

The need to practice what we teach: Outcomes of a diversity mandate

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ABSTRACT

The importance of diversity within a university environment begins with the institution's workforce. Classroom lectures emphasize the benefits, values, and need for diversifying people across organizations, society, and education institutions. Beyond the classroom, diversity in higher education is paramount to creating a comfortable, safe, and empowering environment that welcomes all students and employees with open arms. If an institution is not actively working towards diversifying their workforce and student body, the university risks becoming undesirable to minorities. This approach could lead to confusion for students, as it contradicts and undermines the knowledge learned, leading to a possible devaluation of the school's reputation. This study investigates the student and employee gender and racial composition within the eight public universities in Mississippi. Specifically of interest is how those populations of the students compare to that of the employees as a means to better understand the diversification of higher education institutions in the state.

Keywords: diversity, gender, race, higher education, student, faculty

INTRODUCTION

Diversification's significance continues to grow as a focal point of interest and practice in society, industry, and education. More recently, the value of fairness and the push towards transparency in acceptance of diverse people in higher education has been realized through the creation of offices dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Diversity in College, n.d.). These offices are, by design, tasked with promoting acceptance, fairness, and diversity. In doing so they assist universities and by extension, society, in valuing the contributions of people regardless of their differences. Recognition and emphasis on the importance of the differences between people and how those differences strengthen organizations, opens individuals' minds, encourages variances in input, opinions, and experiences, and acknowledges the fortification of ideas, innovations, inventions, and other creative solutions to shared problems, concerns, and interests.

Gender and racial diversity concerns continue to be of significant interest, as they contribute to the success of organizations in their efforts to be inclusive, fair, open minded, and accepting. These efforts are of particular importance to higher education since a part of their role is to educate through mentorships, observations, and providing appropriate examples in addition to classroom instruction and student experiences and activities. "Should discrepancies exist, the obvious hypocritical practice may leave students and graduates of these institutions questioning the quality of their education" (Johnson et. al, 2014, p. 27). The influence these institutions have on their students is significant, which further strengthens the notion that their practices must be aligned with their emphasis placed on concepts, such as diversity. Students witness their diversification practices in real time every day as they associate with, interact with, and conduct business with each other and university employees. They both consciously and subconsciously acknowledge the people they see and talk to and judge the institutions on how successful they are in employing the concepts, like diversity, that they are taught in their classes. Gender and racial diversity are especially important in this scenario, as students may seek to compare the presence of genders and minorities on the campus to their own. "A diverse faculty and staff can give students a real-world example of how diversity and inclusion can create a harmonious and beneficial environment built upon a foundation of different world views" (Diversity in College, n.d., Why Diversity in Colleges Matters section).

In Mississippi, educational leaders have sought ways to assist in the diversification of their institutions. For example, Commissioner Tom Meredith of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) challenged the state's eight public universities in 2006 to improve their gender and racial compositions of their students, employees, and faculty through a diversity mandate (Hochradel et. al, 2010). Specifically, Meredith (personal communication, 2006) stated that these entities were to have the number of female and minority students reflected equally in the percentage of employees, with emphasis on the faculty, at each university. Meredith's 2006 diversity mandate continues to be reflected in the current IHL Board Policies and Bylaws Statement, which "recognizes the importance for campus environments to promote diversity and ensure that all aspects of institutional practice affirm our commitment to access and success, with particular attention to heightening participation and achievement of underrepresented individuals" (Mississippi Institution of Higher Learning, 2013, para. 3).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the diversification of gender and race in the public universities of Mississippi and to investigate the success or failure of the 2006 diversity mandate for these institutions. Particularly, this study focuses on the diversity of students and employees with consideration given to the employee diversification reflecting that of the students. Of specific interest is the faculty composition within the employee population, as students commonly interact with faculty regularly. Through an examination of the representation in the gender and racial compositions, conclusions are sought in the concept that what is emphasized as necessary, strong educational topics on the campuses are demonstrated and equally emphasized in practice.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Through reviewing information relative to the gender and racial diversity of Mississippi's universities, a foundation of understanding can be established to better gauge the situation in which the institutions contained within this study find themselves. Laws designed to encourage diversification of higher education entities provide a springboard for institutions to take steps in welcoming a variety of students and employees. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade higher education institutions from using race as a determinate for not admitting students (Laws That Changed Diversity, 2021). The formation of the federal financial aid program and the creation of specially designed programs for assisting minority groups in having opportunities which were previously unavailable to them were established through the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) (Laws That Changed Diversity, 2021). According to Laws That Changed Diversity (2021), in 1972, the HEA was revised, thus introducing the Federal Pell Grant program, which according to the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (as cited in Laws That Changed Diversity, 2021) are the "cornerstone of African American higher education" (Higher Education Act of 1965 section). Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 established gender equality and fair treatment of all students. It is most widely known for its effect on collegiate sports in which institutions of higher learning are required to provide equal access to all students to participate in collegiate athletics (Laws That Changed Diversity, 2021). Affirmative Action addresses racial diversity by improving representation of previously excluded groups. Collectively, these laws provided universities with steps in diversifying, equalizing, and fairly treating all their students and employees.

As educating agencies, universities are tasked with avoiding hypocrisy of teaching concepts they do not practice. "By practicing the methods in the boardrooms that they are teaching in the classrooms, universities will become a haven of self-improvement and reciprocal education" (Long et. al, 2013, p. 77). As such, understanding the benefits to students with regards to the need to practice what is taught through gender and racial diversity is critical. Katie Brown (as cited in The Top 5 Ways That Diversity in Education Benefits Students Success, 2020) lists, "1. Campus cultural diversity enriches the educational experience" (para. 5), "2. Diversity on campus improves communication and thought-processing skills" (para. 9), "3. Campus diversity challenges stereotypes" (para. 12), "4. Students can see themselves in their leaders" (para. 15), "5. Diversity better prepares students for the workforce" (para. 18). Understanding the application of higher education's gender and racial diversity efforts aids in a

more succinct comprehension of the universities' practices resulting in overall changes to the gender and racial compositions throughout the institutions being studied.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three research questions were investigated in this study.

- Research Question 1: Have Mississippi's public institutions of higher education successfully achieved fulfilling the 2006 diversity mandate?
- Research Question 2: Do Mississippi's public institutions of higher education practice gender diversity?
- Research Question 3: Do Mississippi's public institutions of higher education practice racial diversity?

FINDINGS

The Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning collects and report data on the eight public universities. The information is made available publicly and the relevant data to this study was used. The findings from this study show the gender and racial composition of the students and employees of the universities from Fall 2017 to Fall 2021. Additionally, within the context of university employees, the data provided specific breakdowns of faculty gender and racial diversity. When viewed together, the institutions' student population had consistent gender and racial profiles over the five-year period, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix). The employee gender profile also demonstrated consistency, whereas the employee racial profile increased 2% for minorities during this same period. The faculty gender and racial profiles also increased 3% for females and 2% for minorities from Fall 2017 to Fall 2021, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix). When considering the 2006 diversity mandate, a comparison of the gender and racial composition of the students, employees, and faculty is needed, as indicated in Tables 2 and 3 (Appendix).

In reading Table 2 (Appendix), a positive indicates students in the respective category outnumber the employees by the stated percent, whereas a negative indicates employees in the respective category outnumber students by the stated percent. Throughout the five-year period studied, female students were consistently 3-4% greater than the number of female employees. For the males, employees outnumbered students by 4% every year. Additionally, minority students maintained a representation of 4-5% greater than minority employees for the universities. And white employees exceeded white students by 4-5% throughout this period. In reading Table 3 (Appendix), a positive indicates students in the respective category outnumber the faculty by the stated percent, whereas a negative indicates faculty in the respective category outnumber students by the stated percent. Throughout the five years, female students were 8-10% greater than the number of female faculty. For the males, faculty outnumbered students by 8-10% during this time. Additionally, minority students maintained a representation of 9-10% greater than minority faculty for the universities. And white faculty exceeded white students by 9-10% from 2017 to 2021.

The Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) within the state of Mississippi are Alcorn State University (ASU), Jackson State University (JSU), and Mississippi Valley State University (MVSU). The non-HBCUs are Delta State University (DSU), Mississippi State

University (MSU), Mississippi University for Women (MUW), University of Mississippi (UM), and University of Southern Mississippi (USM).

DISCUSSION

The findings provide an understanding of the performance of Mississippi's public universities with regards to their gender and racial compositions of students, employees, and faculty. Through the analysis conducted of the available data, these institutions' changes in their make-up of females and minorities are evident. Each research question is best addressed with specific discussion as to the relevant data and its accompanying results.

- Research Question 1: Have Mississippi's public institutions of higher education successfully achieved fulfilling the 2006 diversity mandate?

The 2006 diversity mandate issued specifically required the institutions to equalize the ratio of students to that of the employees, with a heavy emphasis on the faculty. To this degree, no university was completely successful. The most recent available data provides an insight into each university's gender and racial diversity as of 2021, which allowed for a 15-year time span for which progress is hoped to have been made with success in accomplishing the 2006 diversity mandate the ultimate goal.

With regards to the gender composition of the universities as viewed through the lens of the 2006 diversity mandate, the female student population, female employee count, and number of female faculty were compared. Meeting the 2006 diversity mandate's stated goal, as seen in Table 4, is Delta State University in the gender category of students to faculty with 0%, which shows an equal percent of females students enrolled to female faculty employed by the institution. Failing to meet the 2006 diversity mandate by superseding the requirement as defined by the 2006 diversity mandate and as a result "over diversifying" is Mississippi State University in the gender category of students to employees with -1%. Mississippi State University employees more percent females than their percent of female students, which according to the criterion for successfully meeting the stated goal of equalizing the ratio of female students to employees means the university overstepped that objective, thus failing by overachievement, as indicated in Table 4 (Appendix).

The institutions most greatly failing to meet the 2006 diversity mandate with the largest discrepancy of female students to employees are Alcorn State University and Jackson State University. Additionally, Alcorn State University, Jackson State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi were the institutions furthest from reaching the 2006 diversity mandate's stated goal of gender diversity as it relates to the ratio of female students to female faculty, as indicated in Table 4 (Appendix).

In Fall 2021, the minority compositions of Mississippi's public universities yielded none that met the 2006 diversity mandate. Three universities, Mississippi State University, Mississippi Valley State University, and the University of Mississippi, successfully failed the 2006 diversity mandate by overreaching, overachieving, and bypassing the goal. These institutions employed -1%, -3%, and -7%, respectively, more minority employees than enrolled minority students, as indicated in Table 5 (Appendix).

When viewing the minority students to minority faculty, all universities came up short of the ultimate goal, with the closest institutions to achieving the objective being Mississippi State University and the University of Mississippi, both having 4%, thus showing 4% more enrolled minority students to minority faculty that semester, as indicated in Table 5 (Appendix).

The public institutions within the state that exhibited the most room for improvement with regards to minority students to minority employees were Mississippi University for Women at 19% and the University of Southern Mississippi at 14%, as indicated in Table 5 (Appendix). The percent of minority employees greatly outnumbered those of the minority students at both institutions.

For the comparison of minority students to minority faculty, five of the state's universities struggled in their efforts to reach the 2006 diversity mandate: Alcorn State University, Delta State University, Jackson State University, Mississippi University for Women, and the University of Southern Mississippi. The two HBCUs identified within this list, Alcorn State University and Jackson State University, were the "best of the bunch," as their percent of minority students to minority faculty were the lowest within these five institutions, as indicated in Table 5 (Appendix).

- Research Question 2: Do Mississippi's public institutions of higher education practice gender diversity?

In short, yes, each university does practice gender diversity, however some institutions are more successful in their efforts than others. Overall, when the gender data for the eight public universities over the five-year period is averaged, the female students amount to 59% of the student population, the female employees count for 55% of the total employees, and the female faculty make-up 49% of the total number of faculty.

Of the universities studied, Mississippi University for Women is the least diversified with regards to gender of students, employees, and faculty. The five-year average of each for Mississippi University for Women is 80% female students, 71% female employees, and 72% female faculty.

- Research Question 3: Do Mississippi's public institutions of higher education practice racial diversity?

All the universities in this study are racial diversified, with some institutions demonstrating a more balanced racial composition than others. Collectively, the group's minority make-up of students averaged 42%, employees averaged 37%, and faculty averaged 32%.

With regards to student racial diversity, Alcorn State University, Jackson State University, and Mississippi Valley State University have the least amount of diversity. The average Alcorn State University student minority population throughout the five years studied was 97%. Jackson State University's student minority population average was 95%, and Mississippi Valley State University's student minority population was 97%.

Employee racial diversity was found to be most challenging for Alcorn State University and Mississippi Valley State University with an average minority count of 92% and 95%, respectively. Additionally, racial diversity of faculty was found not to be prevalent at the following institutions, which had an overwhelming average majority of minorities: Alcorn State University with 84%, Jackson State University with 83%, and Mississippi Valley State University with 86%. Universities' heavily employing white faculty, thus whose racial diversity was minimized, was Delta State University having a five-year average of 88%, Mississippi State University having 87%, Mississippi University for Women having 87%, and University Southern Mississippi having 83%.

CONCLUSION

The universities studied are representative of progress towards gender and racial diversity, even if none successfully reached the 2006 diversity mandate goal of equality. The 2006 diversity mandate was specific in that for institutions to achieve it, equality was required. In the instances where the universities overreached the 2006 diversity mandate, which demonstrated the institutions' successes in executing diversification strategies so well that female and minority percentages of employees outnumbered that of students, these accomplishments should be recognized for the greater diversification of the campuses' workforces. Additionally, the successes should be praised for more female and minority representatives offering influence and mentoring to female and minority students. However, the letter of the law of the 2006 diversity mandate prevents that acknowledgement. Fortunately, equity, diversity, and inclusion and students appreciate, recognize, and acknowledge the institutions' work towards greater gender and racial diversity. The indoctrination, emphasis, lectures, and institutional practices all align, meaning that for these eight universities in Mississippi, they are practicing what they teach with regards to gender and racial diversity.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this study include the Covid-19 pandemic that disrupted the world's daily lives, which affected higher education. Many institutions closed their physical presence and instituted virtual and online learning. As such, student enrollment and employment at universities within Mississippi were impacted during this time. Another limitation is that the 2006 diversity mandate was too exact in its wording, which resulted in no allowance for success beyond perfect equalization. Additionally, the data provided by the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning reported minority data without the identification of appropriate subcategories, which would have provided clarification and knowledge as to which minority groups were represented and to what extent, and the gender data was categorized as females and males (Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

Future research as to the Mississippi institutions' continued gender and racial diversification practices could be conducted to determine the progress or regression of their efforts. Furthermore, additional studies could be conducted in which they expand upon this study to institutions beyond Mississippi to determine those universities' gender and racial diversification practices and their successes or failures to practice what they teach. Lastly, through additional research on these topics, best practices could be identified and documented for application and use at other institutions.

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APPENDIX

Table 1 Gender and Racial Diversity of Students, Employees, and Faculty at Mississippi's 8 Public Universities: Fall 2017 to Fall 2021

University Affiliation	Gender/Race Category	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Students	Females	58%	58%	58%	59%	59%
	Males	42%	42%	42%	41%	41%
	Minorities	42%	41%	41%	42%	42%
	Whites	58%	59%	59%	58%	58%
Employees	Females	54%	54%	55%	55%	55%
	Males	46%	46%	46%	45%	45%
	Minorities	37%	36%	37%	37%	38%
	Whites	63%	64%	63%	63%	62%
Faculty	Females	48%	49%	50%	50%	51%
	Males	52%	51%	50%	50%	49%
	Minorities	32%	31%	32%	33%	33%

	Whites	68%	69%	68%	67%	67%
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Table 2 Gender and Racial Diversity Comparisons of Students to Employees at Mississippi’s 8 Public Universities: Fall 2017 to Fall 2021

University Affiliation	Gender/Race Category	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Students to Employees	Females	+ 4%	+ 4%	+ 3%	+ 4%	+ 4%
	Males	- 4%	- 4%	- 4%	- 4%	- 4%
	Minorities	+ 5%	+ 5%	+ 4%	+ 5%	+ 4%
	Whites	- 5%	- 5%	- 4%	- 5%	- 4%

Table 3 Gender and Racial Diversity Comparisons of Students to Faculty at Mississippi’s 8 Public Universities: Fall 2017 to Fall 2021

University Affiliation	Gender/Race Category	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Students to Faculty	Females	+ 10%	+ 9%	+ 8%	+ 9%	+ 8%
	Males	- 10%	- 9%	- 8%	- 9%	- 8%
	Minorities	+ 10%	+ 10%	+ 9%	+ 9%	+ 9%
	Whites	- 10%	- 10%	- 9%	- 9%	- 9%

Table 4 Comparison of Female Students to Female Employees and Female Students to Female Faculty at Each Public University in Mississippi: Fall 2021

Comparison Criterion	University	% Females
Students to Employees	ASU	11%
	DSU	6%
	JSU	10%
	MSU	-1%
	MUW	8%
	MVSU	2%
	UM	4%
	USM	8%
Students to Faculty	ASU	13%
	DSU	0%
	JSU	12%
	MSU	7%
	MUW	8%
	MVSU	3%
	UM	9%
	USM	14%

Table 5 Comparison of Minority Students to Minority Employees and Minority Students to Minority Faculty at Each Public University in Mississippi: Fall 2021

Comparison Criterion	University	% Minority
Students to Employees	ASU	5%
	DSU	9%
	JSU	8%
	MSU	-1%

	MUW	19%
	MVSU	-3%
	UM	-7%
	USM	14%
Students to Faculty	ASU	14%
	DSU	18%
	JSU	13%
	MSU	4%
	MUW	23%
	MVSU	8%
	UM	4%
	USM	21%

