

The Ford Foundation Campus Diversity Public Information Project

The Ford Foundation Campus Diversity Public Information Project (PIP) aimed to build support for diversity learning initiatives in higher education. As the “campaign manager,” Martin & Glantz (now known as FowlerHoffman) was charged with re-positioning the image and identity of these programs, which can be controversial and are often portrayed in a negative or cynical light. The initiative presented a real challenge. Martin & Glantz began with interviews and group discussions with campus diversity leaders, a survey, polling, media audits and focus groups. The research led to several general conclusions:

- With the notable exception of ethnic and trade press, news stories on diversity tended to be conflict-driven and generally ignored the exciting diversity work that was taking place on campuses across the country;
- With the exception of recent college graduates, people were largely disinterested in diversity education, except when they considered the issue in terms of its impact on students preparing to enter an increasingly diverse workforce and an ever-more global economy;
- Most colleges and universities were not making any real effort to inform journalists of the diversity work that was taking place at their institutions, usually because decision-makers assumed that diversity stories were likely to be negative; and
- Diversity practitioners, the people who were leading the on-campus diversity work, were especially hostile toward and suspicious of journalists.

These findings led to the development of a multifaceted strategy through which the work of diversity education was promoted to the media and translated to the public. This strategy demanded—and relied on—simultaneously working on different campaign components. This integrated approach enabled Martin & Glantz to adapt effective strategies and messages to the rocky diversity landscape.

The PIP tested and assessed a range of messages, communications tactics, and media outreach activities in two pilot sites, Seattle and Philadelphia. These activities included training diversity messengers, generating feature stories and op-ed pieces, reaching out to representatives of the local and regional media and local survey research. For example, the concept of a Diversity News Lab,



whereby student interns promote positive diversity stories, was tested and proved successful. As a result, a “how to” guide was developed to encourage similar activities on campuses across the country. While implementing pilot site activities, Martin & Glantz developed a career roundtable effort involving corporate CEOs and college and university presidents, as well as media trainings to be conducted at local, state and national conferences.

As a result of simultaneous “planning and doing,” the campaign discovered the best strategies for the national rollout of the effort. They encompassed: expanded media training programs, including a video and workbook for use on individual campuses and at multi-institutional workshops; a newsletter that highlights experiences and lessons learned in promoting campus diversity projects and provides guidance on communicating with media; and the development of a national opinion leader communications program, which materialized via the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Racial Legacies and Learning project.

Involving campuses across the country, this project was designed to foster learning and dialogue about America’s racial legacies and opportunities. The project funded and guided Campus-Community Study-Dialogues at more than 50 colleges and universities in the fall of 1998. Most of these dialogues included new community partners, many participating in campus events for the first time. The Racial Legacies and Learning events were timed to coincide with the PIP’s culminating event, the release of a national public opinion poll on diversity in higher education, so that campuses held provocative dialogues on diversity at the same time the PIP released major new data on the issue.

The national poll was an immensely successful conclusion for the PIP, utilizing many of the spokespeople it had trained and partners it had cultivated to generate unprecedented national attention to the benefits of diversity in higher education. Released in October 1998 at a national news conference in Washington, D.C., and at local events throughout the country, the national poll found strong, broad-based public support for diversity in higher education. Throughout the country, diversity practitioners, now comfortable talking to the media, promoted the poll results in their local media markets. Public information officers, no longer unwilling to promote diversity stories, generated positive editorial coverage. Allies, no longer unaware of their stake in the issue spoke out. And journalists, no longer unfamiliar with the issue or unfamiliar with pro-diversity spokespeople, generated balanced and positive news coverage.

Although the Campus Diversity Public Information Project has formally ended, many of its activities continue through the efforts of its partners and allies.