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# Impact of a Diversity Conference on University Curriculum, Recruitment, and Accreditation Efforts

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## **Impact of a Diversity Conference on University Curriculum, Recruitment, and Accreditation Efforts**

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### **Abstract**

Diversity of students, faculty, administrative staff, community, and curriculum is an asset thought to strengthen and enrich students' academic experiences. Responding to a charge from a Northern Michigan University president to place diversity at the center of a University Strategic Plan, members of a diversity advisory council proposed a plan to prepare the university and its students for a future in an increasingly diverse and globalized society. Integral to this plan was a diversity conference, UNITED (Uniting Neighbors in the Experience of Diversity), which went from an annual September event to an integral part of the university's academic fabric. Our research describes an eight-year history of the diversity conference, which has hosted more than 12,000 participants and has become a vital component in the curriculum of the university. The research assists in outcomes assessment efforts to determine whether the diversity conference has lived up to its original purpose and perceived importance in the curriculum, recruitment of students, and program accreditation efforts.

**Keywords: Diversity, Conference, Higher Education**

## Introduction

Predominantly white institutions have a harder time implementing educationally appropriate topics into curriculum in order to prepare students to live and work in a diverse.<sup>2</sup> A Midwestern rural public university aimed to change this by responding to a charge from the university's president to place diversity at the center of a University Strategic Plan. Members of a diversity advisory council proposed a plan to prepare the university and its students for a future in an increasingly diverse and globalized society. Vital to this plan was a diversity conference.

Diversity of university students, faculty, administrative staff, community, and curriculum is an asset that is thought to strengthen and enrich students' academic experiences. For the purpose of our research, diversity is defined as the inclusion of different types of people, with different races or cultures, in a group or organization. Participating in diversity conferences is connected to students' confidence in their academic abilities and whether students view themselves as thinkers and taking action in society.<sup>2</sup> Meaningful engagement with racially diverse peers has a positive effect on college students' attitudes and values, making them more apt to stand up for their own beliefs<sup>3</sup>.

According to a review of the educational research literature, the current research study involving eight years of data from this diversity conference marks the longest successive empirical study of the impact of a higher education diversity conference on curriculum, recruitment, and program accreditation efforts of a university. Over the last eight years, the diversity conference has hosted more than 17,000 attendees, and the growth trend is increasing.

The diversity conference began as an annual September event, in 2005, called the Fall Domestic Diversity Institute only discussing Native American and African American diversity. The conference broadened to discuss topics of diversity in film, culture, religion, food, and research and was later named UNITED (Uniting Neighbors in the Experience of Diversity). Today, in 2014, this diversity conference is an integral part of the university's academic fabric.

UNITED is a vital component in the curriculum of the university's first year students, and involves a business and marketing class called Event Planning in its organization. Professors value this conference and require attendance at numerous sessions during the conference. Conference planners involve professors and students with the diversity conference in an effort to integrate international, multicultural, and domestic diversity as a core value at the university and to create a tangible culture of diversity broadly defined at a historically white university.

Northern Michigan University's annual diversity conference called UNITED (Uniting Neighbors in the Experience of Diversity) has seven tracks, including: UNITED in Art, UNITED in Diversity, UNITED in Film, UNITED in Food, UNITED in Music, Dance, & Theater, UNITED in Research, and UNITED in Service. UNITED in Art explores the study, practice, and history of art and visual culture. UNITED in Diversity promotes awareness and appreciation of diversity within cultures including cultural customs and contemporary creativity. UNITED in Film explores a broad understanding of diversity through film, television, and related media, grounded in contemporary humanities. A moderator introduces each film and wraps up the showing by facilitating an audience discussion of the film's diversity content. The UNITED Conference Planning Committee allows only a single showing of any film. UNITED in Food explores diverse culinary cuisines, indigenous foods and decolonizing diets, and local and cultural biodiversity of foods. UNITED in Music, Dance, & Theater celebrates new and traditional music and dance, Native American music, dance, and regalia, emerging talent, independent artists, as well as dramatic performances. UNITED in Research welcomes original research papers on a broad range of topics related to diversity, under the theme of Uniting Neighbors in the Experience of Diversity. UNITED in Service explores innovative teaching and service learning in creative, meaningful, positive contributions to society.

## Methods

This historical analysis involved an in depth study of Presidential Charges to diversity committees, UNITED attendance records, and speaker profiles during the years that UNITED has been present on Northern Michigan University's campus.

Since no pre-registration for the diversity conference is required, participants must sign in before each session. Research methodology consisted of counting the attendance records for the years 2005 through 2013.

## Results

The figure below depicts the attendance for the UNITED Conferences from 2005-2013 and projects future growth in attendance.

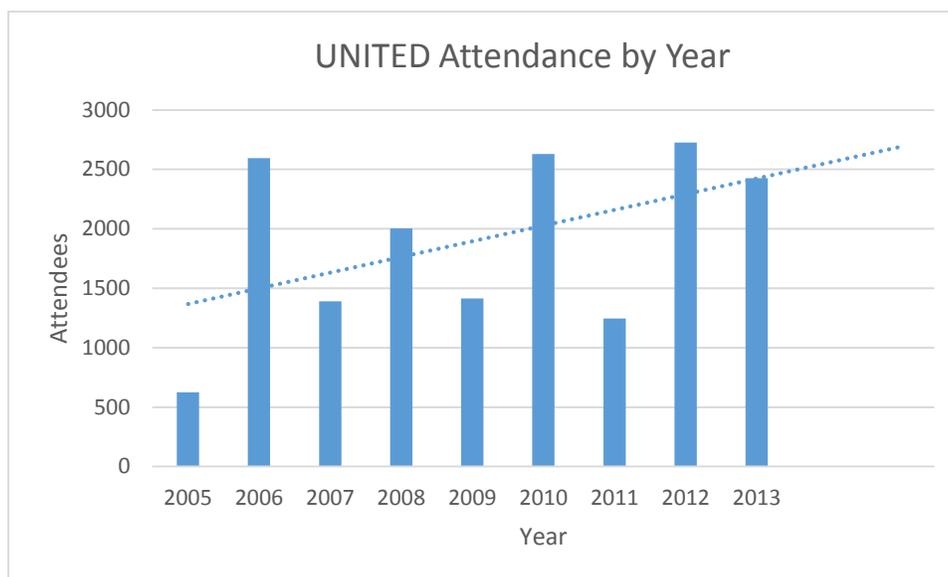


Figure 1. Attendance at UNITED Conferences from 2005 through 2013

## Concluding Discussion

Northern Michigan University is a laptop campus, which means that all students are provided with a laptop for their education. This allows every student to view the UNITED sessions, which are streamed live onto NMU's webpage. Online sessions are an important resource for all students.

These broad tracts have allowed UNITED to become a recruiting tool for Northern Michigan University. Local high school and middle school students are invited to campus for appropriate sessions, which gives them a positive experience at the University. After having one meaningful experience, we can posit that students will return to Northern for their college education.

UNITED also helps with accreditation hours for students. Professional accreditation guarantees students are suitably prepared to practice in their respective professions as part of a diverse society. Students in the School of Education, School of Nursing, and College of Business have taken advantage of this diversity opportunity through the UNITED conference for nine consecutive years.

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## Endnotes

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