October 2001

Are Time-Honored Traditions of Predominantly White Institutions Added Barriers to Integration for Students of Color? The Challenges of Integration in the New Millennium

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Judson, Gail Shorter Ph.D., "Are Time-Honored Traditions of Predominantly White Institutions Added Barriers to Integration for Students of Color? The Challenges of Integration in the New Millennium" (2001). *Sixth Annual National Conference, POCPWI* . 35.
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Abstract

This session presents a framework for implementing diversity initiatives in century-old organizations located in rural communities. By utilizing "change agents" composed of faculty mentors for students of color and an inclusive committee, the campus community starts the process of diffusing the "valuing diversity" initiative into its social system. This process brings into focus the challenges and limitations of time-honored traditions for predominantly white institutions when encountering the "traditions-of-struggle" for people of color. The process examines the pervasiveness of student concerns by utilizing qualitative and quantitative research methods. The impact on recruitment and retention of students, faculty and staff of color is discussed.

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"One of the critical challenges of implementing diversity is helping individuals appreciate how core differences like age, gender, race, abilities DO matter - a task that is often difficult to accomplish due to widespread reluctance to acknowledge how core differences help to create hierarchies of privilege." ...M. Loden (1996)

During April 1996, I was struck by the fact that two African American students placed their names on our baby-sitters' list for the first time. On prior occasions, only white students showed interest in this job. At the end of the job in middle April, the student, also a club leader and in her third year at the college, questioned the requirement for black students to "integrate" themselves around campus. An example provided was the requirement to "sit with white students in the cafeteria instead of sitting with (our) friends." The student asked, "Why can't we sit with our friends? Often we don't see each other for weeks because we're in different majors. We just want to catch up on the other's news." In response to my question, "Who told you that you cannot sit with your friends?" The student responded, "We know we can't." My response to the student was that most predominantly white colleges and universities encourage students of color to "cluster" anytime. Several colleges hold the view that students of color should feel a sense of "connected-ness" with the campus. I suggest that they cluster, sit together and feel good about it.

More Concerns Expressed
During late 1996, I received three telephone calls from students. The first call was concerned about starting black sororities. It seemed that black students were not able to gain admittance into existing sororities on campus. Only a few students of color were accepted at one time. When these students questioned the possibility of starting

traditional black sororities, they were informed that they should join existing sororities.

The next few calls raised concerns about issues such as: the lack of multicultural perspective being taught in the classroom along side the European perspective; a lack of black and Latino(a) role models among faculty, staff, administration; and the general campus environment. The last call came from a student I characterized as distressed. She was more direct in her plea for help. "Why won't you help us, Mrs. J? You're a black woman. President J is a black man. You should know what we are going through! Why won't you help us?" These words were loud and forceful. I finally asked the student, "What exactly is the problem?" The student replied, "Mrs. J, it's just bad! The environment, everything."

Diversity Advisory Committee Formed
Self-segregation is not a general pattern among students of color; and ethnic specific activities for these students do not impede interracial contact. White students clearly had fewer interactions across groups. The results suggest that structured opportunities in classes and in organizations are positively related to the level of inter-group interactions. …Hurtado, Dey, Trevion (1994)

The challenge for administration was to determine how to approach issues presented by students of color. These questions had been raised since late 1994. During February 1997, President J invited me, as "unpaid staff", to come on campus to assist the students and help him identify solutions to "their concerns." Since the President was unable to state specifically what he wanted me to do, I requested office space within his suite to meet with students or anyone who wanted to talk. No official announcement was made about my presence. By word-of-mouth, the students found me.

After listening to multiple student concerns, mostly repeating themes, I received approval to form a President's Diversity Advisory Committee composed of faculty, staff, administrators and Black community leaders. The President, in turn, presented six challenges for the committee: (1) Develop and provide community support for participation in initiatives, activities and programs that value diversity. (2) Create a campus community that is welcoming and affirming to underrepresented and diverse populations. (3) Develop and/or strengthen programs and activities that increase and enhance diversity on campus and in the community. (4) Help the campus and broader-community understand and appreciate the value of diversity. (5) Help all students, including underrepresented students, to succeed in college. And finally, (6) Attract more underrepresented students, faculty and staff at Plattsburgh State University. The Diversity Advisory Committee's broad goal was to find ways to operationalize the President's six challenges.

Presenter
Gail Shorter-Judson, D.B.A. was a doctoral student pursuing her dissertation research when asked by the President of the college to investigate student concerns regarding the campus climate. The concerns were viewed as "problems of students of color" only. By spear-heading and diffusing the "valuing diversity" initiatives for the college, the process

of forming a diversity committee, the diversity strategic initiatives and diversity programming got off to a great start. The process lead to recommending, establishing and serving as coordinator of the college's first official Faculty Mentor Program and later serving as Interim Director of the newly established Center for Diversity, Pluralism and Inclusion. Shorter-Judson coordinated and facilitated Diversity Education and Training for the campus-community.

Prior positions held by Shorter-Judson include: Associate Director of Student Special Programs (e.g., EOP, SSS and campus wide tutoring), California State University at Stanislaus; eight years of middle management experience in the private sector; loan executive with the Urban League of Baltimore, MD; and multiple volunteer positions with public service organizations that worked with black youth in high school. Shorter-Judson's dissertation research was based on E. Rogers' (1983; 1995) framework for adoption and diffusion of innovations.