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The Cultural Diversity Training Program

Dr. Jennifer Barnes is an Assistant Professor of Organization Behavior and Human Resource Management of a major state university in the Southeast. Her university is located in a large city which is 61 percent black. In recent years, the university has aggressively recruited black faculty and graduate students. Specifically, the university has funded new faculty positions and graduate fellowships for minorities.

Recently Dr. Barnes read about a new university-sponsored cultural diversity training program that was required for all academic administrators/supervisors and offered to faculty and staff. Since Dr. Barnes teaches two human resource management courses, she decided to enroll in the one-day seminar in anticipation of utilizing the material in her own courses. She expected the program would cover the full range of workforce diversity including age, race, gender, ethnicity, physical abilities, and sexual orientation. She also thought there might be some discussion of the impact of parental status, religious beliefs, and dual-career couples. Finally, she expected to experience a high level of involvement in the process through the use of case studies, sensitivity training, incidents, and role playing.

When Dr. Barnes attended the program, she was quite disappointed. There was a series of lectures by seven different speakers, including one external consultant on cultural diversity and several university administrators. While the seminar coordinator told the participants she wanted their input and involvement, the speakers were scheduled for one-hour blocks and used most or all of their allotted time with their formal presentations. Throughout the day only seven comments or questions were asked by participants. In addition, the only concept of diversity discussed by the presenters was racial diversity.

Other types of workforce diversity were mentioned in passing by one presenter but were otherwise ignored. The emphasis for most of the presentations was on the changing workforce demographics and the consequent necessity for the university to be more open, accommodative, and responsive to black students, employees, or potential employees. One of the speakers noted that while blacks constitute 60 percent of the city's population and 30 percent of the area's population, only 15 percent of the students and 4 percent of the faculty are black. Moreover, only three percent of the academic administrators at the university are black. The unspoken assumption was that the participants (most of whom were white) harbored racial animosity toward blacks. Therefore, they needed to modify their attitudes and behavior in order to better recruit, retain, and relate to black employees or students.

Dr. Barnes felt that both the content and process of the seminar left much to be desired. After the seminar, she discussed her experience with her department chair. The chair agreed to discuss it with the Dean of the School of Business. After doing so, he reported that it had been decided at the highest levels of the university that "in our environment, diversity means black." She interpreted that comment to mean that the political "powers that be" in the university were only interested in the racial aspect of diversity. Consequently, she did not expect to see future changes in the diversity training program.