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Stages of Inclusion in Residence Halls

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Too often, multicultural efforts toward inclusion in college and university residence halls focus on surface-level programs on celebrating diversity. While these are important and contributive programs, they do not approach the ultimate goal of multiculturalism--to ensure that all members of a community are provided equitable safety, comfort, and voice. The following model, useful for Resident Assistants and others in resident life, describes stages of inclusion moving from exclusion to the ultimate goal: equity and social justice.

Exclusion-->(Heroes and Holidays Programming)-->Representational Inclusion Programming-->(Participatory Inclusion Programming)-->Equity and Social Justice

I. Exclusion

At the Exclusion stage, I give no thought or consideration to diversity or multiculturalism. As a result of this lack of consciousness (this is often unconscious--not based on a decision to do harm) day-to-day life as well as programs and events reflect dominant culture and my work style ultimately maintains the safety, comfort, and privilege of those people who enjoy the most safety, comfort, and privilege in the larger society: White people, men, heterosexual people, Christians, wealthy people, first language English speakers, able-bodied people, etc.

II. Heroes and Holidays Programming (a.k.a. Food, Fairs, & Fun)

At the Heroes and Holidays stage, I design individual programs to "celebrate" diversity. These programs are often built around holidays or celebratory months such as Black History Month or Women's History Month. I might decorate my hall with posters of famous people from particular groups or host programs that center around food, costumes, and other surface-level aspects of culture.

This is a positive step, moving from total exclusion to a stage at which difference is recognized or even appreciated. These types of programs often provide opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration. Still the Heroes and Holidays Stage is, when practiced by itself, problematic. Too often, special celebrations are used to justify the day-to-day exclusion of particular groups. Sometimes, these celebrations can be, in the long run, more alienating, as they further define particular groups and individuals as "the other." Additionally, this approach fails to recognize and address real issues and problems like racism, sexism, heterosexism/homophobia, and others.

III. Representational Inclusion Programming

At the Representational Inclusion stage, my programs transcend surface-level cultural celebrations to focus on serious issues including racism, sexism, and heterosexism/homophobia. These programs normally involve guest speakers or presenters who "represent" a particular group or share an experience that relates to a current issue of importance to a resident community. If a racial epithet is scribbled on an Asian American student's door, I might invite an Asian American expert on racism to speak to my residents about intergroup relations. If I hear homophobic remarks, I might invite a panel of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual students to talk to my residents. The primary aim of these programs is to address multicultural issues and tensions by providing information to my residents.

Again, this is a positive step, moving from surface-level programs to those that deal with real issues and concerns of students. Particularly if I am in a privileged group for some issues (a White person coordinating a program on race or a man coordinating a program on gender), I am sending a strong message that these are important issues and that I am an ally. However this approach often excludes the voices, stories, and real experiences of the people for whom I have created the program, despite the fact that these issues are directly

affecting my residents, as well as the overall community. So, while sexism is happening to people on my hall, I do not give my community an opportunity to work through the issue, instead bringing someone else in to describe the very thing that the students around me are already experiencing.

IV. Participatory Inclusion Programming

At the Participatory Inclusion Programming stage, programs are designed to engage the residents themselves in dialogues about the issues, concerns, prejudices, stereotypes, and oppressions that affect the community. I might respond to a racial epithet by facilitating a dialogue among my residents about race and racism. Program attendees would be encouraged to share their experiences around race and their perspectives about how it affects their residential community. I might form a small committee of students to help decide on hot topics. Overall, at this stage, multicultural programs are designed to fully engage the participants.

V. Equity and Social Justice

The Equity and Social Justice stage transcends all stages that focus solely on "programming." At this stage, my role in resident life begins with a determination to provide a safe, comfortable, equitable experience for ALL residents, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, (dis)ability, first language, gender, sexual orientation, or any other social or cultural identifier. I become proactive instead of reactive, recognizing that the prejudices and stereotypes that affect people's experiences in society are mirrored in my residence halls and working to minimize these from the beginning. I work to create an environment in which people in the community can dialogue about issues that emerge. I also work to understand how my perspectives, background, and biases affect the way I function in my role in resident life and my relationships with people.

* A community is only as inclusive as its most disenfranchised member experiences it to be.

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