Teaching diversity in North American higher education master’s programs: curricula and rationales

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine North American master’s programs in higher education administration, leadership and student affairs; the extent to which these programs incorporate diversity coursework; and their reasons for doing so. Graduate programs must prepare practitioners who are able to work effectively with multiple groups of students, ameliorate persistence and graduation gaps, and create more socially just campuses.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an open-ended questionnaire and document analysis, the authors analyzed the extent to which and why these master’s programs incorporate courses and course material on diversity.

Findings – Exactly half of higher education leadership (50%) and a small majority of student affairs (52%) programs require some type of diversity course, while only 42% of higher education administration programs do so. Reported reasons for including such coursework include students’ demand for such courses, the centrality of diversity to university missions and standards in the field.

Research limitations/implications – Research on faculty perceptions regarding the need for diversity courses with a focus on interest convergence may be productive.

Practical implications – Program directors should ensure that coursework on diversity is required, and that faculty teaching these courses are comfortable discussing these topics to prepare students to work with diverse groups in multiple contexts.

Originality/value – This study uses multiple methods (document analysis, open-ended questionnaire of program directors) to analyze programs and program design intentions. The authors use the critical race theory framework’s tenet of interest convergence to understand program rationales.

Keywords Higher education and student affairs programs, Diversity, Critical race theory

Paper type Research paper

Recently, scholars have begun to investigate institutional histories of racism, and several universities have acknowledged their past histories of racism (Harper, 2012; Parry, 2017; Patton, 2016; Savas, 2014; Stein, 2018; White and Wilson, 2019). Additionally, Poon (2018) focused on the racist underpinnings of the student affairs field, including faculty who say they value diversity but consider it tangential to their program goals. Increased attention to these histories and perspectives raises questions about the extent to which master’s programs in higher education administration, leadership and student affairs are working to prepare practitioners who are cognizant of these underpinnings and able to address histories and practices that marginalize particular groups of students.

Preparing future professionals to understand historical issues and address current practices is often accomplished through curricula focused on student diversity (Freeman, 2012; Linder et al., 2015; Ortiz et al., 2015; Parker and Shapiro, 1992). Yet, there is little information on the extent to which master’s programs in higher education address diversity issues within their programs. Graduates of master’s programs in higher education typically work in student affairs divisions, have substantial student contact and may be responsible for incorporating and promoting diversity efforts on campuses (Budde-Sung, 2011; Bukowski, 2015). Yet, until recently, there was little emphasis on diversity in master’s
Higher education master’s programs must prepare graduates who are well versed in working with diverse students to improve college experiences and outcomes for students (Schwartz and Steward, 2017). While some research on diversity has focused on student affairs programs (Flowers, 2003; Gayles and Kelly, 2007; Linder et al., 2015), less is known about the extent to which other types of master’s level higher education programs prepare professionals who are knowledgeable about and committed to diversity and why they do so. Thus, research is needed to understand how programs prepare students to work effectively with diverse groups, specifically on understanding the extent to which master’s level higher education programs incorporate diversity coursework and the reasons for doing so.

Using document analysis, we analyzed 220 higher education administration, leadership and student affairs master’s programs across North America, examining which programs incorporate information or courses on diversity. We also sent an open-ended questionnaire to higher education program directors to understand the rationale for requiring or not requiring diversity courses. Specifically, the research question guiding this study is: To what extent and why do master’s of higher education programs include diversity courses?

Literature review
Master’s of higher education programs educate professionals for administration and student affairs in diverse learning environments with diverse students (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Freeman, 2012; Herdlein et al., 2010, 2013; Linder et al., 2015; Schwartz and Steward, 2017). The espoused values of most higher education programs include a commitment to diversity, multicultural competence and inclusion (Pope et al., 2019). Program curricula should then reflect a focus on diversity (Budde-Sung, 2011; Linder et al., 2015). However, higher education graduate programs historically have lacked diversity within their curriculum, internships and faculty identities (Freeman, 2012; Ortiz et al., 2015; Parker and Shapiro, 1992).

The Council for the Advancement of Higher Education Programs (CAHEP) established guidelines for master’s level higher education administration and leadership programs (Bush et al., 2010). Specifically, these guidelines focus on the concept of “multiculturalism” as one of many content areas recommended in the curriculum (Bush et al., 2010, p. 2). The creation of these guidelines illustrates the importance of valuing diverse cultures in higher education master’s level programs, and programs should instill a commitment to diversity, as this is critical in preparing effective practitioners (Linder et al., 2015; Mueller and Pope, 2001; Poon, 2018; Robbins, 2016). One approach is through diversity courses or other types of courses focused on inclusion and equity (Gayles and Kelly, 2007; Mueller and Pope, 2001; Talbot, 1996; Wilson et al., 2016).

As stated earlier, historically, higher education programs rarely dealt with issues of race, gender, social class or ethnicity (Parker and Shapiro, 1992), and one consequence of this absence may be graduates who are lacking important preparation for professional practice. A lack of preparation in master’s higher education programs leads to a high attrition rate among new professionals (Renn and Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006). Recently, there has been a call for higher education programs to meet the changing needs of diverse populations in these programs and on college campuses (Freeman, 2012). However, little research has focused on program diversity requirements or the extent to which programs include curricula on these issues and why.

Theoretical framework
We utilized the critical race theory (CRT) as our theoretical perspective. The CRT has been used extensively in higher education as a theoretical framework to analyze the effects of racial inequities, including student and faculty experiences, as well as injustice enshrined in
curriculum, instruction and policies as a result of power differentials (Harper, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015; Savas, 2014; Yosso, 2005). Throughout US history, racism has been utilized to further political and economic interests, shaping institutional norms (Omi and Winant, 2020). CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life; expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy; challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law; insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of minoritized people; is interdisciplinary; views the curriculum as designed to reproduce white supremacy; and works toward eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1998). To further the goal of eliminating racial oppression, the CRT examines interest convergence; CRT scholars believe that progress toward equity will occur when the interests of white people converge with the interests of minoritized populations (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). We specifically use interest convergence as an analytic lens because programs and faculty who are less inclined to disrupt a curriculum steeped in whiteness may shift their viewpoint if they believe their students will be more likely to enroll, persist and be hired when they understand diversity and are able to advocate for students. Thus, their interest in the success of their students and programs may converge with the interest of individuals seeking a more inclusive and equitable society.

**Methodology**

To examine the extent to which master’s programs in higher education include diversity course requirements and the rationales for the requirements, we use a qualitative case study approach. Qualitative research is contextual and constructivist, in that researchers seek to understand the study focus from the perspective of the participants, which resonates with our use of the CRT (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Merriam, 1985; Rossman and Rallis, 2017). A qualitative case study has specific boundaries and is a clearly defined object or group of objects, such as a program or group of programs, that researchers seek to understand rather than from which to generalize (Merriam, 1985; Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015). A case study research typically includes multiple forms of data to inform the understanding of the case (Merriam, 1985; Rossman and Rallis, 2017; Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015), which for this study includes document analysis and an open-ended questionnaire of program directors, and it is less common to see complex statistical analyses in educational case study designs (Merriam, 1985). We define the case as master’s higher education programs listed in the CAHEP directory (Merriam, 1985; Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015) and seek to understand the extent to which diversity courses are program requirements and the extent to which interest convergence explains the decisions to require or not require such courses (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). For this study, we asked “To what extent and why do master’s of higher education programs include diversity courses?” to better understand whether graduates are being exposed to issues of diversity to prepare them for the workplace.

We utilized data collection strategies of document analysis and an open-ended questionnaire of program directors (Bowen, 2009; Patton, 2002), both of which are consistent with our qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1985; Rossman and Rallis, 2017; Stake, 1995). We began with the higher education program directory (henceforth directory), which is publicly available on the CAHEP section of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) website. We chose this directory because it is publicly available and specifically includes higher education administration and leadership programs as well as student affairs programs, whereas other directories, such as ACPA or NASPA, include only student affairs programs. We then searched program websites to determine whether
institutions had an MA, MAEd, MEd, MS or MSEd in higher education administration, higher education leadership or student affairs, and to determine whether programs had course requirements focused on diversity, offered electives on diversity or did not offer coursework related to diversity.

Data collection
We reviewed 220 websites in the USA and Canada listed in the directory, of which 197 had master’s level programs in higher education administration, higher education leadership or student affairs. These programs included a variety of program names such as higher education, higher education administration, student affairs, higher and postsecondary education, higher education leadership, adult and higher education, postsecondary education, student development and college student personnel services, among others. Some of the institutions offered multiple degree concentrations; in these cases, each concentration was included in its respective category of higher education administration \( (n = 72) \), leadership \( (n = 69) \) or student affairs \( (n = 74) \) for a total of 215 programs reviewed. Then, for each program, we examined the curricula or course list on their websites to determine whether a diversity course was required for the degree, offered as an elective or not offered.

Next, we issued an open-ended questionnaire to directors of these programs. The questionnaire asked program directors to provide a rationale for including or not including diversity courses in each of their programs. After pretesting the instrument in Qualtrics, the questionnaire was sent to the 220 program directors throughout the USA and Canada, as listed in the CAHEP directory, was open for two weeks and two reminders were sent. The overall response rate to the questionnaire was 19%, which is similar to other studies using online questionnaires (Flowers, 2003; Herdlein et al., 2010). Several open-ended responses simply restated whether or not a course was required or stated there was not a rationale, and these were not included in the analysis, resulting in a total of 30 responses that were analyzed.

Data analysis
Document analysis. As we reviewed websites, if a course title included one of the following words: diversity, multicultural, race, equity or social justice, we assumed the course focused on this content and met our criteria for inclusion. If course titles did not include the words specifically, but suggested the course could include such a focus (e.g. social and cultural issues in higher education), we examined the course description to determine whether the course content included a focus on diversity. Because most curricula requirements were clearly listed on program websites, researchers worked independently following the inclusion criteria stated above and conducted peer debriefing when course descriptions were vague or unclear to come to agreement as to whether the course focused on diversity (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). In total, 147 course titles and/or descriptions met our parameters for a diversity course. Document analysis data from the websites were analyzed descriptively, and we report the percentage and mean of required courses, elective courses and lack of either required or elective courses by program type as a means of describing the case. Describing the case using percentages is appropriate within a qualitative study because they summarize the data and enable a search for patterns and meaning (Farrell and Marsh, 2016; Hannah and Lautsch, 2011; Merriam, 1985). Moreover, qualitative case studies typically do not rely on complex quantitative analysis (Merriam, 1985).

Questionnaire analysis. The 30 open-ended questionnaire responses were coded thematically, resulting in 34 statements that spoke to five themes. We then analyzed the themes to examine the extent to which they aligned with interest convergence.
(Braun and Clarke, 2006; Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). To ensure interrater reliability, we began coding individually and then met to discuss our initial individual analysis. We agreed on the themes and then each coded individually for the agreed-upon themes and met again to resolve any differences in coding, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of our data (Saldana, 2016). We then carefully examined each theme for its alignment with interest convergence (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). As delineated in the quotes below, 11 open-ended responses included a rationale that focused on student need or demand for diversity, eight included a rationale focused on the centrality of diversity to higher education and four included a rationale focused on the fact that such content was required by standards. Quotes that address these themes are presented below in findings. Five responses indicated faculty valued the content as a rationale, such as the one who wrote that requiring these courses “corresponds to the values of our faculty.” Seven responses included a rationale that noted the content was related to the institutional mission. One wrote that diversity courses were “connected to the mission of our institution.” We considered the responses that focused on student need and demand, norms of the discipline and program standard requirements to be indicative of interest convergence because respondents’ interest in the success of their students or their programs converged with student need and demand, the disciplinary field norms or external standards (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). The interest of faculty or the missions of the institutions were not considered interest convergence because interest in requiring the courses was not predicated on another entity’s interest, and thus, there was no convergence.

Findings

First, we present data from our document analysis of program websites and then present the open-ended findings. As seen in Table 1, website document analysis of 215 programs suggests that about half (48%) required a course in diversity. In total, 29% offered an elective diversity course, although there is no requirement to take a diversity elective, and thus, students may be getting some content in this area or they may not. Finally, 23% of the institutions do not require diversity courses nor offer a diversity elective in their programs. Table 1 further breaks down the results by the area of study. Higher education leadership programs were most likely to require a diversity course, while higher education administration programs were the least likely to require a course and also had the highest percentage of programs that offered no diversity coursework (Table 1).

Among the open-ended responses that described the rationales for diversity course requirements, three themes emerged among the responses that spoke to interest convergence: (1) diversity course offerings are driven by the needs or desires of students; (2) diversity or social justice is central to the field of higher education; and (3) diversity courses are required/offered to adhere to external competencies, standards and norms. As noted above, we

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<th>Requires a diversity course</th>
<th>Offers an elective course in diversity</th>
<th>Does not offer a diversity course</th>
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<td>HE administration</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>HE leadership</td>
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<td>28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student affairs</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>27%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>72</td>
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Note(s): N = 215
consider these to be indicative of interest convergence because there is demand from students, normative demands within the field or accreditation demands (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Freeman, 2012; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015).

Student-driven needs
The first major theme that emerged from program directors’ responses suggested diversity course offerings were driven by student needs or requests to prepare them to be successful in the workforce. For example, one participant wrote, “addressing both diversity and social justice is central to [students’] effective practice.” Another responded, “our program capitalizes in the diversity of [our] student population.” One respondent had students who “wanted [the diversity course] to be required, not just available or recommended.” One participant indicated that diversity was a “strategic foci” for the development of future university leaders. Another communicated a sense of urgency, responding, “This content is a must . . . or we are not preparing our future leaders responsibly.” Finally, one participant responded, “Students need to understand how to work with people who do not look like themselves.”

Higher education field norms
The second theme that emerged highlights diversity course requirements that align with norms within the field of higher education. These statements tended to refer to diversity issues more broadly, noting, as one participant did, that such issues “are prevalent in higher education.” Another participant indicated that “diversity and social justice issues are core to the work of higher education and must be a focus in every area.” A third wrote, “having a required diversity course shows our values . . . as a field.” One program director wrote: “We feel [diversity education] is important to the core of access to higher education.” Finally, one explained that diversity work “lies at the heart of what we do.”

Accreditation and standards
Finally, the third dominant theme highlights the requirement or offering of diversity courses as a way to meet external demands, requirements or standards. Several respondents noted they modeled their program on other programs, or that external reviewers or standards required such courses. One responded, “after [a] recent external program review, we are now discussing and . . . making it a required course.” Similarly, another participant explained that “research into other programs at the founding of this program” was a reason for their diversity course. One program director responded that diversity content “has always been a part of the curriculum due to our alignment with . . . [external]competencies.” Another wrote that professional association, “competencies form [the] foundation of curriculum.”

Discussion
As data in this study illustrate, higher education master’s programs, regardless of concentration type, lack the required diversity coursework. The highest percentage of required courses in a specific concentration was 52% of leadership-focused programs that required such coursework. The overall mean of all program types was just under a majority at 48%. While an additional 29% offered diversity course electives, these courses are not required, and so students may or may not enroll in them and thus may be prepared or may not be. To ensure the professional preparation of graduates, we may want to consider an approach that focuses on interest convergence (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015), as suggested by the open-ended responses. It is in the interest of
the programs to prepare graduates in diversity-related content to address student requests as well as to have well-prepared graduates who can address the demands of the profession (Budde-Sung, 2011; Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein et al., 2010, 2013; Linder et al., 2015). Graduates need to be well prepared to be competitive for positions and to be successful as new professionals (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein et al., 2010, 2013; Kretovics, 2002). Moreover, it is also in the interest of programs to incorporate the normative demands of the field to stay competitive (Freeman, 2012). While it has been documented that the majority of students in these programs are white women who may not have insight into their own racial identity (Linder et al., 2015; Mueller and Pope, 2001; Robbins, 2016; Taub and McEwen, 2006), it is still in these students’ interest to be well prepared for the job market. Thus, this alignment of students’ interests in professional advancement and the advancement of the interests of minoritized populations demonstrates interest convergence, and are the conditions under which CRT scholars believe that progress toward equity will occur (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). Thus, students may advocate for more diversity-related content or diversity courses, and they may specifically choose programs with such courses or programmatic foci (Budde-Sung, 2011). This type of self-advocacy could be indicative of interest convergence (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). Additionally, a program should produce well-prepared graduates to remain current with normative expectations and adhere to professional standards (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein et al., 2010, 2013; Kretovics, 2002). Since the majority of faculty members, and thus program directors, are white, these professional norms and standards regarding incorporating diversity content represent the convergence of their interests and the advancement of minoritized populations’ interests (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015).

Implications
Based on the results of the study, program directors have an interest in incorporating diversity content in courses or adding courses devoted to diversity to meet student demand, to ensure that their graduates are well prepared and able to secure positions after graduation and to ensure the success of their programs (Budde-Sung, 2011; Gayles and Kelly, 2007; Ortiz et al., 2015, Schwartz and Steward, 2017), indicative of interest convergence (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). Additional implications for program directors include ensuring that faculty teaching these courses are comfortable discussing these topics to prepare students to work with diverse groups in multiple contexts (Bukowski, 2015). Faculty can incorporate service learning courses or projects to engage with the interest of diverse student populations (Parker and Shapiro, 1992). Professional development for addressing diversity content may be helpful for faculty and increase their comfort levels, especially given the current political climate. Further, we recommend that program directors and students look for opportunities on campus for experiencing diversity, e.g. faculty could make assignments for their courses that include attending diverse events on campus. Another recommendation is partnering with diverse campus organizations in preparing and delivering course content to provide students with diversity content and professional preparation and could represent interest convergence (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015).

However, it is also clear from previous research that faculty are often unprepared to address or resist addressing diversity, resulting in an inability to manage issues of equity and diversity (Linder et al., 2015). Thus, future research should examine faculty perceptions of the need for diversity courses with a focus on interest convergence (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). Since the majority of programs do not require diversity courses, additional research is needed on how program directors make such decisions, since clearly not all students are able to learn about such
knowledge and content. Further, additional research should focus on the effectiveness of diversity courses and the extent to which they prepare graduates for their professional positions.

Limitations
This study has several limitations. First, this analysis is limited to programs listed in the CAHEP directory and therefore does not include every possible program. Similarly, this study relies on document analysis to determine whether programs require diversity courses, offer them as electives or do not offer them; the questionnaire did not ask program directors to confirm the website findings. In addition, questionnaire data may highlight more socially favorable responses, as program directors may not be willing to discuss why diversity courses are not in their curricula, especially considering that various program standards include a diversity competency. Finally, this study does not evaluate the content of various diversity courses to understand what aspects of diversity the courses address, nor does it evaluate the quality of the teaching of such courses, which can make a profound difference for students.

Conclusion
Overall, this study has shown that a majority of programs do not require a course focused on diversity. Thus, there is work to be done in encouraging master’s programs in higher education to include coursework and programmatic foci on diversity, inclusivity and equity. Open-ended questionnaire responses provided insight into how student demand, field norms or standard requirements for such knowledge and skills are main factors for including these courses in programs. These are examples of interest convergence in which CRT scholars believe progress in creating a more just society will occur when the interests of white people coincide with the interests of minoritized populations (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Harper, 2009; McCoy and Rodericks, 2015). While the data indicate almost half of all programs recognize the importance of diversity in program curricula, there remains a need for a greater focus. We must ensure that all of our programs include diversity course content so that our graduates are well prepared for the demands of the profession. This is particularly important in the current context, as higher education institutions and the student affairs profession grapple with their own racist histories (Harper, 2012; Parry, 2017; Patton, 2016; Poon, 2018; Savas, 2014; Stein, 2018; White and Wilson, 2019).

References


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