

# Nonprofit Research Abridged

*Connecting nonprofit sector research and leadership*

## Diversity: Challenges and Opportunities

### FINDINGS

The nonprofit staff members interviewed for this study all agreed that diversity is a critical and ongoing issue. Specific challenges identified by investigator Dr. Maria T. Allison, through interviews and a review of previous research, include:

#### Research Project

Diversity Issues and Challenges Facing Nonprofit Youth Organizations.

#### Investigator

Maria T. Allison, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Graduate College, Arizona State University

#### Commissioned By

Center for Nonprofit Leadership and Management

#### Methods

This study aimed to identify and analyze diversity issues, challenges, and best practices through in-depth interviews with 14 professionals from various youth organizations within Maricopa County. Dr. Allison's final report integrated these findings with existing research on organizational diversity.

- Rapid demographic changes. Nonprofit constituents and staff are increasingly elderly, Hispanic, African-American, and individuals with disabilities.
- Including diverse constituents. Obtaining buy-in from the community, including involvement at all levels of the organization, is essential and yet often lost in competition with other priorities.
- Hiring and retaining a pluralistic staff. Many nonprofits desire a staff that is ethnically and culturally representative of their community, but achieving that goal is a tall order. There is heavy competition for bicultural and bilingual individuals.
- Linguistic barriers. In Arizona, this is often Spanish or native languages that prevent communication and inclusion.
- Discomfort with differences. Uneasiness with race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, social class, age, and gender manifests itself in many dimensions of contemporary and organizational life. Diversity is an emotionally-charged topic that can evoke defensiveness, blame, and anger.
- Stereotypes and discrimination. Low-income, minority and disabled youth and adults still confront stereotypes and bias from the majority culture. Studies continue to reveal exclusion in service provision and in the treatment of clients and staff. Sometimes issues of trust and fearfulness prevent those who most need the services from seeking them out.
- Ensuring legal and fair organizational practices. Organizational personnel must know and practice fair employment and volunteer management so as to avoid discrimination complaints or worse, lawsuits.

Turning these challenges into opportunities and strengths is no easy task, but there are organizations succeeding. From the analysis and integration of the findings, Dr. Allison offers the following leadership recommendations.

## LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Make Diversity a Priority.** Organizations that make an explicit commitment to understanding and grappling with diversity issues reap the greatest benefits in terms of cultural richness, multicultural staff, and constituent ownership.

“Diversity has to be a front-end agenda; an integral part of the strategic direction,” says Dr. Allison. “Leadership has to make it a priority and this needs to be communicated with staff in an ongoing way.”

Several of those interviewed noted the importance of diversity being part of the budget and staff performance measures. As one staff member said, “If there is no money behind it and we [the staff] are not measured on it, then it will not happen.”

Dr. Allison’s advice is to start small and expand diversity initiatives as skill and comfort increase. A self-analysis and organizational learning tool can be a helpful guide for an organization to learn about and transform itself (look under Recommended Resources at [www.asu.edu/copp/nonprofit](http://www.asu.edu/copp/nonprofit)).

What about the old standby—diversity/sensitivity training? Do it. Several staff said repeatedly that it helps, especially if it is interactive and introspective, “The kind that really call for people to actually step out of the box and think about their own behaviors,” says one staff member. Staff also preferred ongoing training—not just a one-time seminar when first hired.

2. **Know Your Communities.** Nonprofit staff are often knowledgeable about the demographics of the neighborhoods in their service areas and the various race/ethnic, religious, cultural, and income groups represented. This demographic knowledge however,

does not guarantee effective community relationships and understanding.

What works? Conducting a thorough community assessment and avoiding the pitfall of over-reliance on one or two high-profile individuals.

“Systematic community assessment is required.” Dr. Allison says. “Management and staff were strongly committed to serving everyone and were providing important opportunities, but there was recognition that there was an ongoing need to find better ways to reach out to different parts of their

communities.” It is also important to market to communities specifically, for example, by developing bilingual program materials or having open houses.

3. **Involve the Youth.** The heart and soul of a youth organization—and lots of knowledge, ideas and potential—lie with the youth themselves. Youth advisory boards should be created or expanded to be as inclusive and representative as possible, with an environment conducive to youth sharing their concerns, issues and ideas with management and staff.

4. **Collaborate.** When agencies work together, financial, human and program resources are maximized for the good of the community. Many of the larger, traditional youth organizations are working with smaller, grass-roots organizations—larger organizations often have programs and resources; grass-roots organizations are often in the heart of communities who need services. One such program is the ongoing partnership between Girl Scouts and Wesley Community Center to provide monthly life-skills development for youth. Collaborations can also

**“What difference does leadership make?”**

**All the difference in the world.”**

*- Nonprofit Manager*

start small, for example, begin by co-sponsoring a one-time event with another community agency where underserved communities or neighborhoods might be present.

**5. Grow Your Own Staff...But Recruit New Ones, Too.**

With so much competition for culturally diverse and bilingual staff, it is crucial to have an effective hiring and recruitment strategy that includes growing your own staff.

Youth organizations should systematically identify promising and talented youth members and educate them on the professional opportunities within the organization. The Boys and Girls Clubs do this through their junior staff career training program.

After they identify promising youth, they hire them as junior staff and encourage them to pursue a college education. Many Clubs offer college scholarships for these youth in addition to a national tuition stipend program based on the number of hours worked.

"It has worked," says one branch director. "I'm seeing more and more top kids saying, 'I want your job.'"

For both current and future staff, it is critical to emphasize the benefits of working with kids and changing lives. As one director regularly tells his staff, "You might be making a little less, but the experience, the knowledge, the good stuff you feel at the end of the day or the year...you can't buy that, you can't replace that." Other marketing strategies are also crucial, such as marketing to community college and university students at career fairs, classes, and meetings.

**6. Share Challenges and Successes.** Many organizations have great diversity initiatives and have experienced great success. Since so many youth

organizations face the same issues and challenges, it only makes sense to form "think-tanks" to discuss the problems, exchange ideas, and especially, share what has worked in areas such as building a diverse board, program development, and hiring and retention strategies. Lots of organizations have creative, effective solutions that should be shared.

**About the researcher**

Maria T. Allison, Ph.D., is the Associate Dean of the Graduate College at Arizona State University and a full professor with ASU's Department of Recreation Management and Tourism. Dr. Allison's research includes the dynamics of organizational diversity and the cross-cultural analysis of play, sport, and leisure. She recently co-authored a book, *Diversity in the Recreation Profession: Organizational Perspectives*.

"People are hungry to talk with each other about this issue, to ask each other questions and share strategies and ideas," said Dr. Allison.

**7. Learn More, Find Further Resources, and Participate in the "Excellence Exchange" on the Center's Web Site.**

During Dr. Allison's interviews, staff members expressed great interest in repositories of best practices and places to exchange information, like a web site.

Many nonprofit staff members have asked the Center for Nonprofit Leadership and Management (CNLM) to facilitate such an exchange. In response to these requests, this inaugural issue of *Nonprofit Research Abridged* pilots the "Excellence Exchange" on the CNLM web site. To participate in the Excellence Exchange, log on to [www.asu.edu/copp/nonprofit](http://www.asu.edu/copp/nonprofit) and share what has worked for your organization in the area of diversity. You can also read about what has worked for others and find a list of Dr. Allison's recommended resources.

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