraduate community at SU on race and ethnic education and skill building.