

A Testimony for Change to More Diversity and Inclusion in Accounting Education Through Faculty Training

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This article brings to light the insights gained from one accounting faculty member's participation in diversity training, the corrective action taken to barriers presented, and a description of the evidence that the training resulted in positive outcomes for students. The article attests to the benefits to minority students from interaction with a diverse faculty pool, regardless of demographic heterogeneity. It is meant to provide support for increased efforts to a more inclusive environment in accounting programs to make progress toward a shift from under-representation of minorities in the profession, as the literature review describes.

Keywords: accounting faculty, communication apprehension, diversity training, inclusion in accounting education

INTRODUCTION

This article is a testimonial to the positive outcomes for accounting students from faculty diversity training and interaction with diverse faculty members. The accounting profession is known to have under-representation of minorities (McCabe, 2014; McDowell & Sanchez, 2010; Pluviose, 2015; Ross, Wells, & Clarke, 2014), and the profession is recognizing the need for more diversity and inclusion due to globalization (American Institute of CPAs, 2019). This writing is meant to inspire accounting faculty to create a more inclusive environment through faculty training and a diverse faculty pool to help remedy the problem.

Diversity in higher education is defined expansively and institutions strive to be inclusive in hiring and supporting a student body regardless of race, gender, color, national origin, or disability. There is literature about the lack of, and benefits of, having more diverse accounting faculty from minority groups, which mostly focus on race and to a lesser extent gender (Callahan, 2018; Weisenfeld & Robinson-Backmon, 2007). The literature shows efforts to help accounting students in the classroom become more aware of diversity issues (Samson, Allen, Fleischman, & Robinson-Backmon June, 2006) and the necessity and best practices of faculty training (Morina, Cortes-Vega, & Molina, 2015). Literature also shows evidence of better pedagogical practices, faculty development, professional development of students, and a more inclusive environment through faculty diversity training (Booker, Merriweather, & Campbell-Whately, 2016). This writing is a specific example connecting diversity training to a more inclusive environment for both diverse students and a diverse faculty member. It intends to contribute to the literature to foster encouragement of more and on-going faculty diversity training and recruitment of a diverse faculty pool for accounting programs.

While accounting practitioners continue to strive for a more inclusive environment, educators must help meet that charge by producing a sufficient supply of diverse candidates by attracting them to the accounting major. According to Ernst & Young's Ken Boulay, training at the university level has a "ripple affect" in bringing a more diverse pool of candidates to the accounting profession (Bisoux, 2014). The emphasis of inclusion efforts in the accounting profession are also heavily weighted toward race and gender (Kyriakidou, 2016) which was the same as described above for educational institutions.

This writing is from the standpoint of a female accounting faculty member, with a disability, who strives to support diversity by attending training and demonstrating learned behavior for a more inclusive campus community. This research suggests that empathetic faculty from minority groups may more aggressively apply knowledge attained in diversity training resulting in enhanced student outcomes. This research also proposes that the heterogeneity of the demographic may be unimportant when fostering a more inclusive environment, so long as diversity is present. Therefore, this writing is meant to both support faculty training to further inclusion efforts and serve as a testimony to how having diverse faculty members can reach students in a more impactful way.

This specific story reveals the full circle I experienced through diversity training—from comprehending my own barrier, to the action I took in overcoming it, and the discovery of evidence that it made a difference for students—five years post training.

Background

I am an accounting faculty member who has moderate to severe hearing loss, and there are significant challenges in the classroom with this impairment. The problem started as an adult, so I was fortunate in developing normal speech, although difficulties posed in the classroom are even more pronounced when working with international students who speak English as a second language (ESL) due to the hearing loss coupled with the language barrier. So, when the college I worked for sponsored "English Corner" as a means for international students to hone their English skills by having casual dialog with volunteer faculty, staff, and students, to help improve the students' English-speaking ability, I eagerly participated. My willingness to participate was not only to help the ESL students, but to help myself in better interpreting the international students' dialog in my classrooms. I also encouraged attendance by students in my own classrooms to develop their skills as well.

DIVERSITY TRAINING AND OUTCOMES

English Corner

The English Corner group met weekly over the noon hour to share lunch and foster casual conversations. A member of the college's diversity committee led the activities. We introduced ourselves and participated in various dialogs. The more casual discussions were about hobbies and leisure activities and the more structured conversations were about the use of idioms in the United States and how to properly interpret them.

When the first English Corner session was over, I assessed what I had learned. And I was surprised, as it was not what I had expected. I was expecting to begin gaining some familiarity with international accents to better interpret what was being said by ESL students. Instead, I had a revelation of a personal barrier that was likely alienating international students in my classrooms. I realized that in the dialog that I participated in, I was purposefully directing my communications to a non-ESL participant, so when the person responded to my questions or comments, I would be more likely to understand what was being said.

Although I immediately rationalized that my behavior stemmed from my hearing impairment, I knew it was unacceptable and needed correcting. However, I propose this may be a wide-spread problem in discussions between non-ESL and ESL communicators, resulting in alienation of international students generally, which the literature also suggests (Booker, et al, 2016).

Corrective Behavior

The solution to this was not necessarily well thought out because it seemed obvious. I would force understanding and better communication with international students. My methods were not unique nor were they polished. The communication was as it had been, with me boldly asking “What?” and “Say again?” but post-English Corner, I readily explained at some point in the dialog that the problem was with me and my hearing, as sometimes I believe I made the student feel subconscious about their fluency in English, bringing to the forefront any communication apprehension they may have had. Communication apprehension in minority groups is well documented in the literature (Coetzee, Schmulian, & Kotze, 2014). Almost always when the student discovered I was an impaired communicator they were at ease and wanted to help me out, so the dialog continued. There were rare instances when I would ask a student to “write it”. I continue these same practices today.

Outcomes

I am confident that my discussions with international students are productive and I no longer avoid the discomfort of not understanding what is being said. I have learned that the ESL students appreciate my discomfort because it eases their own, which will be explained further.

Through discovering my barrier, my goal became making a comfortable environment for international students in my classroom. And there came to be evidence that this goal was attained.

Five years after the English Corner experience, there became evidence that my intentional dialog with ESL students was making an impact on their experience and inclusion in the college. I had forgotten about the realization of my personal barrier at this point and my practices of making additional efforts with ESL students had become habit. I realized this was true when a student shared with me the impact that I had had on the student’s academic experiences. The student explained to me how it was noticeable that I try harder and take more time with international students because of my hearing impairment, and how I make the learning environment a better experience at the college for ESL students because of my patience. For the first time in my life I felt empowered because of my disability to help other minorities feel included. The student noted feeling inspired because I do not let my hearing impairment bother me or slow me down. My hearing impairment does bother me as one could assume it would, but I was so glad to know it did not appear to. The student pointed out something I had not considered, which both made me feel better about my hearing loss and more empathy for ESL communicators—my hearing loss causes a one-way barrier—I have a hard time understanding what is being said to me, but what I say is understandable to the listener. The ESL communicator has a two-way barrier—they have a hard time understanding the non-ESL communicator with the varying idioms, slang, and other complexities of the English language and the non-ESL listener has difficulty at times understanding the ESL speaker. This was enlightening, and I immediately gained feelings of both empathy and solidarity toward ESL professors, who must certainly share my same struggles in the classroom, if not more. And, therein was the hidden prize of striving to foster inclusiveness—I felt more included myself, despite my disability, knowing I have an important role to fulfill for students, giving them hope. The student also explained how an ESL student’s English would get better, but my hearing would only get worse. The add-on was just innocent enough to make it funny, which was enough to soften the sting.

As a woman and disabled faculty member with hearing loss, I rarely consider myself as a member contributing to a diverse group because it seems diversity, in my experience focuses so much on race. I have experienced many students through my 13 years in academia that have identified with my hearing loss and seemed encouraged and empowered because they too have a disability, either hearing or otherwise. And, I have always considered myself a professional role model for young women in the accounting program. But, until my interactions with international students, I had not realized that my disability could so positively inspire international minority students, where English is their second language.

CONCLUSION

This personal experience is written to show evidence of how faculty diversity training can make a real difference to both faculty and students. While my experience may be unique, it gives one example of how by understanding our individual barriers, we can take corrective action to make international students feel more comfortable in our classrooms, which is not only contributing to the social benefits we strive for in embracing diversity, but it is bound to help retention and student confidence which is what we want for all of our academic programs. For accounting programs, by making connections to international students, we can make a change to the under-representation of minorities in the profession. From a faculty standpoint, the experience made me more empathetic to my minority peers, fostered a more inclusive environment for students and myself, and made me more ambitious to help my institution recruit and hire minorities to our faculty pool.

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