Departmental Best Practices:

Creating a More Inclusive Work Environment

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Executive Summary

The Making Excellence Inclusive program tasked their participants to develop programs that will help incorporate the aspect of religion into everyday work practices and procedures. Through a series of learning activities, which included workshops, discussion sessions, and outside research, our group was able to compile a variety of ideas to help foster religion diversity into every department at the University of California, Riverside (UCR).

The primary objective for our group was to determine how to effectively implement a program that would promote religious diversity within each campus department. The University, as a whole, is dedicated to creating an environment in which all students, faculty, and staff have an opportunity to nurture and grow both intellectually and personally. Through this comes the Diversity Education & Leadership Initiative, which is a campus-wide initiative focused on establishing education opportunities and leadership training to enhance diversity on campus. These resources are effective for the campus community in understanding diversity within the workplace. Through the MEI program, our group created the “Awareness Ambassador Program” as an effective approach to understanding religious diversity within the work environment. This ambassador program will be designed to foster an open safe work space.

Introduction

In today's multicultural world many universities understand the need to acclimate to the new and expected work atmosphere, which more and more includes hiring diverse staff members, especially here at UCR. Diverse employees bring very unique perspectives and practices to the workplace that often lead to more innovative ideas and better problem solving (Phillips, 2014). However, as more people from different cultural and religious backgrounds are hired, they bring in different systems of belief and practices that can sometimes clash with others’ or sometimes, a
department's’ general culture itself. Thus, it is the responsibility of each department within the university to be more aware of the unique accommodations its staff requires in order to feel supported and included since they play a key role in the success of the university.

Problem Definition

Currently, it seems that university departments and businesses alike seem to believe that one of the best ways to support diversity and help create a more inclusive work environment, is to host diversity workshops or diversity fairs, and although this is a step toward the right direction, it is not the most effective. The need for diversity training is there, once again, particularly in working with people from different religions, given the sensitive nature of the issue. It is important the people from diverse backgrounds and religions be and feel included in the workplace so they feel like they are part of the department and university as a whole, making them less likely to feel excluded. However, “studies have shown that any training activates a backlash and that diversity training in particular may even activate a bias” (Cullen, 2007). Also, some workshops can manage to influence a person intellectually, however people's’ emotional biases can undo any work the diversity training has accomplished (Kolowich, 2015).

Description of the Resource

Although there is no method that is guaranteed to help foster a more diverse and religiously inclusive work environment, studies have shown that the best way to really encourage diversity and thus create a more inclusive climate is to appoint a person or task force to lead initiatives that deal with the issue. A study done on diversity initiatives that analyzed various American companies over three decades have come to the conclusion that companies that had a staff member in charge of diversity, see a significant increase of underrepresented groups in management positions (Plaut, 2014). Thus, we believe that this same logic can also apply to
initiatives to make a department more welcoming for staff members, so we are proposing departments implement an “Awareness Ambassador Program”. In the same way some departments within UCR have wellness ambassadors, departments can select an “Awareness Ambassador” that would be responsible for researching and implementing ideas to help cultivate a more culturally and religious understanding departmental climate. Below are some examples of the project the ambassador would work on implementing that we have found on the Human Resource Council of Canada website and some that we have come up with ourselves.

- Coordinate departmentally-approved optional staff site visits to different religious community centers in order to learn more about different religions
- Encourage staff potlucks in which staff members bring a dish that they feel is representative of their culture or religion
- Organize workshops and speakers about diversity and have follow up session to gauge how effective these are within the department in promoting diversity and inclusion
- Create a multicultural calendar that helps staff members avoid scheduling important meeting and big events around cultural and religious holidays
- Research resources available through the Riverside community that deal with cultural or religious diversity, such as available courses, and inform employees of their availability
- Create/designate a safe place to have interfaith dialogues, by finding an available space within the department and hosting open forums where staff can get to know each other and share their thoughts about their religious beliefs and misconceptions about it, and how religious diversity can or should be addressed in the workplace.
- Reach out to campus offices with the resources available to provide training/workshops/panels on diversity and religion issues. For example, the Vice Provost of International Affairs (VPIA) office has a communications manager that does a briefing on the cultural and religious norms of the particular social group to the UCR representatives that will be meeting with international visitors. The manager can be invited to hold workshops on communicating with people from different cultural/religious backgrounds. Speakers or presenters would not be limited to UCR staff but could also include faculty and even students that can provide different perspectives on religious issues, such as how can staff better support students from different religious backgrounds.

**Resource Implementation**

The “Awareness Ambassador Program” initiative would be implemented by having departments notify staff of the unofficial position and what it entails. It is suggested the position be held for 12 to 24 months in order to allow the staff member to really acclimate themselves to the role and have ample of time to work on making the program a success. Since this would be an unofficial,
voluntary role, 16 hours would be approved and allotted by the department on a quarterly basis to have the appointed staff member work on this enterprise. Ideally the ambassador would be a non-probationary, career employee of the department or a previous MEI participant willing to volunteer some of their work time to this program-with department approval. The ambassador would go through diversity and religious awareness trainings found on the LMS system or online and consult with their human resource department on what activities and projects are feasible based on UCR policy and the possible sensitivity of some projects, especially those dealing with religion. This would be a very malleable role that could be tailored to departments’ needs, making it applicable and beneficial to departments and the staff members involved in the program. The program will encourage ambassadors to create a series of interactive activities that will help create awareness of religious diversity within the UCR campus.

**Risks**

One of the obstacles that we foresee arising when implementing the program is the potential for labor relations issues that can arise between staff member while exploring and discussing different cultural and religious practices. Therefore, the ambassador must check in with the UCR Human Resource department to make sure they are adhering to all UCR rules and regulation on diversity and understand that they are not by any means, in a position of authority to deal with employee labor relations issues or that they can mitigate any conflicts arising due to cultural and religious differences between staff. Another potential issue is that there are already a lot of programs in which staff can participate and this would be adding to the list, and some might see this as another added responsibility to their already full work schedule. A noteworthy thing to mention is that since this is a volunteer position whose responsibilities would require time of an ambassador’s regular work schedule, it would be up to each department to decide the hours that could be reasonably allocated to work on this program each week or month, as well as the time
allotted for staff members to participate in these events. However, we believe that as long as departments make the dedicated effort to implement and promote the “Awareness Ambassador Program”, their employees can come to appreciate the value and reasoning behind it.

**Benefits**

The “Awareness Ambassador Program” is geared toward helping departments create a more inclusive and respectful work environment for staff members. The ambassador would be tasked with helping to create a safe environment within the workplace by means of staff events and workshops, in which staff members would be comfortable to discuss topics such as religion, cultures, and diversity. This will help foster a sense of community and collaboration between staff and lead to more exploration, learning, and happier more productive UCR staff members.

**Measures**

The main method in which the effectiveness of the program can be quantified is by having the ambassador conduct surveys. A survey during the beginning stages of the program is recommended to analyze the current general departmental disposition on diversity and religion issues in the workplace. A survey would give us a better overall measure on how inclusive the work environment in the department really is and what specific workshops would be recommended for staff in general. At the end of the year a second survey would be conducted asking staff whether they attended events and workshops coordinated by the ambassador and how helpful and effective those were. The survey would also have a suggestion box to allow for comments and recommendations on how to improve the program. Staff within the department should be consulted throughout the program implementation in order to allow feedback about the program.
Resources


http://hrcouncil.ca/hr-toolkit/diversity-supportive-environment.cfm