



The Department Chair as Transformative Diversity Leader: Building Inclusive Learning Environments in Higher Education

Chun, Edna; and Evans, Alvin
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Book Review

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Edna Chun and Alvin Evans' work on the department chair and diversity fills a gap in the literature on academic leadership. They argue that the academic chair is the pivot for diversity in higher education, particularly as increasing numbers of minoritized students enter the academy. Student diversity contrasts with the overwhelming white maleness of academic administrators, including 90 percent of chairs. Nevertheless, chairs are poised to enhance both the student experience of diversity and diverse faculty diversity development.

The authors used an online survey and interviewed chairs across the nation to assess the current level of progress in diversity, to address barriers to diversity, to understand environmental factors that can promote or impede diversity, and to articulate strategies for developing diversity. They were particularly interested in talking with minoritized chairs and in the impact of diversity on student learning. By diversity, they mean race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexual orientation. Chun and Evans recognize that department chairs face many limitations in doing diversity work. Changing upper administrations, maintaining harmony in departments, and other issues take up much chair attention.

The work begins with an overview of inequality in America, arguing that the role of higher education is to address this social landscape. They examine the challenges in higher education itself, from the impact of MOOCs to globalization and how department and institutional politics can block chairs' diversity efforts. Serving students is key: Since minoritized students are at-risk for non-completion, campus climate, including diverse faculty and curriculum, can make a difference in those students' lives. They also argue, in chapter 6, that interactional diversity is

an essential dimension among high-impact college experiences for all student growth.

Chairs, who occupy a double role as administrator and faculty, span boundaries and are potential bridge-builders. As both buffers and connections between faculty and administration, skilled chairs have the capacity to reflect on and transform these boundaries to mobilize the various stakeholders towards action. Chairs report to deans (analyzed in chapter 4), and trust in that that relationship is crucial for developing diversity, though the “revolving door” of administration in some institutions poses problems.

The discussion of issues that minoritized chairs face and the voices of these persons is an important contribution of this book. These chairs are always proving their competence and may be taken less seriously than their white counterparts. A minority chair may be the only departmental voice for diversity. In terms of sexual orientation, some chairs are limited by institutions’ unwillingness to appoint or policies against appointment of LGBTQI chairs. Like minority faculty, minority chairs face lower student evaluations (see chapter 5), may be isolated and vulnerable, and are under great stress.

Another key contribution is strategies, offered by chairs and the authors. Each chapter ends with strategies a chair may implement to address diversity. The final chapters offer suggestions for developing diversity plans, including helpful examples, and additional strategies for overcoming limitations. The description of higher education today, the voices of the chairs, and the multiple strategies offered create a rich study, insightful *and* practical, for aiding chairs to become leaders for a diverse academy in a global context.

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