

Establishing a Diversity/Cultural Competency Advisory Council

Part 1: What's in it for my unit?

During the University's benchmarking and best practice visits to gather information about successful faculty and staff diversity initiatives, we learned that one of the hallmarks of embedding diversity, inclusiveness and cultural competence into an organization is the establishment of Diversity Councils. In an organization as large as the University of Rochester with a wide range of diverse departments, units, and services, the approaches to deepening our commitment to diversity are also varied. One size does not fit all. Underrepresented individuals in one department may not mirror that of another. Training programs regarding cultural competency may take a different direction from one unit to the next.

Diversity Councils should ensure that their diversity initiatives are in alignment with the unit's strategic goals. In addition, Diversity Councils help to improve teamwork and increase creativity and productivity when employees feel their opinions are valued.

Each unit is encouraged to start with an implementation plan. This includes a self-assessment, upper-level support and identification of action steps. Leadership involvement and commitment is critical. There are some things the planning committee might not be able to accomplish without buy-in from management, such as a unit-wide climate survey. A recent survey by Vault/INROADS (a diversity and cultural competence consultant firm) found that 88 percent of companies with Diversity Councils have the support of top management. Senior management needs to endorse the allocation of human and financial resources. Getting a process started, however, is a middle management function since those managers will be charged with ensuring that it is implemented.

Tips for departments and units that are contemplating launching a Diversity Advisory Council:

- Ensure that there is adequate representation across units and divisions within the department or program
- Make sure supervisors and managers understand the value of faculty and staff participation and the time commitment needed for meetings and events
- Encourage a variety of unit members to participate, whether they are part of an underrepresented group or not
- Strive to have a group made up of equal numbers of faculty, staff and management
- Designate an effective facilitator to lead meetings

The right mix of participants is essential. Units may wish to consider handpicking some prospective Council members. There are risks to handpicking Council members, but similar risks exist when Councils are made up entirely of volunteers. Handpicking gives your unit the ability to ensure representation for all areas within a department or division. You will find, however, that volunteers are often those with the passion and enthusiasm to see that the unit's goals are carried out.

A primary consideration for participation on a Council is a desire to be there. It is suggested that units invite those who are interested to submit a written explanation of why they want to serve. To eliminate bias, names could be removed before the written statements are reviewed by those charged with selecting participants. A final check should be made to ensure good representation by function and position level. At that point, if the group is not as diverse by race, gender, ethnicity, or other important identifier for your unit, others may be invited to join the Council.

While the structure of the Council is important, even more essential is a direct link to the unit's strategic outcomes. While the pursuit of diversity initiatives can be accurately described as moral, ethical or noble, the Diversity Council will remain on the sidelines if its initiatives are not related to unit objectives.

Realistic expectations are critical for those who are launching or re-energizing a Diversity Advisory Council. Unit leaders should not expect immediate success or change from a new group. It is important for the group to focus on sustainable unit initiatives rather than serving only as event calendar coordinators.

When they are effectively launched and supported, however, Diversity Councils offer the prospect of several key outcomes, including:

- More fluid communication throughout the unit
- Alignment of the unit's objectives with University-wide activities in this area
- Availability of a sounding board to review and address identified concerns
- A tangible recruitment and retention tool
- A resource for improving service delivery
- Increased employee and customer satisfaction

Units must be honest about why they wish to establish a Diversity Advisory Council and what outcomes are expected. Trust comes with time – people may have preconceived notions about why the group is being formed. Organizational intent is an important element.

If you would like assistance in assessing your unit's need to establish a Diversity Council, contact Stan Byrd, Human Resources Manager-Multicultural Affairs and Inclusion. He is the senior diversity officer and consultant for staff initiatives.