Campus diversity becoming a real-world reality

By Kevin Cullen
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The U.S. population is getting browner and Purdue University is looking for ways to ensure that its students can thrive in a more diverse climate.

"We live in a society that is changing rapidly," said Dorothy Simpson-Taylor, director of the campus diversity resource office. "We need to respond, in higher education, to the needs of that changing society.

"Will our students be able to interact and be successful in this new world?"

A workshop Friday in the Stewart Center was attended by 50 faculty, staff, administrators, students and community representatives.

It began a discussion of what Simpson-Taylor termed a "competency-based diversity" philosophy.

The idea is for undergraduates to be able to show they are grounded in diversity issues and comfortable interacting with a wide variety of people unlike themselves. Graduate students should be able to initiate conversations about diversity and develop diversity initiatives, she said.

A Ph.D. should know what a competent diversity program looks like and take their organization to that point," she said.

That's not just some pie-in-the-sky notion, she said. In today's workforce, competency in a narrow technical discipline is not enough. Companies want employees with a track record of working well with people of other races, genders, ages and backgrounds.

"You need to be aware to be proficient," Simpson-Taylor said.

The American Association of University Professors, the American Association of Higher Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, plus other accrediting bodies, are stressing such "competency-based" approaches.

Purdue also is growing "browner." Its international enrollment grew by 78 percent between 1990 and 1999, and its ethnic enrollment grew by 21 percent during the same period.

In 1999, nearly 8,000 of its 37,762 were either from other nations or Americans of African, Indian, Asian or Hispanic descent.

A 1997 study, called "Barriers to Bridges: The Purdue University Plan for Enhancing Diversity," showed that most students surveyed did not think the Purdue campus fostered diversity. Most minorities said they had been discriminated against or harassed on campus, with black students reporting the most problems.

DIVERSITY DIALOGUES: Joyce Hall (left), director of the Division of Financial Aid at Purdue University, makes a point, along with Triscilla Johnson, a doctoral student in civil engineering at Purdue, during a diversity workshop Friday. They were talking about initiatives that Purdue could use to help graduate students become more versed in diversity.

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students reporting significantly more such experiences.

The study also recommended building diversity into the curriculum, "where appropriate," and making minority programs a part of school and departmental planning.

The study also encouraged the adoption of diversity requirements for all undergraduate degrees to ensure "that every Purdue graduate is knowledgeable about race, gender, and culture in a global context."

Regents Todd Hicks, director of minority programs in the School of Science, said he encourages students to learn foreign languages and to study abroad.

Often, she said, minority students are expected to teach white students about their cultures when they are on campus to learn. That can cause undue pressure.

Jeannine Marshall, an associate dean in the School of Liberal Arts, said the notion of diversity is "the basis of a liberal arts education" and its value is embedded in her school's curriculum.

Students are required to take courses on gender, diversity and global awareness. Some students embrace such instruction; others resist it.

"The goal has been to raise awareness but to develop competencies is really the way to go," she said.

Michael Brzezinski, director of Purdue's Office of International Students and Scholars, agreed.

"We'd like to continue with awareness programs about cultural issues and go to the next step to help people develop competencies," he said.

Tony Foster, an academic adviser in intercollegiate athletics, said that diversity is a major part of her office. One of the greatest challenges is finding minority tutors; some of the top minority scholars on campus don't want to be associated with sports.

Susan Huffman, manager of Young Graduate House, said 40 percent to 70 percent of the graduate house population is international. She calls it a "mini-United Nations."

Staff within the residence hall system attend in-service diversity training at least once each semester.

Some graduate students don't "see diversity as a positive or enriching thing," she said. But many staff members "become surrogate parents" to international students.

Professor Jeff Lucas, who teaches biological sciences, said the importance of diversity is not always stressed among faculty or filtered into classrooms.

"We have a long way to go," he said. "Diversity at the faculty level is really a problem we need to address."