

# **TWO PROGRAMS THAT TRANSFORM STUDENTS FOR PROFESSIONAL WORKFORCE DIVERSITY READINESS**

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## **A MODELING PRESENTATION**

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## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Workforce diversity learning in the Academy is scant. If workforce diversity learning conversations do occur, the discussions are embedded in courses where students are not required to put their learning into practice. In an attempt to fill this void, two programs of impact – Diverse Student Scholars and Diverse Voices Conference – allow students to develop professional readiness skills and core workforce diversity competencies. These programs enable students to transform their understanding of others from different identities and of workforce diversity as well as to be exposed to the wide variety of career fields that encompass workforce diversity. Both programs were founded by faculty who actively research on the topic of workforce diversity, and both programs place students at the center of their own learning.

Diverse Student Scholars (DSS) is a robust predominantly undergraduate research program in its 9<sup>th</sup> year (Sims, Shuff, Lai, Lim, Neese, & Sims, in press). Dr. Jeanetta D. Sims founded the program which is housed at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) and has been supported through several university sources. The program originated from Sims' self-talk (Sims, 2011) and personal values of linking faculty engagement efforts to UCO's institutional mission with emphasis on research and the involvement of underrepresented groups in the Academy (see Sims et al., in press). DSS began with the involvement of just a single student who enrolled in a Fall 2007 research independent study and has grown to engage more than 50 students who have represented numerous aspects of human diversity (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, sex, etc.). Together, the students with faculty mentorship have accomplished more than 70 co-authored research presentations and more than 10 publications with two research manuscripts earning conference top paper awards at the National Communication Association and Marketing Management Association, respectively.

Sims developed the DSS program to have a three-fold mission which is: (1) to engage students in the research pipeline process of scholarly inquiry; (2) to develop and enhance students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills related to research and professional career preparation; and (3) to cultivate students' abilities at interacting and working with people from different identities. The first mission area emphasizes the central focus of research engagement and scholarly curiosity. The second mission area focuses on the types of effects students should experience from program involvement. And, the third mission area directly links the DSS program and advancing student learning in the area of workforce diversity. Students explore topics related to workforce diversity, and they work alongside others from different self-identities. And, some students work alongside a faculty mentor from a different gender and/or racio-ethnic identity. Thus, DSS program students experience heterogeneity in working relationships beyond the classroom but still in the space of the educational environment.

The Diverse Voices Conference (DVC) is a supportive forum for students, faculty, professionals and community members hosted at Oakland University (OU) (Scott, in press). Dr. Chaunda L. Scott founded the program in 1998 after securing a small grant from the then Diamler Chrysler Foundation to

fund this conference. While teaching a workforce diversity course, Scott began to notice that critical real world human diversity topics such as racism, discrimination, sexism, ageism, classism, and homophobia were being candidly discussed on world news programs on television and in the newspaper, but scarcely discussed, if at all in workforce diversity higher education focused textbooks. Because of the complex nature of many real world diversity and workforce diversity social issues such as the ones mentioned above, she realized that her students desperately needed a space on campus, but outside of the classroom to candidly discuss critical real world diversity issues that continue to plague our society.

The main goals of the DVC are: (1) to promote the importance of continuous human diversity education and human diversity learning throughout ones' lifetime; (2) to provide OU students, Michigan higher education students, faculty, administrators, business leaders, professionals and community members a safe and supportive town forum like environment to learn and speak out on the importance of valuing all aspects valuing human diversity on OU's campus; and (3) to promote the sharing of success stories and strategies that speakers have utilized in supporting the concept of diversity and inclusion and in addressing human inequalities professionally in the workplace and in society so that students can learn from them and draw upon them if and when they need to.

The founders of DSS and DVC believe college students need additional opportunities to engage in critical conversations and interactions related to workforce diversity through programming beyond the classroom. Both faculty undergraduate research engagement and annual supportive forums are excellent examples that serve as useful models for accomplishing this type of transformative learning.

## **SELECT REFERENCES**

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