

Continuing Education and the Diversity Imperative for Higher Education

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Whether under the name of Continuing Education, Lifelong Learning, or Extension Studies, this work represents arguably the most significant segment of the overall higher education sector for best aligning education and training with the economic realities of the 21st Century. Of central importance in this regard is our potential to address and offer solutions to the critical challenges in diversity, equity, and inclusion that have become so prominent in higher education discourse.

Since the creation of the Lifelong Learning program at Case Western Reserve University nearly 9 years ago, we have striven to use the means at our disposal to advance the diversity of our staff, instructors, and the broad array of students that we serve. While these attempts admittedly have opportunity for improvement, I believe we are obligated to continue these efforts to most effectively serve our communities, our institutions, and in fact the entire higher education industry. Indeed, the realm of continuing education in which we operate plays a key role in innovating new educational structures and programs to truly and effectively provide the opportunities for equity and inclusion to which all of our universities claim allegiance. During my first month as Executive Director of our program, I went out to the local community and participated in a “Neighborhood Conversation” during which I learned firsthand that the local residents felt unwelcome and intimidated to join university programs and activities. In response, we have opened many of our enrichment programs to local residents at no charge.

Anyone who has seriously studied the history and contexts in which higher education unfolded in the U.S., understands that we are still operating within frameworks that were built for different times and different circumstances. As an industry, we have not yet been transformed by the same disruptive forces that have created significant change in so many other sectors of U.S. society. Issues of racial and economic inequality continue to impact the overall educational system in the United States, resulting in collegiate bodies that are nearly as segregated as they were in the earliest days of the Civil Rights movement. The pressure of rankings, selectivity, and faculty advancement have merely exacerbated a system that was initially created to cater to the needs of the elite. Higher education, by and large, vocally supports an agenda of diversity and inclusion, and I do believe faculty and administrators approach this issue with the best of intentions. Yet conventional academic divisions struggle to effect systemic change, bound as they are to structures hampered by inertia, budgetary constraints, and professional standards that offer little incentive to significantly move away from the status quo.

By the very nature of serving non-traditional students, continuing education as a field, and those of us that work in that realm, are well positioned to prod and poke our institutions to take some chances, pilot new models, and open up our doors to those students who most need the intellectual and institutional resources we can provide, but often also demand more appropriate

support systems and creative curricular structures. Urban institutions in particular have a unique opportunity (and I would argue an obligation) to use the tools of continuing education to advance the broader issues of overall community engagement and regional economic development. While creating lower cost programming can create all sorts of internal challenges on a university campus, especially when introducing alternative credentialing opportunities into the mix, I continue to advocate for experimenting in this direction. Notwithstanding the important work that goes on in the realm of scholarly research and conventional teaching on our campus, I personally view continuing education programming as a much more impactful arena for our communities, with direct engagement between employers, students of all ages, and the public sector. In continuing education, we often go where others are reluctant to tread.

In my own work, I have demanded that our program allocate both human and material resources to lowering barriers to access and promoting more diverse classrooms than would generally be found in other programs at CWRU. We engage in direct outreach to our local neighborhoods, those right on the border of campus, whose residents often only reluctantly (maybe reluctantly instead of grudgingly?) join us. We have created more welcoming pathways - even if we still struggle to get our neighbors to take those steps - and over time we have seen the impact on those individuals who take a chance with us, and by extension the positive impact on their communities.

Deans and other leaders in continuing education welcome the opportunity to further promote this agenda and use the many tools at our disposal to engage under-represented populations of all sorts in advancing their own education. By reaching out to the underserved and working with community leadership and grassroots advocates, we can represent the university's interests and the opportunities we offer directly to prospective students, potential employers, and advocates in the public sector. Continuing education divisions represent that rare piece of higher education that can both generate net positive revenue and expand the overall reach of the university to the most diverse pool of prospective students at the same time. We still need even more top university leadership to assert themselves aggressively supporting these priorities in actions as well as words, and when they give us the opportunity, continuing education leaders will happily lead the charge.