

Missed Opportunities

University of Southern California

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SCholars Program

The Scholar's Program at the University of Southern California (USC) is a grant-funded program that was designed in 2006 to serve first generation, low-income, community college transfer students. It acts as a critical tool of college access for historically disadvantaged populations, particularly African American and Latino. In its four-year run the program has had both major success and challenges. K.C. Mmeje, Program Director was part of the inauguration process of the program and has since seen the impact it has made on community college transfer students at USC. His honesty and modest respect for this particular population of students has been a key component of the programs achievements and has given a voice to students who are typically on the peripheral in terms of higher educational access.

“One-third of student on the USC campus are transfer students. Being able to provide a supportive college experience and environment for this particularly diverse population has been the goal and mission of the SCholars program from the get-go” (K. Mmeje, personal communication, February 12, 2010). With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to dissect salient themes related to diversity that were discussed when interviewing USC SCholar's Program Director, K.C. Mmeje.

Diversity Challenges

Program Director K.C. Mmeje identified various challenges to diversity within the SCholars program and USC. One of the major challenges outlined was the institutional neglect of the transfer student population within USC:

USC is an institution that primarily caters to traditionally aged college going students, it is a commonly held misconception that transfer students are not academically qualified to be at USC. The SCholars program aims at changing these misconception and challenging faculty and the administrations perception of our transfer student population (K. C. Mmeje, personal communication, February 12, 2010).

These forms of institutionally based biases make it difficult to sustain a transfer student population. It is therefore necessary to cultivate supportive services such as the SCholars program in order to work towards continually reframing higher educational access for this population of students. Tierney (1997) emphasizes on the notion of critical theory as a key component to understanding oppressive aspects of society. Tierney (1997) notes that in order to change and empower those who have been marginalized we must restructure how as a culture we identify and understand certain oppressed societies. This idea of critical theory applies to transfer students within the SCholars program. As an invisible population, at one of the leading institution in the world, transfer students are faced with multiple challenges that need to be addressed by in order for them to succeed. The Scholars program acts as a conduit to this success and needs to be valued as such within the institution. Being able to think critically about the academic, cultural, financial needs of community college transfer students is the main focus of the SCholars program. It has been able to successfully move student forward through the academic pipeline by encouraging and empowering students to not only transfer to selective undergraduate institutions but also to move on to professional and graduate programs (K. C. Mmeje, personal communication, February 12, 2010).

A second challenge delineated by the SCholars program director is funding. One of the major issues that the program is dealing with at the moment is finding a source of money to continue the program. Due to the SCholars program being grant-funded it has its limitations:

The grant will expire at the end of the 2010 school year. This creates a dilemma for the students within the program and also demonstrated how serious USC is as an institution about committing to this particular initiative. How do we continue a program that has no institutional investment? (K. C. Mmeje, personal communication, February 12, 2010).

Bensimon's (2005) notion of organizational learning acts as a key tool to reframing cognitive thinking of administrators and faculty while stressing the importance of achieving equitable

educational outcomes for diverse groups within postsecondary education. In order to achieve an equitable form of thinking it is important to deconstruct what is lacking within an institution and be critical of who is or is not gaining access to privileged forms of learning.

As an institution USC must work towards reframing and addressing the needs of its transfer student population and find ways to financially stabilize the SCholars program and make it an institutional initiative (K. C. Mmeje, personal communication, February 12, 2010). This will in effect act as a key component in maintaining its status as a forward thinking institution that addresses the diverse needs of students, particularly those that reflect the demographics that surround the Los Angeles, California community i.e. Latino and African American, first generation, low-income, students.

Reality of Diversity on the USC Campus

Finally, as a student affairs professional on the USC campus, K.C. Mmeje acknowledged the balkanization of students as part of the campus environment when he reported:

If you walk around the USC campus at noon and critically look at how students interact with one another, I think you'll begin to notice a missed opportunity. The campus itself is diverse but engagement in diversity is lacking. There is not enough cultural dialogue or institutional policy that ensures diversity among students (K. C. Mmeje, personal communication, February 12, 2010).

Pincus (2000) outlines individual, institutional, and structural discrimination as detrimental to diversity. These three forms of discrimination have affected not only the SCholar's program and its recipients but the university as well. If the program is not resurged in the upcoming school year, first-generation, low-income, African American and Latino transfer student will obliterate and the voice of this particular population of students will be silenced. Both Pincus (2000) and SCholars Program Director, K.C. Mmeje respond to these issues of inequity as an offset to confronting and reassessing the value that is placed on creating opportunities; opportunities

where students can learn from one another and create intercultural dialogue that not only demonstrates how they differ but also what they share in common (K. C. Mmeje, personal communication, February 12, 2010).

References

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