Intercultural Diversity and Inclusion:
Teaching, Learning, and Planning

In January 2008, Beloit College launched an ambitious Diversity Plan that sought to “develop and implement procedures and policies that will enable people of all backgrounds to flourish on campus.” Along with setting goals related to the recruitment of students, faculty and staff from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education, the plan also aimed to “improve the ‘climate’ of respect and understanding and increase intercultural competencies” among all members of our residential learning community.

Since 2008, the college has successfully pursued some of the goals embodied in that plan. We have met or exceeded our enrollment targets. Even more importantly, we have sought to understand better what we already do that advances a model of liberal learning that speaks to multiple identities and experiences while bringing their full power to bear in the education we provide. From 2008 to 2010, the Diversity Council engaged in a mapping project of intercultural programming on campus, with attention to curricular offerings, cultural events, community outreach, and faculty and staff training and development. The group also attempted to track the effectiveness of such efforts through a review of student success and student survey responses on matters related to Beloit’s campus climate over the past 15 years. These projects have helped inform our understanding of what we are doing and where we have significant room for improvement.

We have also pursued important measures related to preparing students for a life of purposeful consequence in a complex world of multiple identities and ways of knowing. In 2011, new graduation requirements came into effect that includes a requirement for students to complete at least one course focusing on intercultural literacy. While this requirement marks an important priority in foundational learning, the entire curriculum is informed by the understanding that Beloit students, encouraged and supported by their advisors, are expected to move well beyond the bare minimum of requirements as they pursue their liberal education. We reinforced that commitment this summer and fall by re-evaluating the multicultural components of the Initiatives program, revamping New Student Days programming and seeking ways to build inquiry into social identity throughout the two-year program.

These efforts are ongoing, and they need to be deepened and broadened to reach our goal of providing a residential learning community that simultaneously recognizes, respects, and challenges the multiple perspectives and identities of all of its members. While important parts of the 2008 Diversity Plan have been realized, we have been less successful in reaching a shared understanding about the profound questions that racial and ethnic diversity — and their intersections with gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and other identities -- pose for the nature of knowledge and our responsibilities to one another. As a result, determining how best to engage such questions through our curriculum remains incomplete.
Such conversation needs to inform the development and use of resources to sustain the education to which we aspire. A significant example in this regard involves Beloit’s federally funded TRiO programs -- Upward Bound, Student Support Services (SSS), and McNair. While TRiO provides valuable resources to groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education, we should recognize and embrace the importance of these programs for all of us in the Beloit community. In the high expectations they set, the confidence they instill, and their commitment to student success, these programs reach to the best of a Beloit education and benefit us all. Indeed, the value of these programs prompts an important question about the feasibility of making their best practices and opportunities available to a broader set of students.

Yet we cannot be confident that federal support for these kinds of programs will continue at the same levels as in the past. Appropriations for ongoing TRiO programs were trimmed this summer; in the present budget cycle, the future of McNair and Upward Bound programs remained uncertain until December. Beloit’s McNair and Upward Bound programs are up for renewal this year, and the competition will be fierce. Even if they win renewal, the possibility remains that they will face further budget cuts during the upcoming grant cycle.

In light of this kind of funding environment, Beloit College needs to arrive at a more complete understanding of its own commitments and goals in recruiting, supporting, and advancing a diverse student population, and it must seek to develop resources to sustain those efforts independent of federal funding. To that end, I have asked the Committee for Diversity and Inclusion, co-chaired by Cecil Youngblood and Professor Georgia Duerst-Lahti, to provide a report to me by the end of the academic year that accomplishes three important tasks:

1. to articulate more fully Beloit’s learning goals related to social identity and intercultural literacy;

2. to evaluate curricular means – understood broadly to include learning within and beyond the classroom -- for successfully realizing those goals;

3. to generate recommendations for the development and use of resources related to attracting and advancing a diverse student body with decreased dependence on federal funding sources. Such recommendations should align themselves with other institutional priorities, including implementation of the new curriculum and the liberal arts in practice, and must pay attention not only to their potential programmatic impact but their ability to attract donors and their potential attractiveness to prospective students and parents.

After receiving the report, I will disseminate it to the community, seek reactions and responses, and assign responsibility for further action to the appropriate officers and committees on campus.

Scott Bierman
Beloit College President
February 2012