

# **Diverse Learning Environments Site Visit Report: University of Denver**

December, 2009

Dr. Sylvia Hurtado

Higher Education Research Institute

University of California, Los Angeles

A project funded by The Ford Foundation

## **Executive Summary**

As part of the University of Denver's involvement in the Diverse Learning Environments project, a site visit was conducted in May 2009 by a UCLA research team led by Dr. Sylvia Hurtado to examine how DU is organized for retention, diversity, and student success. This report highlights the University of Denver's achievements in these key areas thus far and identifies potential areas for improvement as it continues to develop a diverse learning environment.

In order to understand the varying perspectives at the University of Denver, key administrators, academic program administrators, co-curricular administrators/staff, and students were interviewed during this site visit. Several themes related to DU's success and challenges in promoting diversity and student success emerged across all of these institutional constituents. These are highlighted below.

## **Commitment to Diversity Signaled from the Central Administration**

Central administrators expressed a deep commitment to diversity, a message that resonated across all interviews. However, curricular and co-curricular administrators/staff indicated that there was a lack of clear directives from the central administration on how to achieve diversity and student success across the university.

## **Policy/Action Towards Diversity, Student Success, and Retention**

With a commitment to diversity in place, central administrators reported that the university was working on several strategic efforts, including Inclusive Excellence, in order to achieve its diversity, student success, and retention goals. DU has initiated special programs and initiatives to increase the number of students retained each year; however, more work remains to be accomplished. Part of the difficulty in implementing change across the institution appears to be linked to the fact that there is not a diversity strategic plan in place.

## **Increased Selectivity and Increased Diversity**

Over the past several years, DU's applicant pool has steadily increased. The academic quality of the applicant pool in terms of GPA and SAT and ACT scores has also improved each year. While these increases in selectivity often pose challenges to diversity at other institutions, DU's commitment to Inclusive Excellence is reflective in its increase in representation of racially/ethnically diverse students.

## **Establishing a Clear DU Identity and a Strategic Plan to Assess Progress**

One of the most evident challenges facing DU is a lack of a clear institutional identity which then poses challenges in other areas. Despite the branding efforts that have been undertaken in the past, a cohesive sense of a DU identity is still not defined across the institution.

### **Overcoming the Decentralized Nature of the Undergraduate Education**

While it was often repeated that the undergraduate division of the university was highly centralized in terms of admissions and financial aid, there was some indication that in regards to diversity and student success that this was not always the case. Although there was a firm commitment from the central administration that diversity, Inclusive Excellence more specifically, was important to the university, there was less clarity on how this was to be accomplished across the institution.

### **Creating a Welcoming Campus Climate**

Although the institution has worked on creating a more welcoming campus climate, several students still shared experiences that were indicative of a somewhat unwelcoming environment. Students also reported several structural barriers, such as the availability of required courses, which deter their individual success.

### **Bi-Modal Socioeconomic Diversity**

The clearest challenge at DU in terms of increasing its diverse student population was related to its financial ability to bring these students in. This “middle-class squeeze” means that there are limits to diversity at DU in regards to socioeconomic backgrounds, which has implications on the student learning experience.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

DU has transformed itself in several key areas and has now arrived at a critical time of reflection on accomplishments and the development of new directions for the university. DU is poised to take its collective efforts for diversity, student success, and retention to the next level. Moving forward will require more than articulating the goals of the institution; it requires actions that will affect the daily practice of individuals at all levels of the organization. As external observers, we did not have the benefit of the large body of information collected as part of the self-study for accreditation that may resonate or add nuance to the themes captured here. We offer the following recommendations that may be pursued in the future.

- The common concerns point to the need for a DU community forum that can serve as a vehicle for communication and dialogue that will advance institutional goals, and increase diversity, retention, and student success.
- Incentivize collaborations that meet the institutional goals around Inclusive Excellence
- Adopt an institution-wide reporting structure that can be developed by institutional research in collaboration with CME. Many universities now use an institution-wide report to provide benchmarks for progress in diversifying the student body, the faculty on a per unit basis, and staff. It serves the goal of consolidating information on target objectives and as an accountability mechanism to bring more concerted effort to achieve the goals of diversity and student success.
- Renew attempts to tap in to student and faculty perspectives on institutional identity - what does it mean to be a Pioneer?