A university recognizes the intellectual value of diversity and inclusion

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One of my hosts for a recent visit to the University of Washington (UW) was Luis Ricardo Fraga, Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement, Russell F. Stark University Professor, Director of the Diversity Research Institute, and Professor of Political Science. With the responsibility for developing strategies and policies with the Provost, Vice Provosts, Deans, and Department Chairs to recruit, promote, and retain faculty at the UW, Fraga was instrumental in guiding a process that other research universities should emulate.

Like many research universities, UW has been long committed to increasing the diversity of its students, faculty, and staff. Unlike most, however, it has approved changes to the Faculty Code. Accomplishments related to enriching diversity in teaching, research, and service are now considered, but not required, in faculty appointments and promotions decisions.

The significance of all this cannot be overstated. For the focus is not on faculty background. Rather, it is one’s work, which can be performed by any faculty member regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity.

These changes to the Faculty Code serve as a reminder to deans and departments that diversity and inclusion are university-wide goals. Furthermore, all university leaders are to be held accountable, as part of their annual assessments, for their own and their subordinate’s work to promote this UW goal.

As Professor Fraga puts it, “The focus on encouraging departments to see the added intellectual value of having a more diverse and inclusive faculty effectively overcomes any claim of special privilege provided to members of historically underrepresented groups. Acknowledging, counting, and promoting work related to diversity and inclusion
enriches the central academic mission of all colleges and universities: the promotion and dissemination of knowledge.”

So much of the challenge to universities today flows from changing demographics. But changing campus culture to become more “competent” and inclusive is still a hard sell.

In Fraga’s words, “An institution that values creativity in faculty research and classroom teaching, i.e., new discovery, new artistic production, new ideas, new reflections, rarely, if ever, values creativity in assessing its own institutional work, such as that related to appointment, promotion, and tenure.”

That is the lesson for other research universities. Changing demographics must be seen as creating new opportunities for universities to grow within the best traditions of innovative research, teaching, and service. The University of Washington is embracing the opportunities and codifying them for all—on campus and beyond—to implement.