

The Complexity of Diversity: Rethinking Gaps and Leveraging Differences

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS

November 10-11, 2005
University of Michigan, Palmer Commons

Note: The following notes were compiled by designated scribes at the conference and pulled together afterwards by editors at the NCID. Although this document endeavors to capture the essence of each expert's presentation, researchers should contact speakers and review their related publications to access these studies more fully.

Consider the following scenarios:

- One city erupts into riots, plagued by violence once again. Another city, just as ethnically diverse, manages to maintain peace.
- The achievement gap between black and white students alarms educators yet stubbornly resists interventions.
- Housing segregation persists despite an increased value placed on integration and rising incomes for blacks.
- College administrators work to attract students of color for the diverse perspectives needed for better learning and a better democratic society. But what happens once students arrive? Is there sharing and integration or confrontation and separation?
- A company needs to convene a team to develop a new product. What perspectives and skills should be represented on that team? And will team members actually work together and put the group ahead of themselves?

Issues such as these have caught the attention of educators, business leaders, policymakers, and scholars who wrestle with the complex nature of cities, schools, societies, and industries--and the role of diversity in each of these institutions.

"Diversity is not only a value and a policy and a commitment but also a line of inquiry," explains Michael Cohen, William D. Hamilton Collegiate Professor of Complex Systems, Information, and Public Policy at the University of Michigan.

For two days in November 2005, scholars and leaders gathered at the University of Michigan to open that line of inquiry.

Sponsored by the National Center for Institutional Diversity, the Complexity of Diversity Colloquium centered on understanding what diversity is, how diversity comes about, and what the consequences of diversity are for individuals and institutions. Participants additionally examined how diversity might be prevented from wreaking havoc on a society and instead harnessed to benefit humankind.

As the colloquium demonstrated, scholars, policymakers, and business executives are moving away from the simple conception that diversity is good towards a deeper understanding of *when* and *how* diversity is good. However, the complex systems —cities, schools, societies, cultures, ecosystems —in which diversity is a factor complicate efforts to understand diversity.

To complete the link from diversity to better outcomes, we need to distinguish among types of diversity and explore the connections between these various types and the outcomes they produce. For example, it is vital to discover *when* and *how* diverse perspectives lead to better outcomes.

This gathering applied a new science of complexity to several key questions: What is diversity? How do diverse individuals interact and respond? And how does diversity function? Namely, when is it useful? When is it wasteful? And when do differences lead to conflict?

The conference had four main sessions.

Diversity Within a Complex System

It began with an explanation of the science of complex adaptive systems, the role of diversity in the systems, and how benefits emerge from the interactions of diverse parts.

The complex systems framework brings a focus on the interactions of individual parts or “agents” to view what interactions over time lead to what outcomes. It helps scholars consider connections among individual actions, processes, and outcomes.

The Nature of Our Differences—Who We Are

The next session looked at difference—why and how we differ, why those differences are important to us, and where people’s differences originate.

This session revealed that identity is itself complex and that people have multiple identities to draw upon, with certain ones more important depending on the situation. It is interactions among our genes, environment, and culture that lead to people’s identities.

Identity is a central concept in diversity, but identity has confounding effects. It creates cognitive differences, which can drive progress while at the same time producing boundaries that can hinder efforts to benefit from that diversity.

Gaps in the System

The third session focused on causes and implications of segregation and the potential for conflict created by that segregation. Presenters asked not only why we see such extreme segregation by both identity group and income class, but also how we might change those dynamics and prevent conflict.

Interacting Our Differences

In the final session, presenters recounted efforts to understand how to manage diversity to achieve the benefits of diverse perspectives applied to creative problem solving.