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Pitt leans in on diversity as other universities deal with outside pressure to make cuts

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While universities in several states are being forced to defend their diversity, equity and inclusion programs, Pitt has been leaning in by strengthening the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; creating diversity offices in units throughout the University and promoting a variety of hiring programs.

The headlines just in the past couple months illustrate the political headwinds higher education faces:

- Florida rule would limit talk of 'social issues' at public universities. This is part of a larger measure pushed by Gov. Ron DeSantis that seeks to gut diversity, equity and inclusion programs at colleges and universities.
- Okla. senators debating diversity, equity and inclusion programs in higher education
- As Texas bans diversity and equity offices at public colleges, Rice University's inclusion efforts march on
- Wisconsin GOP withholds university pay raises in fight over school diversity funding. While writing the budget in June, Republicans slashed the University of Wisconsin funding by \$32 million because they estimated that's what the system's 13 campuses put toward DEI efforts over two years.

DIVERSITY FORUM

Pitt's annual Diversity Forum has taken place each summer since 2016, but this year it is being moved to January to coincide with Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Clyde Pickett, vice chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion, said they heard from faculty and students that it was difficult for them to participate in July.

The event — “Amplifying Our Voices Through Active Listening and Constructive Dialogue” — will take place Jan. 23 and 24, 2024, as part of MLK Social Justice Week. The theme coincides with Pitt's Year of Dialogue and Discourse.

Questions? Email diversity@pitt.edu

“I think from the top down in the University, the message is that we consider (diversity, equity and inclusion) to be important,” said Adam Leibovich, dean of the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences. “And I'm grateful we live in a state where the legislators are not making it impossible for us to do that.”

Chancellor Joan Gabel has repeatedly voiced her support for diversity and equity on campus. “I'm committed to building a campus community where a sense of belonging is strong, accessibility is valued, and equity and diversity are actively promoted,” she told the University Times. “We are leaning into this expectation through the development of the next chapter of the Plan for Pitt so that we can work together to become the community we aspire to be.”

“In looking at our university, there's a clear commitment to the work to advance diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility,” said Clyde Pickett, vice chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion.

The diversity landscape became even more complicated this summer, when the U.S. Supreme Court restricted the use of race-based admission practices at universities.

Gabel said at the September Board of Trustees meeting: “We've been working as a leadership team on the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling regarding admissions practices in order to ensure that we continue to fulfill our commitment to be a representative and equitable community while being fully compliant with new law.”

While the ruling said colleges cannot directly use race when considering an application, it said they could consider “an applicant's discussion of how race affected the applicant's life” if it was tied to the “quality of character or unique ability.”

An article in The Hill in September noted that the U.S. Education Department is urging colleges to ramp up their diversity efforts in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling. The department issued a report outlining ways higher education institutions can promote more diversity in their admission practices, including boosting scholarships and minority recruiting.

Marc Harding, vice provost for enrollment, told a Senate committee earlier this semester that a group with representatives from all of Pitt's campuses is looking into how to maintain the mission outlined in a provost's memo after the ruling, which said: “The University of Pittsburgh's mission is to improve lives through education and knowledge. We believe that

all of our students can and should benefit from this mission. And that diversity in all its forms enhances our individual and shared success and improves the educational experience.”

Pickett pointed out that the “team from the Office of Admissions and Financial Aid have long been proactive in establishing relationships with different communities of color in diverse communities, and I think that will bode well for us in the future in terms of the ways in which we've had those lines of communication open.”

Growing diversity leadership

Over the past several years, almost all of Pitt's schools have added or elevated the role of chief diversity officers.

Just last summer the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences named its first associate dean for equity, faculty recruitment and community engagement, Natasha Tokowicz, and Pitt Business named its first associate dean for inclusion, engagement and international affairs, Paul Harper.

Under previous Dean Kathleen Blee, the Dietrich School had a special adviser to the dean on diversity issues, but new Dean Adam Leibovich thought “elevating that to an associate dean level would allow us to do more and actually make systemwide changes and try to improve the situation a lot more than then we could do with just the special adviser.”

Harper's newly created role under Dean Gene Anderson is part of the Pitt Business 2030 strategic plan.

“I think that there have been individuals all around the University that have championed this work in different schools and units,” Pickett said. “And I think for me as senior diversity officer for the institution, having those colleagues who are moving the work around and have them have official titles that support this work, I think is very helpful and fruitful in addition to my role.”

Pickett, who also is second vice president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, said one of the things his colleagues discuss is “institutional commitment and sustained commitment for this work.” He said it's important to look at the ways in which peer institutions in the AAU and ACC have supported diversity work.

“We know ... that our (Pitt) community continues to prioritize and amplify that commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion,” he said, noting they've heard that loud and clear from students, faculty and staff.

Pickett said his work at Pitt and with the national association “has underscored that when we're looking to create a community, it's important for our colleagues to see a commitment ... to diversity, equity and inclusion, and to see that commitment in action. I think that having an office like ours, having colleagues around the University, says that we are committed to this, and I think that it will bode well for us in the future as we're working to continue to recruit students and for us to continue to attract and retain our colleagues.”

Faculty, staff and students who don't get support and affirmation for their identity and for their scholarship are going to look for places to find that, Pickett said. “I think my role in that is to bring awareness to the importance of the ways in which we champion diversity,

equity, inclusion, accessibility (at Pitt) and the individuals who do this work.”

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020 and the increased focus on diversity work, Pickett said, “I think those who not only made commitments, but those who executed those will be long remembered. I think that it will certainly bode well for them in terms of students who will come to those organizations, in terms of faculty who will want to come and stay, and in creating an environment where staff can thrive.”

A more diverse community

In addition to adding more diversity and inclusion professionals throughout the University, Pitt has — through different initiatives — increased diversity among students, employees and vendors.

Chancellor Gabel, in welcoming the incoming first-year class this fall, said it was “one of the most diverse groups of students (that’s) ever entered (Pitt) in every way we measure that.” That includes a large number of students who are the first in their family to attend college.

In the past 10 years, the percentage of Black students at Pitt has increased from 6.5 percent of all students to 8.5 percent. The number of Hispanic or Latino students has almost doubled, now making up 6.7 percent this year, and Asian students make up 21.4 percent of enrollment this year.

Faculty also have seen increases in diverse populations: Black representation has increased from 2.9 to 4 percent of faculty; Hispanic/Latino from 2.7 to 3.8 percent; and Asian from 16.5 to 18.2 percent. Staff have seen just slight increases in these populations.

Two hiring initiatives in recent years have not only focused on diverse faculty, but also diversity in scholarship. A multi-year, Latinx cluster-hiring initiative started in 2019 was aimed at attracting more faculty with academic expertise in topics concerning the broad, diverse Latinx community.

The Race and Social Determinants of Equity, Health and Well-being Cluster Hire and Retention Initiative from the Office of the Provost and Pitt Health Sciences was started in 2021, to significantly increase the number of faculty who are hired, promoted and retained who specialize in race, equity, health and well-being and to improve Pitt’s international, national and local profile and expertise in those area. It welcomed 25 faculty in its first cohort last year and has spawned the Race & ... initiative, which has sponsored a lecture series, annual conferences, and summer retreats and other events.

These initiatives fall under John Wallace, whose position as vice provost for faculty diversity & development was created in 2020. Previously those jobs were combined with vice provost of faculty affairs. Lorie Johnson-Osho joined the office as director of faculty diversity and development in 2020 to promote a comprehensive set of programs to support the career and professional development of all Pitt faculty.

Facilities Management also has expanded its diversity initiatives, including an operating engineer apprenticeship program in collaboration with Hill District community groups. At job sites, the University has made a commitment to bring in more minority- and women-owned businesses, which were awarded 39 percent of the recently completed Chilled Water Plant construction project.

Pickett said, "One of the things that we want to do is continue to make sure that this is an inclusive community for all, and so continuing to respond and be proactive in creating initiatives and listening to concerns when there are possible disruptions to making an inclusive community. We will continue to fortify those efforts."

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