Bryant University
Student Diversity Advocates

The Institution and Its Students

Bryant University, founded in 1863, is a private, independent institution located in Smithfield, Rhode Island, 12 miles northwest of Providence. Bryant is a four-year, coeducational institution with 3,201 full-time and 168 part-time undergraduates. In 2007, Bryant undergraduates came from 31 states and 45 countries. Most students are residential with only 17% commuting. The undergraduate student body is 60% male and 40% female. In fall 2007, entering first-year students were 59% male and 41% female. Of those students, 82% reported that they were domestic White, 10% domestic minorities (non-White U.S. citizens), and 5% nonresident aliens; 3% did not report their ethnicity. The population is primarily of traditional age with less than 1% of students over 25 years of age.

Description of the Initiative

Bryant's first-year seminar is entitled Foundations for Learning (FFL)**.** The peer educator program was designed exclusively to assist FFL instructors in delivering one of the four goals of FFL curriculum: developing self-concept, which includes an awareness of health and wellness issues and understanding the importance of respecting diversity. Instructors and students alike felt the diversity topic would be explored more freely "student to student." Consequently, in the fall of 2005, a group called the Student Diversity Advocates (SDA) was formed. Each year, 15 peer educators are recruited to fulfill this role (see Appendix A for application form).

The Foundations for Learning curriculum coordinator supervises, trains, and evaluates the SDAs. Student advocates visit the FFL classes to conduct diversity exercises. Instructors invite SDAs to their classes via a course registration process (see Appendix B for registration form). During FFL class visits, SDAs moderate activities with fellow students, talking about topics such as diversity resources on campus, individual diversity, personal values, perceptions of self, and community and cultural values. The role of the SDA also includes participating in diversity training, which covers topics such as developing effective facilitation skills, understanding the role of the facilitator, practicing exercises utilizing role-plays, and learning group processing skills. SDAs also study the most recent research on diversity issues in higher education. In addition, during the biweekly trainings, SDAs conduct practice exercises and receive feedback from the curriculum coordinator and their peers about their presentation skills. Finally, the SDAs facilitate the administrative aspects of the program.

Research Design

Each year, the Student Diversity Advocate program is assessed. The goal of assessment is to measure program effectiveness and establish continuous improvement efforts. The assessment is two-fold: (a) the Student Diversity Advocates participate in a

needs assessment to ascertain the usefulness of the training and their comfort level with classroom facilitation skills (see Appendix C), and (b) first-year students and instructors who experience an SDA class visit fill out a self-report inventory to appraise its value and evaluate their satisfaction (see Appendix D). The first year the program was instituted, feedback about training was gathered from 15 SDAs. At that time, 231 students were exposed to the SDAs, as 16 of the 47 FFL sections solicited class visits from them. Of the 16 sections, 13 evaluated the experience.

Findings

Question 1 on the SDA Training Questionnaire focuses on motivation to apply for the position, role expectations, training, and benchmarking diversity definitions. In general, students' motivation to apply centered on their recognition of the importance of diversity to the University community. As one student notes, "I personally thought it [diversity] needed some attention on campus." Students also indicated altruistic motives, "to help make Bryant a better place," and "a great way to help the community." Finally, students saw it as a way to get involved on campus.

The second question asks about whether the role met expectations. About half of the students indicated that it did. The other half, who suggested it was not what they expected, expressed the need for program organization and more training. One student related this to the program's pilot status: "I believe that this was a new program and anything done first was not necessarily going to be the right way." Questions 3 and 4 ask students to assess the training and their confidence levels. SDAs indicated they would like to see bonding activities for the group, have more practice before they go into the classrooms via role-plays and mock presentations, and have more formal and structured meetings. As one student put it, "A more formal meeting and more structure in what to do. Ice breakers or games to make diversity a more well-rounded topic."

The final question attempts to ascertain a benchmark of where students were in terms of their current perceptions of the definition of diversity. There were two distinct patterns. About half of the SDAs saw diversity as straightforward differences: "Each aspect of every person that makes us different and creates a community." The other half grounded their definitions in a socio-political context: "Cultural, racial, religious, economic, or any variety of sociocultural elements that make each and every individual unique."

Both SDAs and first-year students had an opportunity to provide formal feedback. For each class visit, SDAs distributed an evaluation form to students to assess the effectiveness of their presentations (see Appendix D). Results indicate that students were generally positive when asked about the SDA class visit. Table 1 summarizes the responses based on the Likert-scale questions.

Table 1
Student Diversity Advocates Presentation Evaluation (*N* = 231)

	Average rating
1. The objectives of the workshop were clear and met.	4.6
2. The content of the workshop was delivered in a clear and complete manner.	4.6
3. The workshop provided me with new information that has expanded my understanding of diversity.	4.1
4. The presenter(s) was (were) well versed in the subject matter.	4.6
5. The visual aids (if used) were appropriate and of good quality.	3.8
6. The presenter(s) was (were) able to create an environment conducive to an open discussion and issues raised.	4.6
7. The correct amount of time was allotted for the presentation.	4.5

The evaluation also asks students what was most beneficial, least beneficial, and their overall impressions of the presentation. While many of the things students noted as least beneficial were specific to the presentation, some students found the topic of diversity to be of little value. For instance, one student said, "I have already had many talks about diversity at Bryant so this was nothing new." In general, the qualitative responses in the Most Beneficial category were overwhelmingly positive. For example, one student noted that the experience broadened his understanding of diversity beyond race, "which always jumps into my head first." Similarly, the Overall Evaluation responses indicated that the students found the class visit worthwhile; student responses included patterned comments such as, "Very good, would recommend it to other FFL classes" and "Good, worthwhile, definitely a presentation idea that can be built upon for other topics."

Implications

Results suggest that students had a positive experience with the SDAs. Understanding the importance of respecting diversity is a key element not only to FFL, but also to the Bryant undergraduate experience. The fact that only 16 of the 47 instructors used SDAs during the fall 2005 represents a challenge of administering the diversity curricular goal. Ideally, an SDA should visit every section. In 2006, an SDA was assigned to each section. This model of matching an instructor with an SDA increased coverage of each section. For example, in the fall of 2006, 22 out of the 55 sections were visited (approximately 40%) and in the fall of 2007, 30 of the 55 sections were visited (54%)—a significant improvement from 34% the first year. As the number of requests increase, more SDAs have been recruited and hired. The increase has had limited budget implications because the SDAs are volunteers. They are students who are passionate about diversity issues at the University. Findings also suggest the necessity of

in-depth training. Feedback from SDAs helped create a more systematic training program: more role-playing, mock presentations, and structured meetings. Additionally, new SDAs conduct their class visits with seasoned SDAs. More recent assessments indicate that SDAs have increased confidence with presenting.

These results demonstrate the importance of conducting systematic research to gauge student perceptions. Many college campuses are still in the process of introducing a diversity goal into their curricula. The tendency is to rely on student anecdotal feedback, but rigorous assessment is critical to obtain an accurate indication of program effectiveness.

For other institutions wishing to implement a similar program, a primary advantage is there is no upfront monetary investment. Rather, the cost lies in the time that a professional staff member must dedicate to the organization and administration of such a program. Once the program is established and the students are trained, the coordinator may function in an advisory capacity to the students.

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Appendix A

Student Diversity Advocate (SDA) Application

Date:

Last Name:	First name:

Cell Phone:	E-Mail:	Box #:

Local Phone:	Home Phone: (include area code):

Local Address:	Home Address: (include City/State/Zip)

Major:	Class Year:	GPA:

List the names of three Bryant references with contact information (a student, an administrator, and a faculty member):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Please attach typed, 500-750 word responses to the following two questions:

1. How do you define diversity?

2. What qualities and characteristics should a Student Diversity Advocate (SDA) possess? Be sure to justify your answer.

If you have an updated resume, please attach. If you don't, please attach a sheet of paper with all activities you are involved in outside of your Bryant classes.

Appendix B

**Foundations for Learning
Student Diversity Advocate Registration Form**

Instructor's Name:		
Section:	Time/Day:	Location:

1. What date would you like your Student Diversity Advocate to visit your class? Please provide your top two choices:

2. How many students are in your class?

3. How long would you like the workshop or presentation to be?

4. Briefly describe the demographics in your classroom (i.e., the gender breakdown, the number of international and minority students, commuters, student-athletes).

5. Would you like to participate in the SDA workshop, or will you leave the classroom?

6. Is there anything specific you would like covered in the workshop?

7. How is your classroom set up?

8. Would you like your SDA to generate a journal prompt with your class?

9. Will your students be required to complete a specific reading prior to class? If not, would you like some suggestions from your SDA?

Appendix C

Student Diversity Advocate Training Questionnaire

1. What motivated you to apply for this position?

2. So far, is it what you expected? Please explain.

3. What would you like to see in the training program?

4. What would help you to be successful/ feel confident/ competent at this? Explain.

5. What is your current definition of diversity?

Appendix D

Student Diversity Advocates
Presentation Evaluation Form

I am a (n)   Administrator _____   Student_____   Faculty _____

Please evaluate this presentation by answering 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree):

1. The objectives of the workshop were clear and met.   1   2   3   4   5

2. The content of the workshop was delivered in a clear and   1   2   3   4   5
   complete manner.

3. The workshop provided me with new information that has
   expanded my understanding of diversity.   1   2   3   4   5

4. The presenter(s) was (were) well versed in the subject matter.   1   2   3   4   5

5. The visual aids (if used) were appropriate and of good quality.   1   2   3   4   5

6. The presenter (s) was (were) able to create an environment
   conducive to an open discussion about questions asked and   1   2   3   4   5
   issues raised.

7. The correct amount of time was allotted to the presentation.   1   2   3   4   5

Please comment on the following:

8. What about this presentation was **least** beneficial to you?
   _____
   _____
   _____

9. What about this presentation was **most** beneficial to you?
   _____
   _____
   _____

10. Overall evaluation of this presentation.
    _____
    _____