

## SPECIAL REPORTS

# Demand Surges for Diversity Consultants

But what do colleges get from them?

By Peter Schmidt | MAY 15, 2016



Billie Weiss

Dialogues on Diversity, a company that offers diversity training to about 100 colleges a year, stages theatrical sessions to increase awareness of difficult topics. Larry Jay Tish, one of the founders, enacts "The Black-Jew Dialogues," a comedy on cross-cultural differences.

To promote diversity, many colleges turn to an outsider — a consultant who offers to help them remedy inequities or reduce discrimination.

The Boston University Medical Campus, for example, recently hired Cook Ross, an international consulting firm, to help it recruit students and faculty members who better reflect the urban community served by its hospital. Howard J. Ross, a founding partner of the firm, led three days of workshops focused on making administrators and faculty members more aware of any unconscious biases they might have. In one

exercise, they reviewed fictitious job applicants and learned how much their willingness to offer an interview was shaped by an applicant's name, gender, and photo.

Although colleges have been using diversity consultants for decades, demand for such services has surged in the past year, as a wave of student protests over racial or gender discrimination has generated awareness of how unwelcoming many colleges remain for much of society.

"What we have been doing for the last 20 years hasn't worked," says Emelia J. Benjamin, the medical campus's assistant provost for faculty development. By hiring Cook Ross, she says, officials there hoped "to really shift the culture," with the goal of having a much more diverse faculty and student body five or 10 years from now.

Other colleges hire diversity consultants not to plant seeds, but to put out fires. Last fall's turmoil over race relations at the University of Missouri and Claremont McKenna College led both institutions to

ask current or former diversity officers from other colleges to help them deal with students' demands. Claremont asked Mariana M. Cruz, a former director of the Multicultural Resource Center at Amherst College, who has since opened her own diversity consulting business, to set up such a center on its campus in response to protesters. She says she is optimistic about her fledgling firm's prospects, given the pressure on colleges to adopt policies and programs "grounded in student advocacy and students' requests."

Campuses that have maintained calm are looking for consultants to help them keep things that way. EAB, a consulting firm that conducts best-practices research for colleges, lists bias prevention, diversity promotion, and the handling of student protests among the top issues it has been asked to study this year. Colleges "want to get out in front of these issues," says Mauricio Velásquez, president of the Diversity Training Group, a Virginia firm that counts colleges among its clients. He predicted that demand for such services will grow in response to the animosities being laid bare in the current presidential campaign. "Trump has been fantastic for my business," he says.

Diversity consultants offer colleges not just specialized expertise, but also the voice of a detached third party whose recommendations are likely to be received with less skepticism than those of administrators on the defensive. "Everything is political — let's be honest. Every decision you make impacts people," says Archie W. Ervin, chief diversity officer at Georgia Institute of Technology and president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, or Nadohe.

Like many administrators who hold similar positions, Mr. Ervin serves as a diversity consultant to other colleges. Because he offers up recommendations both to "people who understand what you are doing, and people who don't," he says, "you want to have a high degree of objectivity assigned to the work you are doing."

At Claremont McKenna, where faculty participation in diversity-related workshops is voluntary, "the people who need the training most don't come," says Frederick R. Lynch, associate professor of government there. Mr. Lynch is the author of *The Diversity Machine: The Drive to Change the 'White Male Workplace,'* a 1997 book critical of the diversity-consulting industry. He says colleges hire such consultants mainly for the public-relations value, "as a means of showing you are doing something."

## Who Sets a College's Diversity Agenda?



True diversity remains a struggle for many colleges. This **special report** looks at who actually sets a college's diversity agenda, and what makes that agenda flourish or flop. These questions have taken on a special urgency as race-related protests have erupted on many campuses and as the nation's population grows more diverse.

*Chronicle* subscribers and site-license holders get access to the full Diversity report. Not yet a subscriber? **Subscribe today.**

Consultants focused on diversity differ greatly in how they operate, a reflection of disagreements over strategy. Colleges lack an easy way to measure such consultants' impact, and the effectiveness of one of their most common services — diversity training — remains in dispute. Although the diversity-officers group has adopted professional standards for its members, there are no commonly accepted standards for the consultants who advise them.



Billie Weiss

Ron Jones and Mr. Tish, founders of Dialogues on Diversity, play women who find a connection in a performance at Goucher College.

"People need to do due diligence in terms of who they invite onto their campus," says Mr. Ervin, president of the group, which is considering whether to develop, for referral purposes, a list of member diversity officers who provide consulting services. The quality of consultants' work "can make or break" colleges' efforts to promote diversity or inclusion, he says.

Mr. Ervin says evaluations of policies, practices, and programs account for the largest share of consultants' work at

colleges — about 40 percent. The rest consists of education and training, research to help identify and eliminate bias in personnel or admission decisions, and campus-climate assessments, in which consultants examine the experiences of women or minority groups. Costs range from a few thousand dollars for a one-day workshop to \$50,000 or more for a climate assessment in which a team of researchers spends weeks or months studying the institution.

Cook Ross, the firm hired by Boston University Medical Campus, provided an array of services, including training and strategic-planning advice, to more than two dozen colleges last year. It encourages clients to adopt sophisticated metrics to measure their progress, tracking, for example, not just how many minority members apply for their open faculty positions, but how many end up being hired or remain on the job after a period of time. Using such measures "allows them to focus on where the breakdown is occurring, rather than throwing stuff on the wall and seeing what sticks," Mr. Ross says.

Dialogues on Diversity, a Cambridge, Mass., company that works with about 100 colleges a year, offers diversity training and specializes in staging highly theatrical sessions. "We try to bring humor and wit and light to topics that are often rife with heat and tension and awkwardness," says Ron Jones, the company's executive director. When the consultants visited the University of Michigan's School of Information last month, they used an old card game for an activity that conveyed how it feels to be on the receiving end of bias. Each of the school's staff members was instructed to hold a playing card against his or her forehead so that its rank was visible to everyone but the holder. Then the players were asked to respond to one another based on the value of a person's card, giving deference, for example, to someone holding a face card.

"People are still thinking about it and talking about it," says Judy Lawson, the school's assistant dean for academic and student affairs. She says it is now up to people there to make what they learned "part of the fabric of the institution."

Rankin & Associates Consulting, a Pennsylvania firm, focuses on conducting climate assessments for higher-education institutions and has a long list of college administrators on its staff. It examines the persistence rates of various minority student populations, the promotion rates of different subsets of the faculty, and staff members' perceptions of how valued they are, and then guides people on campus in fashioning ways to make improvements in such areas. Its president, Susan Rankin, an associate professor of education and senior research associate at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Pennsylvania State University, says she prefers to work on campuses that are not experiencing strife, because "it is best to try to do an assessment when you are not reacting to something."

Hackman Consulting Group, which works with about six to 12 colleges a year, resists the label "diversity consultant," preferring instead to characterize itself as focused on promoting equity. Heather W. Hackman, its president, dismisses short-term training programs as ineffective and works exclusively under long-term contracts. She analyzes how bias affects clients' decisions on hiring, promotion, and the distribution of resources, and then works her way down through the organization's ranks. She tries to get people to look at the world and their jobs in ways that make their institution "more accessible to a broader range of people," she says.

Ms. Hackman "really was an important catalyst," says Janet Handler, provost of Mount Mercy University, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where the consultant tailored workshops to various constituencies on campus throughout the 2014-15 academic year. The university has since established a steering committee and annual summer retreats to help it continue to follow Ms. Hackman's guidance. Says Ms. Handler: "We continue to see her influence here."

*Peter Schmidt writes about affirmative action, academic labor, and issues related to academic freedom. Contact him at [peter.schmidt@chronicle.com](mailto:peter.schmidt@chronicle.com).*

*This article is part of:*

Diversity in Academe: Who Sets a College's Diversity Agenda?

*A version of this article appeared in the May 20, 2016 issue.*

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037

Copyright © 2016 The Chronicle of Higher Education