THE ROLE OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN PROMOTING DIVERSITY ON A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

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Abstract

We live in an era where xenophobia, Islamophobia, and dangerous “Othering” is gaining ground in our communities. If anthropology’s purpose still is, as Ruth Benedict once said, “to make the world safe for human differences,” it is more important now than ever for colleges and universities to provide our students with the necessary tools to do so. This report documents how a new initiative is building capacity for positive interaction among all those who orient around religion differently while building bridges of interfaith cooperation at Utah State University. After summarizing campus climate research that led to the initiative’s emergence in 2014, this report summarizes some of the major changes on campus that have come about as a result of these efforts. It then discusses the pros and cons of implementing positive institutional change from the “bottom-up” versus “top-down.” It concludes by asserting that we need applied and engaged anthropology in higher education now, more than ever, to prepare our students for the challenges of living and working in the 21st century.

Key words: diversity, higher education, evaluation, interfaith

Introduction

With almost 900 hate crimes reported in the ten days after our most recent Presidential election, promoting and protecting diversity on college campuses has become more important than ever (Southern Poverty Law Center 2016, Westcott 2016). Applied anthropology is a crucial tool in this ongoing work.

On our public university campus, the Utah State University (USU) Interfaith Initiative and its affiliate, the USU Interfaith Student Association, seek to inoculate against the kind of hate described in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s grain report—hate which is grounded in both fear and ignorance. Our efforts focus on “creating positive and meaningful interaction among people who orient around religion differently” by providing “safe spaces to voice our beliefs and values, by teaching skills for interacting with respect and appreciation across ‘faith-divides,’” and by coming together to serve the common good.1 Our work builds bridges of relationship, appreciation, and common ground among groups who view themselves as different while bringing members of our campus community together to share authentically, engage respectfully, and to work together on common problems. We do this work because we know that it is more difficult to objectify those who may look or behave differently than we do when we know who they are, what they stand for, and why they suffer.

Background to the Emergence of the USU Interfaith Initiative

This initiative emerged from recent participatory, anthropological, campus climate research that invited students, administrators, faculty, and staff to share if they felt “safe” expressing their religious/spiritual commitments (or lack thereof) in and out of the classroom and whether they thought it was important to be able to do so. As I have reported elsewhere (Glass-Coffin 2016), data collected during four round table discussions with sixty-five participants and follow-up ethnographic interviews with forty-eight students revealed what we already suspected: most respondents felt that these kinds of conversations are vitally important to the health of our campus. Silence about such an important aspect of personal identity, they asserted, leads to feelings of isolation, disconnection, and disempowerment. However, most respondents also reported that they were reluctant to engage in these discussions because they were afraid they would be stereotyped, misunderstood, and vulnerable to macro-aggressions if they did.

Our research focused on assessing needs and identifying stakeholder assets. It produced specific action items for facilitating change in three broad areas. First, because ours is a single-faith-dominant campus where most incoming students have had little extended interaction with those of other faiths, respondents told us they desired programs and events to increase their religious literacy (both in terms of religious traditions and in terms of how these impact adherents’ lives). Suggestions for change were both curricular and extra-curricular. Some of these included a university-required class in world religions, a course sequence (leading to a certificate or to a minor) that would encourage interfaith literacy and teach the skills necessary for promoting interfaith cooperation, guest lectures, reading groups and informal “brown-bag” conversations, new-student and new-faculty orientations about our specific campus climate, service learning opportunities, religious diversity trainings, the creation of a library archive of diverse “faith-stories,” round table and “speed-faithing” (like speed-dating) discussions among students of multiple faiths, site visits to churches and other places where people of different faith traditions congregate, and the creation of a community-wide directory that would connect students to religious resources. Additional suggestions included creating spaces within the university that would provide opportunities for sustained interaction among people of differing worldviews, the creation of an interfaith student club, and creation of interfaith suites in the residence halls.

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