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Effectively Involving Minority Communities in Planning and Communications

Overarching Principles

The fact that the schools in the University of Texas System were once segregated makes them suspect in the eyes of the minority community. While I suspect this is true for all of the schools, I know this is the case for UT Austin (at least during my tenure there, 1980-1993), and for UT Arlington.

As a history professor, I often argue with Afro-Americans that they do not fully know their past; that is not the case, however, when it comes to the long struggle for desegregation of higher education in Texas that culminated in the Heman Sweatt decision of 1950. On the Arlington campus, stories abound about the early years of

desegregation and of the fact that the University had Confederate symbols as its mascots.

The good news regarding Mexican-Americans is that they were not legally kept out of UT System schools. But no one would be so bold as to proclaim that the absence of legal discrimination meant the presence of true equality at the schools.

Not surprisingly, years after the influx of blacks and Mexican-Americans, there has been (relatively) few students and even fewer faculty and administrators. The minority community is aware of this.

Given the legacy of the past, of where blacks and browns did not have equality at our schools, it is not at all surprising that negative news receives a great deal of attention with the local media. Any wrong, whether real or imagined, relating to blacks and Mexican Americans at any level within our institutions is depicted in a manner to

where the institution is on the defensive and is viewed as the villain.

Two Key Incidents

Since 1995, two incidents have at first strained the relationship of UTA with the minority community but in the long run has led to better relations.

The Administration of Ryan Amacher and his controversial Provost, Dalmas Taylor. Note: I need to be clear and fair up front: all that I know about Amacher and Taylor is second hand, i.e., from talking with people at UTA and from what I read in the newspapers. A key point: the fact that Amacher hired a black as his Provost led to loyalty from the black community when he came under attack. The fact that Dalmas Taylor said that the criticisms of him from UTA faculty were racially motivated, rallied blacks, such as the Dallas NAACP, who had previously had no interactions with him. Taylor's troubles at UTA led to black students and indeed the black community championing his cause.

Upon arriving at UTA, President Witt took steps to meet with and to become personally acquainted with the leaders of the Afro-American community. This eventually led to a formal covenant with the Tarrant County Black Ministers group. This relationship--covenant--has proven to be positive in several instances: (1) the ministers conducted a racial sensitivity seminar; (2) they have encouraged both black students and potential faculty to apply at UTA. Note: they understand that it is complicated when it comes to hiring minorities in key positions. (3) very important: the ministers have listened to the concerns of black students and faculty who would rather talk with them than with those of us in the Administration; (4) on three occasions when personnel changes have been made, the ministers did not assume that it was a case of UTA being racist: (a) our removal of a young man; (b) the resignation of 3 blacks in Social Work; (c) change in director

of the Africa Program. (5) Finally, the ministers are attempting to raise scholarship money.

Problems in working with the Black Ministers Group: they are doing this on a volunteer basis so their attendance at our regular meetings etc. is unpredictable. The same is true about follow through on a number of projects. Finally, they find themselves caught in the middle of having to defend us to some blacks who say that little or no progress has occurred at UTA. Has often led to the ministers making comments in the paper that are critical of us. (My personal belief is that they really do not believe the statements that they have made in us).

The second incident was our decision in July 1996 to remove Dr. Jose Gutierrez as Director of CMAS and Diane Flores as Program Coordinator. I recommended to President Witt that changes be made because (1) of my belief that we needed a person with a strong academic background in the position and that (2) to attract Mexican-

American scholars we needed a different focus from CMAS. I do understand and respect the fact that people of goodwill can differ with me on my view of how to run a Center.

This led to strong protest from the Mexican-American community and weekly demonstrations. A letter writing campaign was begun. I would venture to say that from every part of the country that has a sizeable Mexican-American population, we received some criticism, as did the UT System for allowing us to remove Dr. Gutierrez. A key point: in my view, the local media, given their own lack of progress in hiring and promoting Mexican Americans, felt that it could not criticize Dr. Gutierrez or his followers.

Initially, President Witt hoped that we could work with the CMAS Advisory group, even though it had been formed by Dr. Gutierrez. He had hoped that even though they, like the black ministers in the Taylor case, might disagree with us over the removal of the director, that they might be more committed with going forward in other areas. That

proved not to be the case, and the President disbanded the group, which led to more criticism.

Interestingly, after our settlement was reached, where Dr. Gutierrez would go back in as Director for roughly 60 days, the criticism from the Mexican-American community ceased all together. But, our goal was not to simply end protests but to make progress in this area as well. President Witt has moved forward with the forming of a new group of prominent Mexican-Americans to advise him not only on CMAS but other areas as well.

Other Initiatives Aimed at the Minority Community

Our "Target of Opportunity" Hiring Plan has been well received by both blacks and Mexican-Americans.

While it is relatively new, we have assigned two staff members, both of whom have strong reputations for being concerned about their respective communities, to devote a

third of their time to community activities. We are involved in a wide range of programs in both communities.

Finally, we are in the process of forming another, broader informal group to meet with the President regarding race relations. This will include ministers from Arlington, key minority employees from several companies, and significantly, members of the Asian-American community.

Conclusion

I believe that given the diversity found on our campus that at some point someone will say or act in an inappropriate manner. In 1990, this happened at UT Austin at the Round-Up Parade. Note the more recent comments by the UT Law Professor. I firmly believe that after an unpleasant incident has occurred that it is impossible to meet and talk frankly for the first time.

Getting to know, building trust, etc. must occur before the incident. That is why it is important that bridges be built to the minority communities in your area.