



Setting the Diversity Agenda, Achieving Goals

BY KEVIN P. REILLY

Most experts agree that in the coming decades millions more Americans must attain a college credential if we are to remain competitive in the global marketplace. Given our nation's evolving demographic makeup, many more of these educated American workers will come from diverse backgrounds and populations not well represented on college campuses today.

Colleges and universities have long embraced diversity as a matter of social justice and fairness. That moral imperative remains, but we must also recognize another growing impetus for diversity in higher education: our nation's economic health.

The significant role of governing boards in setting the agenda on such grand themes cannot be overlooked or underestimated. In the University of Wisconsin System, the Board of Regents has embraced the need for diversity on our campuses and been a key driver of efforts to diversify our student body and our workforce.

As anyone familiar with Wisconsin knows, our state is not as ethnically diverse as many others. But Wisconsin's relative homogeneity cannot be an excuse for a lack of progress, or lack of effort, in encouraging campus populations that better reflect the nation's overall diversity. Tackling such hurdles and translating ideals into practice demand strong, clear leadership. The UW System regents called for long-range diversity plans with clear goals and timelines, to close the achievement and retention gaps between white students and students of color. In 1988, we became the first university system in the country to adopt a long-range plan to diversify the system's institutions. Ten years later, the board called for and approved a second 10-year plan to further advance and make operational the system's commitment to diversity.

The regents insisted as well that we address campus climate issues for students and employees. The regents also saw a role for the university in increasing awareness of diversity challenges along the K-12 pipeline.

As the saying goes, anything worth doing is worth measuring. Our diversity-related efforts include rigorous self-assessment. When it became apparent

midway through the second plan that results were falling short of expectations, the regents refused to accept the limited progress and boldly issued specific additional recommendations.

The results are visible throughout the system. Eleven UW institutions now participate in the Equity Scorecard, a self-assessment process to improve institutional accountability for achieving equity in educational outcomes. A multi-campus climate-appraisal project is yielding compelling data that institutions are using to create more-inclusive learning environments. A diversity awards program has been established. Progress on diversity is factored into performance evaluations and salary adjustments for the system's top executives. I also established a diversity council with members from the business, government, and non-profit sectors to learn about their best practices.

We have made measurable progress. Since 1998, enrollment of undergraduates of color in the system has risen from 11,967 to 18,021, a 51-percent increase. Comparing white students to students of color, the gap in retention rates fell from 7.2 percent to 4.7 percent. The difference in graduation rates has narrowed by 2 percentage points.

Further, in the system's workforce, the number of employees of color has increased in every category, growing from 8.6 to 12.2 percent of the total.

Clearly, we need to do more. But we are moving in the right direction. Equally important, we are measuring and reporting that progress—or lack of progress—in a way that keeps diversity at the forefront of leadership decisions and public discourse.

Students, parents, taxpayers, donors, governors, and legislators all want a prosperous, vibrant future. Colleges and universities need to embrace that shared desire, and better explain how progress for everyone depends on our success at educating and graduating more students from traditionally underserved backgrounds. As advocates of the public interest, our boards can lead that charge.

Kevin P. Reilly is president of the University of Wisconsin System (kreilly@uwsa.edu).

Colleges and universities need to better explain how progress for everyone depends on our success at educating and graduating more students from traditionally underserved backgrounds.