Creating the Comfort Zone for Diversity and Inclusion

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Abstract

In order to attract minorities and to have diversity, one of the most important conditions is to create a comfortable atmosphere.

What is a comfortable atmosphere? This paper will look at the steps to make a comfortable atmosphere for minorities and what has worked.

One of the steps that will be suggested is to increase the awareness of minorities in your area. This can be accomplished through posters, displays, and increasing the number of minorities teaching.

Some other steps that will be discussed will be the way the minorities are treated once they have arrived. Welcoming and comfortable atmospheres can be accomplished through open door policies, communication, clubs and even simply just learning names.

Methods that have been used in our university will be discussed more in detail and their positive impact in creating a comfort zone for diversity and inclusion.

Introduction

In order to attract minorities and to have diversity, one of the most important conditions is to create a comfortable atmosphere. But what is a comfortable atmosphere? This paper will look at the steps to make a comfortable atmosphere for minorities through visibility, education, and connecting.

Visibility

When students are visiting it is important that they feel an attraction toward the university or company and that they would fit in. Shouldn’t everybody feel this way? If you are ever in

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another country or even visiting from out of state, if you notice somebody from your own hometown or country you tend to gravitate toward that person and feel connected. The same thing can be said when minorities are visiting a university or company.

To create this visibility in our university we have implemented posters showing minorities smiling and asking students to join them in their field and to find out more information to how they can join. This is mentioned in excerpts from the WomenTech Educators Newsletter, “Hanging posters like these send an important message about who you are as a school. It says that you welcome female students, and support women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) career pathways.”

Our university has greatly increased the number of women professors in our College of Technology. When I first started teaching in 1997 there were only three female professors out of seventy faculty. Since I started, there are now over twelve faculty. In my first classes I taught I had all male students with only one female student every couple years in my beginning plastics course. A year and a half ago, our department and plastics program hired another female faculty. Last year our number increased to four in our beginning course and this year we already have five female students with an additional two female students joining our program! It has greatly amazed me the past year that twice, once on a tour and once in a classroom that a female student has spoken up and told me that they were so glad to see a female professor. The hiring of additional minorities has greatly helped our program and has slightly increased the number of females that have graduated and enrolled overall in our college of technology – see tables and graph below from our university’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>#Female Faculty</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>6%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Female Faculty in College of Technology

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Another way to show visibility is through the use of websites to communicate the activities and opportunities for women. Some excellent examples can be found at Iowa State with their website for women in science and engineering. Not only does this website promote, it also gives resources through the use of posters. These posters and visual aids provide role models for younger students and other women.

There have also been some marketing examples of providing role models and trying to break the cycle of stereotypes for females. A good example of this is the role model of Debbie Sterling, a female engineer and founder of GoldiBlox, a toy company that was created to inspire females to engineering. Her company also produced the hit YouTube sensation of “GoldieBlox & Rube Goldberg ‘Princess Machine’.” This was a commercial showing young girls being creative and
building and downplaying pink and princess styles all set to the Beastie Boys’ song “Girls.” The YouTube sensation got over 8 million hits when it debuted.

Education

To continue where marketing starts, educating minorities about the opportunities and what engineering is about is a way to introduce them to the field and to make them feel comfortable. Even Debbie Sterling brought up in her YouTube video that engineering is often confused with trains and a CIEC speaker in Orlando even commented that minorities, when asked about engineering, had the same response.

One of the events that Pittsburg State University has participated in the past two years is “Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day (IGED) an annual event hosted by the Kansas City Section of the Society of Women Engineers (SWE-KC). The event is typically held during engineering week in February and is for female high school students. Other sites such as Ohio State University and Argonne National Laboratory in Chicago, IL also host similar events. Our university started participating in 2013, by having college students mentoring, hosting a table displaying information about our university, and participating in the college panel, and there were around 100 girls attending. Last year when we participated the number had grown to over 200! It even attracted attention from the local news media who interviewed female engineers and students who were participating. This all day event includes company and university booths, booths with hands on activities highlighting different engineering fields, a college panel comprised of female engineering students, a keynote speaker and a hands-on team activity. Various companies that hire engineers sponsor the event.

Our engineering technology department is starting to become more active with our local Girl Scouts. Last spring an activity was hosted by the electronics engineering technology department and this fall we are hosting an all-day event that will include electronics, 3-D printing, metal casting, and plastics engineering technology where girls will participate with hands-on activities and a speaker while they eat.

Connections

What happens when the minority student finally arrives on campus and is in your classroom? How do you create that comfort zone? Well, to start off with names are very important. I don’t know if everybody remembers the television sitcom “Cheers” theme song, Where Everybody Knows Your Name with lyrics by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo

“Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see,
our troubles are all the same
You wanna be where everybody knows

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Your name.

You wanna go where people know,
people are all the same,
You wanna go where everybody knows
your name. “

I am not the greatest on names, but a fellow professor gave a tip on how he masters his students’ names. He creates an assignment where students create one PowerPoint slide with a headshot of themselves, their name, and a little more information and has them submit it for points. He then creates a card deck of these PowerPoints and takes them home and memorizes the names and faces. I have started doing this and it has helped and students really light up when you know their name and they feel welcomed!

Dr. Brenda J. Allen, from the University of Colorado at Denver, came to our campus for a diversity workshop and in one of the breakout sessions it was also mentioned on how important it is for professors to know names. She also has a great website with information on how to relate to minorities.6

Connecting to students is another way that is so important to create a comfortable environment for learning and educating. We recently had a keynote speaker by the name of Dr. Michael Wesch, who is an Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology from Kansas State University talk to us on “The End of Wonder in the Age of Whatever” and how he connects to his students. One way for him is to take each student out to lunch to learn about them and helps him to connect with them in this age of social media and digital technology. Now I have a lot of students, but one way for me to put this into effect is to create a welcoming office and have an open door policy. Sometimes some of my students come to my office to eat their lunch and hang out. I also have created this semester opening my class with a “Pun of the Day’ and to connect with humor. All of this is an attempt to connect to students and to make them welcome.

Another way for minority students to connect is to join clubs on campus with which they have a connection. Our campus has many clubs such as the HOT club (Hispanics of Today) and NASA (Native American Student Association) and the Black Student Association (BSA). This enables them to learn and be encouraged by others that have similar upbringings and cultures.

In our College of Technology we have a student Society of Women Engineers (SWE) and this organization allows female students to share stories about classes and encourage one another in their studies. This encouragement also helps them to overcome the “imposter syndrome” or mindset that Gaby Hinsliff writes about herself that “like a surprising number of high-flying women she feels unworthy of her success. It’s the little voice inside our heads declaring that we’re not as good as everyone else seems to think – that we somehow just got lucky, and any minute now we’ll be found out. A survey found half the women admitted feeling self-doubt, against only 31 percent of the men.”7 At a SWE conference that I took some female students,
one of the talks was on this very topic. After, one of the students admitted this was exactly how she felt and I was able to encourage her and she then went on to become president of the student SWE chapter and other successes.

Summary

Minorities are needed in our STEM industries and university settings and it is important to create that comfort zone in order make sure that they are included and feel welcome. Through visibility, educating, and connecting with them, we can achieve that goal.


7Hinsliff, G. (2012, February 23). Imposter syndrome: They ooze confidence, so why do so many career women feel they're not up to it? Retrieved from Mail Online: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2104926/Imposter-syndrome-They-ooze-confidence-career-women-feel-it.html

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