

WHAT WORKS? A CULTURE CHANGE

A clear-eyed look at four diversity strategies shows there can be no shortcuts.

By Elizabeth Holloway

ASEE's Year of Action on Diversity is meant to spur us all into conversations and actions that will improve the inclusion of groups underrepresented in engineering. Most of us want to do the right thing, want to support and encourage all people's inclusion and success in engineering, but many of us struggle with knowing what actions we personally can take that will contribute positively to diversity. An innovative framework developed at the Simmons School of Management for promoting equity in organizations can help guide our thinking about ways to achieve equitable, inclusive learning environments. Applying these strategies to the classroom allows us consider classroom policies, behavior, and requirements in a place where we most often interact with students. However, each has drawbacks, as is explained below. In the end, only a strategy aimed at changing the culture is likely to succeed.

Equip the Underrepresented Group – This strategy assumes a deficiency in certain knowledge, experiences, or skills needed to take advantage of opportunities. It prompts us to think about what supplementary training and experiences can be put in place to help an underrepresented group be more successful. In the classroom, for example, we may assume that all women need additional skills in spatial visualization, or that no women know how to use the equipment in the machine shop, and so create interventions and experiences to supplement the deficiency. These experiences can help individuals from the underrepresented group be successful, but if they are offered only to those students, they can carry a stigma. Most troubling is the perception that if an individual does not succeed after participation in these interventions, it is his or her fault. However, there are times when these types of strategies are needed, particularly in situations where we are not able to change the culture that favors the majority population for success.

Create Equal Opportunities – The assumption here is that differences in group achievements or outcomes can be explained by discrimination or biases that result in unequal opportunities. To compensate, we try to “create equal opportunities.” For example, we know that when students are working on teams, sometimes the women end up in support roles, such as organizing or note-taking, and don't always get a chance to contribute to team leadership or technical project development. So we put into place a policy that team roles need to rotate or that there must be two women assigned to a team, or we purposefully put women into leadership roles. There are times that these types of strategies are needed to ensure greater equity, because we know that biases do exist. But they can create resentment, from both the majority and underrepresented groups. They are, in essence, a Band-Aid.

Celebrate Differences – In the classroom, we might make a special point of talking about the contributions of those from underrepresented groups to the field or what they can bring to a team environment; such as, for women, better collaboration and teaming skills. This approach does help promote understanding and illustrates the added value provided by underrepresented groups, but it also assumes that everyone in a particular group shares the same experiences and strengths. Thus, it reinforces the very stereotypes that have exacerbated the group's exclusion.

Change the Culture – Guided by a belief that all students in a classroom can succeed, we set up an environment that facilitates students' learning in a way that promotes universal success. We might, for instance, emphasize the socio-cultural aspects of the course material, to stress thriving instead of merely surviving. This approach will almost certainly drive our teaching pedagogies to be more learner-centered, using and relying

on teamwork, collaboration, active learning, and inclusive examples to ensure that each student connects to and masters the material. Difference, from this perspective, is seen as valuable and necessary in making us all better. Results show that this approach is the only one that has a hope of making significant, sustainable change. The drawback? It's hard work, very hard work. But when have engineers ever backed away from a challenge? Let's all work together to make this type of change happen, so that all of our students, regardless of their areas of difference, can be successful.

Elizabeth Holloway is assistant dean of engineering for undergraduate education and director of the Women in Engineering Program at Purdue University.