

Are We Moving the Needle on Diversity and Inclusion?

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While considering the title for July's edition of *Essentials*, "Are We Moving The Needle?" my immediate thoughts were, "I don't really know" and "according to whose scale?" A flurry of additional questions arose from this one individual prompt that brought an initial answer of "Well, yes?...no?...maybe?" It is easy to reflect on the past year in media and come to a reasonable conclusion that perhaps we are not. Each day, social media, Google alerts, colleagues, and other sources can easily remind us of each and every misstep by those within our communities. It can be argued we are (or are not) moving the needle depending on whom within the association you speak with and on which day you spoke with them. I believe it takes measurements of many different aspects such as membership experience, change management, contribution to the greater community, futuristic planning, and more to be evaluated in order to ascertain whether or not we are truly moving the needle. A community's level of inclusivity is one such aspect that should be measured to answer the question, and one the Vanderbilt University IFC community explored over the past year.

Over the course of the spring 2014 semester, the Vanderbilt University IFC presidents' meetings were spent establishing and fulfilling their leadership legacy. The students found themselves having many discussions about what it means to be a fraternity member within their community. For one fraternity president, this discussion included sharing his experience as an openly gay member of his chapter. What ensued was a very open, student-led conversation about what the member experience might look like for someone who identifies within the LGBTQI community and ultimately surprised some presidents as they concluded *perhaps their brotherhood was not as close as they thought it was*. When there are members who do not feel comfortable or safe embracing their personal identity with their own brothers, perhaps they are "*failing*" their membership as presidents. One student even spoke to his personal enlightenment from this conversation stating, "It's understandable for every man in my chapter to have a mask they wear day to day on campus, but within the walls of my own fraternity house as well? Well, that's something I had never considered before." Such a statement had a resounding effect on the conversation, allowing for the community leadership to process the possibility their members' experiences weren't all they presumed. The concern of "what if my brotherhood isn't as close as I thought it was?" struck a chord with each president when they discussed the reality of how members within their organization felt they had to hide their sexual orientation.

Such a personal and emotional feeling of empathy was the entry point for a year of progress, exceptional dialogues, programming, and more for men within the Vanderbilt IFC community. As a result of these dialogues, an "IFC Inclusivity Agreement" was developed by the students intended to establish a standard and expectation, which they acknowledged they may not have exemplified in the past, but were striving to exemplify in the future. They sought to declare the community would henceforth willingly work to create safer spaces for the wide array of identities an individual may hold, including but not limited to race, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, and socioeconomic status.

Throughout the remainder of the year, a variety of programs were held, including a recruitment event where IFC men spoke to potential new members about their identities and how they had been supported through membership in a fraternity. This was followed later in the year by a chapter hosting a dialogue about race with another student organization using national media as a conversation starter. Additionally, they chose to develop a new leadership opportunity for members to serve as representatives charged with the responsibility to engage in a variety of trainings ranging from SafeZone Ally Training to MAPS Suicide Intervention and Prevention training. The IFC Presidents established that every new member would undergo the six-hour Green Dot Bystander Intervention Training in partnership with another office on campus and every chapter would offer a variety of trainings for their entire chapter within a recurring two-year plan so every member would receive education on inclusivity before they graduate. The students wanted to create a space that would better their membership and they enjoyed the sense of ownership in which *they* were the ones implementing it. Nationally, they repeatedly saw negative media attention towards the fraternity experience, so they viewed this as their opportunity to create their own story and to be the purveyors of their own destiny without feeling forced to do so by our office, our university, or a national organization. Ultimately, this was viewed as a personal choice to start working towards a safer and more inclusive community.

In considering the variety of work a community can do to experience similar outcomes, establishing clear expectations and involving the students in setting those expectations provided me with a tool to hold them accountable. This accountability ranges from utilizing attendance tracking software to record who has attended which programs, establishing metrics and key performance indicators, celebrating when they accomplish those goals, asking student leadership during meetings what they truly think about the direction of their initiatives, and expressing the importance of their leadership in the community. Like the needle on a speedometer, a community will rise and fall with the decisions they make and it's our responsibility to adapt accordingly through the development of reasonable responses for this wax and wane of leadership. While our community still has opportunities for improvement, their work towards a more inclusive community is just the beginning. It's important to determine what the next steps are and how to evaluate their successes, whether this is through utilizing an assessment program, revamping officer and council advisement, spending more time listening and asking the right questions in meetings, or even recognizing other staff members within my office whom might have a better relationship with students to help move the conversation along. During a speech given by the primary author of the "IFC Inclusivity Agreement," he said as president the three biggest questions he felt continually asked by his membership were: "Do you see me? Do you hear me? Do I matter?" This insight by a student leader has enhanced my professional philosophy greatly and I feel is applicable to all walks of life. How are you showing the students the answers to those questions? How are you showing it to your staff you supervise or other colleagues? What would the answers look like for yourself? To me, the answer(s) to "Are We Moving The Needle?" are tied and not mutually exclusive from the responses to "Do you hear us? Do you see us? Do we matter?" and whatever lens you personally choose to read those questions through.

I have found it helpful to view the advising experience with an analytical perspective and seek continual improvement. Examples of said examination could be determining what the standard is for “good” compared to “great” work as an advisor. What do I think is a “win” for my community and what do they think is a “win?” Do those align or differ, and why? Do I truly know what motivates the membership or am I just assuming? Considering the way in which our work with fraternities and sororities and students can be, it’s important to not rely solely upon a sensation of needle movement as validation for one’s personal assessment of their efficacy as a professional. Our students did not wake up one day thinking they needed to have a more inclusive campus, nor was it in response to something I had to say as their advisor. It was their student leadership recognizing a need within their community and being given the trust and respect to find appropriate solutions. They recognized their organizations, built on a culture of trust, were reliant upon a respect of differences and saw such respect wasn’t inherently given, but needed to be fostered and protected.

When considering all of the challenges communities and student leaders face on a daily basis, evaluating the measurements we hold our communities (and ourselves) to can assist us in ascertaining whether or not we are truly making an impact, or perhaps just assuming we are. Examining those priorities of the leadership and membership of the community can direct the assessment of purpose. In evaluating if we are moving the needle, it is healthy to examine said movement under a variety of lenses that may prompt one to reconsider what movement actually looks like, what areas need more attention than others, whether or not we are truly establishing a standard our community can rise to meet, and maintain a healthy dose of optimism if they don’t.