How Can Universities Encourage Self-Disclosure by Equity Students?

Refereed Full Paper, Successful and sustainable partnerships

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Abstract:

This paper proposes good practice guidelines for universities to encourage self-disclosure by students in equity cohorts—Indigenous students, students with disabilities and those from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB). It is based on a 12-month study of current university practices, student motivations for disclosure and reasons for concealing equity status. The primary reasons for disclosure versus non-disclosure varied between these three groups. Indigenous students were influenced by pride in identity versus popular perceptions of special treatment and may perceive Indigenous programs as primarily intended to achieve bureaucratic goals and meet “diversity” targets (Sullivan, 2008). Students with disabilities appreciated adjustments, but often required a crisis moment to prompt help-seeking. We advocate removal of barriers rather than a ‘medical model’ of support (Shakespeare and Watson, 2002). NESB students were least likely to disclose, because in many cases disclosure was not necessary to receive assistance, or no targeted assistance was available despite the apparent frustration of teaching staff (Fildes et al. 2010). The guidelines urge universities to adopt inclusive practices to reduce the need for self-disclosure, and to define equity groups in a practical and understandable way. Educate staff and all students to improve understanding of equity groups. Where disclosure is necessary, universities should offer options for levels of disclosure so students can retain control of their data. They should explain equity programs and services with clear guidelines for benefits and preserving confidentiality. Finally, they should explain the need for disclosure and allow noncommittal responses during enrolment, with later follow up.

References


Biography:
Dr. Colin Clark is Senior Project Officer at UNSW Sydney, where he works in Student Life on issues concerning equity students. He has previously lectured in Business Communication at Nanyang Business School in Singapore and his PhD thesis won the 2012 Outstanding Dissertation of the Year award from the Association for Business Communication for research on call centre agents’ communication strategies. Previously he has taught academic English at several institutions including the University of Sydney.