

## CHAPTER ONE

# Nyack College

DAVID F. TURK, PhD

*Nyack College, Provost and Vice-President for Academic Affairs*

In May of 2013, I had the privilege of going to India with ten Nyack College nursing students who were doing clinical work in various hospitals throughout the country. Although this first trip to India was an incredible learning experience for me, I still can vividly recall that this land of many peoples and many wonders was hardly as diverse as the nursing students from Nyack. As a group, they were primarily American citizens, but they or their parents had come to the United States from all over the planet: the Philippines, Vietnam, India, Romania, Colombia, and Guyana. Only a few could claim that their families had been in the United States for several generations.

The picture that I keep of this group—taken in front of the Taj Mahal—reminds me that Nyack was once a school that trained missionaries to go forth into all corners of the globe, and now people from all parts of the world come to Nyack. This is never more evident than at commencement ceremonies each May, when names hailing from many lands are called out and faces from countless countries wearing beaming smiles receive their diplomas from Nyack's president. Indeed, because it has become customary to sing *How Great Thou Art* at the close, the commencement bulletin prints the song in the twelve most prominent languages of the largest people groups represented among the graduates.

For the last ten years, *U.S. News & World Report* has listed Nyack College as one of the most diverse colleges in America. The college has marketed this distinction, even claiming that it is one of the most diverse Christian colleges in the country. Nyack has much to be proud of, having transformed itself from a small suburban Christian college with the majority of its six hundred students drawn from suburban and rural white communities in the northeast to a mid-sized college that recruits most of its twenty-seven hundred students from the many ethnic communities of the New York metropolitan area.

As of this writing, Nyack's student body, including approximately twelve hundred graduate students and fifteen hundred undergraduates, has the following ethnic breakdown:

- Asian American            15%
- Black                        30%
- Hispanic                    30%
- White                        20%
- Two or more                5%

Although this level of diversity is common among the colleges and universities that are part of the City University of New York (CUNY), it is quite uncommon among Christian colleges. And while it is often claimed that Nyack's diverse student body might be considered normal for a college that now has, in addition to its suburban campus, a campus in Manhattan where over one thousand of its students are enrolled, the college's diversity is found among its faculty as well. Currently, approximately 45 percent of Nyack's full-time faculty members are Asian American, black, or Latino, a level of diversity that not even CUNY schools can match.

Statistics do not, however, tell the whole story. One of Nyack's core values notes that Nyack is "intentionally diverse," and thereby committed to providing educational access to underserved populations. All of its degree programs have at least one course that focuses on studying the range of issues related to living and working in a diverse society, and the core curriculum required of all undergraduates contains fifteen credits that explore diversity in the liberal arts and sciences. In addition, Nyack's chapel program joyfully embraces black and Latino worship styles.

Nyack's students have been more than enthusiastic in their praise of the diversity at the college and its vibrant spiritual atmosphere. Results of the *National Survey of Student Engagement* show Nyack students to be more confident that they are prepared to work in a diverse world than their peers in all other comparison groups. And, indeed, this confidence is affirmed by employer surveys for accounting, education, nursing, and social work majors that show these graduates as exceptional when it comes to working in teams and working with a variety of people.

By many measures, then, Nyack College's transformation into a diverse college is a success story. Yet Nyack's efforts are not uncommon. Over the last twenty years, many Catholic colleges and smaller liberal arts colleges have taken the same journey. And many member institutions in the CCCU are now beginning this journey. Although the details of these journeys may vary, there is a common set of factors that facilitated the transformations at Nyack and at other colleges.

These principles can be summarized as follows:

- *Leading.* Set goals at all levels to diversify a campus community, including its students, faculty, and programs.
- *Engaging.* Recruit students from one of the urban centers of the United States or establish a learning center or branch in a city.
- *Linking.* Explore the institution's history and theological roots, and relearn the truth that the *missio dei* of the gospel is to reach the poor and underserved.
- *Partnering.* Join hands with urban churches and black and Latino church leaders to educate the emerging demographic—their congregants.
- *Assessing.* Prepare to move far beyond the goals of demographic change, and examine the purpose of higher education, especially Christian higher education.

## LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE

When a Latino was hired by Nyack as an admissions counselor in 1989 and began recruiting black and Latino students in New York City, almost no one at Nyack knew how successful he would be. The college president and vice-president for enrollment at that time not only endorsed this recruiter's success, but also ran interference, as many in the faculty, a number of alumni, and even some trustees expressed reservations that Nyack would change too much and thereby lose its identity. Both leaders were strongly committed to pressing ahead and two years later promoted this young man to director of admissions, the first Hispanic to serve in the administration of Nyack College.

A mere three years after Nyack began recruiting heavily in New York City, the face of the campus had changed dramatically. At that point, 40 percent of the student body was people of color, a startling rise from 12 percent a few years before. It is now easy to see how this happened, but from the vantage point of the 1980s, the strong leadership of the president and the vice-president for enrollment was required so that the college could bridge the mere eighteen-mile gap between its campus in suburban Nyack to the George Washington Bridge, the entrance to Manhattan and the communities of Harlem and Spanish Harlem.

Since the college had moved out of Manhattan in 1897, the distance between the suburban college and the city had grown with each decade, so that by the late 1980s, the two seemed to be in separate galaxies. There were even discussions about moving the college to a more rural location, as white students and their parents from the traditional recruiting territories of upstate New York, Western Pennsylvania, and Ohio became fearful of attending a college so close to New

York City. After all, as New York papers noted at the time, the federal government had told New York City to “Drop Dead” rather than providing help for the city on the point of bankruptcy. Why, then, would the white families who had sent their sons and daughters to Nyack for so many years want to do so now?

Thus, recruiting in the city and admitting so many students from the broader urban area was both courageous and revolutionary. But as with any major change, there was a call for further change from the newly admitted black and Latino students, followed by a backlash from forces who feared that Nyack was losing its very heart and soul.

Encouraged by one of the few Latino professors on campus, Latino students interrupted an early 1990s meeting of Nyack’s board of trustees and presented the trustees with a list of demands for change:

- Hire more professors of color.
- Diversify the curriculum.
- Hire people of color in Student Life.
- Establish scholarships to assist students of color.
- Allow black and Latino students to assist in planning chapel services.
- Make the campus climate amenable to students of color by changing things ranging from menus in the cafeteria to student activity programming.

Amazingly, the executive team soon put in place plans to make changes in a number of these areas; in regard to curriculum, there was real change before a backlash again slowed the progress to bring true diversity. The vice-president for academic affairs appointed a faculty committee to revise the core curriculum, and by 1992, a much more inclusive core that examined world cultures rather than Western cultures and celebrated diversity in a “multicultural America” had begun to take shape.

The year 1992 saw the trustees dismiss the president and the vice-president for academic affairs because of the controversy surrounding a professor who wore a button that said “Support Gay Rights.” There was fear that Nyack was going too far—a fear that was very much linked to a broader fear that swept through the white evangelical community when Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992. However, a new college president, keeping both the vice-president for enrollment and the director of admissions in their roles, continued to actively admit students of color and pursue plans to diversify the institution.

In addition, the new president began the process of bringing people of color onto the leadership team and the board of trustees. He appointed the college’s first African American vice-president, and by the time the president had

completed fifteen years in office, people of color represented a quarter of the board members. Most importantly though, the new president launched Nyack's city campus and began the process of reaching out to partner with black and Latino churches in New York City.

## **ENGAGING URBAN AMERICA**

Encouraged by adult students who had studied at one of the college's extensions in the city, the president developed a vision to bring Christian higher education to the residents of the city—to be “in the city for the city.” He launched a branch campus in 1997, and within four years (by 9/11), Nyack had over 1,000 students at its city campus, with 750 in its undergraduate program alone. Nyack was also offering a range of graduate programs (counseling, education, MBA, ministry) to almost 250 students as the president began the process of reuniting the college with Alliance Theological Seminary (ATS), which had functioned as separate entities since the late 1980s.

The stunning growth of the city campus by 2001 meant that in terms of the overall student demographics, the minority had become the majority. For the college, this year was a tipping point in terms of diversity. Nyack's student demographics now closely corresponded to ethnic group demographics in New York City. City residents, especially members of black and Latinos churches, increasingly looked to Nyack for graduate education. Soon, 40 percent of the institution's students would be graduate students. ATS's Master of Divinity program became the institution's largest degree program, with more than four hundred students. And the MA degree in Mental Health Counseling became its second largest program. ATS, which had been struggling with declining enrollments, quickly grew to become one of the largest seminaries in the United States. Perhaps more importantly, the face of ATS changed as well, with more than 75 percent of its students being people of color.

The move into New York City and the embrace of an urban student body also reshaped the college's undergraduate programs, as city residents were attracted to professional programs that led to careers readily available to people of color. New undergraduate programs in social work, nursing, and criminal justice were launched and have since become some of the largest undergraduate degree programs. And a number of undergraduate degrees that had once been the central programs of Nyack Missionary College but had dwindled to the point of being moribund were reborn and grew into thriving programs at the city campus: biblical literature, music, and pastoral ministry. The importance of the church in African American and Latino communities throughout the city meant that Nyack rapidly became the school for the training of city ministers.

Interestingly, for both the college and the seminary, enrollments at the suburban campus increased, with many new students coming from the metropolitan New York area. And for both campuses—Nyack and Manhattan—the largest groups of students came from Brooklyn and Queens. What is significant about these two boroughs is that they had become, by 2001, home to very diverse groups of immigrants. So with the launch of the city campus, Nyack became a school in which the majority of its students were first or second generation immigrants. No longer did being black at Nyack mean a student was African American or possibly Afro Caribbean; being black at Nyack now meant that students were just as likely to have come from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, Ghana, Nigeria, or Kenya as they were to have been raised African American. And to be Hispanic at Nyack was no longer synonymous with being Nuyoric (of Puerto Rican birth or descent, living in New York City), given that Hispanic students now hailed from Colombia, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, or one of the many countries of Central America. Likewise, to be Asian American at Nyack once meant that a student came from Korea; now students attended from China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and India.

Such a dramatic transformation resulted in a number of major changes. Nyack's admission requirements remained the same—a statement of faith and a pastor's recommendation were still required of all undergraduate and seminary students. And most of the new graduate programs required the same. As with the curricular changes, however, a whole range of student services underwent transformations as the college gradually began the process of hiring faculty and staff in all departments whose faces looked like those of the students. This process was primarily led by the president, academic vice-president, and the chief financial officer.

## **PARTNERING WITH URBAN CHURCHES**

The president also believed that if urban churches saw the evidence that Nyack College seriously intended to be “in the city for the city,” then they would send their congregants to Nyack as students. In order to demonstrate Nyack's commitment to the city, he set up regular luncheon meetings with many church leaders and pastors in the city. Speaking to these groups about Nyack's vision for educating the city was central, but the presence of the entire Nyack leadership team at these luncheons spoke volumes to the NYC church community. But probably the greatest indicator of Nyack's sincerity about being willing to partner with NYC churches was that the college hired faculty and staff, for both campuses, from the city church community.

Partnerships with four city churches and their leaders have become extremely important for Nyack: Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral, Brooklyn

Tabernacle, the Christian Cultural Center, and Evangel Christian Church. All of these churches are located in Brooklyn or Queens and have played vital roles in helping Nyack be “in the city, for the city.”

These churches and others have sent many students from their communities to Nyack, and Nyack has drawn upon their members in order to hire faculty for both campuses. Initially, Nyack reached out to these churches for adjunct professors, and then began hiring as full-time professors those adjuncts who demonstrated a strong calling to teaching in Christian higher education. Often, these professors did not have terminal degrees, so the college began a program to assist new professors to pay for their doctoral programs.

Before this process began, Nyack had bought into the “myth” that there were no qualified faculty members of color who would be willing to work at the college. A new paradigm was born. Rather than advertising nationally for open positions, the college began recruiting its faculty in the city with the help of city churches. No longer would the college have to move a young faculty member and his or her family from the hinterlands of the United States. Faculty hiring now involved, in many cases, identifying seasoned professionals with a history of teaching in city colleges, public schools, or churches—individuals who had established homes in the city and strong ties to local churches. And so, in six short years after launching the city campus in 1997, the college, because of the expansion of its programs, was able to hire an incredibly diverse faculty—45 percent people of color by 2003.

City churches were also a rich mine for helping Nyack fill leadership positions. When the institution fully unified the college and seminary in 2003 and moved to adopt what it called a “university model” by establishing a number of colleges and schools, twelve deans were appointed, half of whom were people of color.

The impact on the curriculum of hiring so many faculty and deans of color has been enormous. Since many had experience in other professional educational settings where issues related to diversity had been embedded into curricula, this process began in earnest in many of the degree programs offered by the institution. This momentum was helped by the move toward specialized accreditation of the professional degree programs like social work and education, as the accreditors required the inclusion of specific courses that examined diversity within particular fields of study.

## **LINKING PAST AND FUTURE**

By 2003, then, Nyack College had made a remarkable transition from a small, majority white, suburban college to a midsized, very diverse college with two campuses—one in the suburbs and one in the heart of the city. Substantial

strides had been made in diversifying the faculty, academic administration, and board of trustees, which were then 40 percent, 50 percent, and 25 percent people of color, respectively. And significant programmatic changes had been made to serve the institution's diverse population. Yet this transformation had occurred without the guidance of a new strategic plan or guiding vision.

The launch of the city campus did, however, begin a process whereby the college, in conjunction with archivists from the sponsoring denomination (The Christian and Missionary Alliance), began to explore the college's earliest days in Manhattan from 1882 to 1897. This recovered history told a story that few at the college knew about. A portrait of the founder, A. B. Simpson, emerged that startled yet pleased the community: Simpson was a Canadian who came to the United States in the 1870s to pastor a church in Kentucky and then pastored a church in midtown Manhattan. He was so moved by the racist and anti-immigrant attitudes of "respectable" Christians that he left the pastorate to found a school that would become Nyack College. So from its earliest days, the college had enrolled African Americans as well as recent immigrants from China and Italy. Simpson boldly proclaimed, "Our Master knew no color line except that of the blood red cross"; and thus the diverse college of the twenty-first century had found its roots in the nineteenth century.

Out of the school, a movement developed, an alliance of like-minded Christians motivated by the desire to spread the gospel of Jesus. Yet this was no ordinary missionary movement, as Simpson himself was deeply passionate about confronting the social problems so prevalent in the city around him. He launched numerous parachurch ministries to the homeless, the unemployed, single mothers, the incarcerated, and all others struggling within an urban context. Posters outlining these early aspects of the college, as well as others depicting its early diversity, were created by the denomination and displayed throughout the hallways of the college's Manhattan campus and the college's administration building in the town of Nyack. A history had been reclaimed, and a beginning that had foretold the present was made evident. It became clear that the college's true mission, since Nyack's founding, had been to serve the underserved.

With a new story and renewed mission—one that had been lost and now was recovered—the college, under the leadership of President David Schroeder, laid out five core values in 2005, one of which is "intentional diversity." While the other core values—academic excellence, global engagement, personal transformation, and social relevance—could be found in the aspirational or strategic goals of many colleges and universities, few would, at that time, state that they made diversity a strategic goal. However, Nyack did not develop these as goals that could be measured, so the college could not know whether or not each was being achieved.



## ASSESSING THE SUCCESS OF DIVERSITY

Ten years after codifying diversity as an aspirational goal or core value, the need to measure the effectiveness of learning at a diverse Christian college has emerged. A number of areas have been identified for assessment:

1. Nyack now has substantial populations of Asian Americans, blacks, Hispanics, and whites, so members of each group can now find a vibrant collegiate environment solely within their own group. In other words, students are under no compunction to socialize with students from a different group. Is this then really a diverse environment wherein students are learning to work with each other and where students of color are learning to negotiate the still very white world of the careers that they will enter? And will students of color even be able to enter underrepresented fields? And are white students being equipped to be successful in a multicultural world?
2. Nyack's professors now teach a range of courses that explore issues related to diversity, yet do they engage social justice issues, white privilege, institutional racism, and the like? Few graduates, with the exception of those in select majors, seem to be aware of these issues. So what sorts of training should faculty receive to assist them in engaging in the more difficult topics that must be studied at a college as diverse as Nyack?
3. Nyack's retention and graduation rates for black and Latino students lag behind the rates for Asian American and white students. Similarly, these rates at the city campus are far below those at the suburban campus. While many of Nyack's students of color are recipients of Pell grants, and Pell recipients have lower retention and graduation rates than students who don't receive Pell funding, the question must be asked whether the programs that Nyack has in place to assist at-risk students are effective.
4. Furthermore, since a large percentage of the entering class fails out during the first year and the majority of these failing students are students of color, it seems urgent that Nyack redesign the first-year curriculum. The curriculum currently places heavy emphasis on writing, research skills, and study in the liberal arts. Yet most of Nyack's first-year students have been educated in urban high schools that do a dismal job of preparing students to excel in these areas. Nyack needs to develop a curriculum that simultaneously affirms the skills in which they are proficient, such as oral communication and technological literacy, and prepares students to enter the requisite liberal arts courses central to a college education. For instance, should students take statistics before taking college algebra, and should

the first course that develops quantitative analytic skills be a financial literacy course?

5. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for a Christian college, is Nyack actually providing its students with a theological understanding of the Bible that underscores and affirms diversity and speaks to issues of marginalization, sexism, and racism? Nyack's students respond enthusiastically to the worship services and the overall spiritual climate on both campuses, but how many would say they have walked away from Nyack with the knowledge of God's Word as a radical underpinning for their faith?

Assessing these issues will take a good deal of work and involve a tremendous amount of struggle, debate, research, and writing. But the very fact that these questions are asked and these issues are raised is a testimony to the ongoing struggle to make Nyack a diverse Christian college. The easy part of Nyack's journey to become a diverse college is over. Certain demographic percentages have been achieved, certain courses that focus on diversity have been put in place, and the first phase of becoming diverse has been wildly successful. A foundation is finished and is ready to be built upon.

The next phase of becoming truly inclusive lies before us.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the tipping point for your college to become a diverse community?
2. What academic programs best serve students of color at your institution?
3. What changes should your institution make to its admission policies and student services in order to best serve students of color?
4. What strategies can your administration employ to encourage ethnically diverse churches and the broader communities that represent people of color to "buy in" to your institution?
5. What strategies can your college develop to hire people of color as faculty?
6. What goals can your institution set to diversify its faculty, staff, administration, and board?
7. What aspects of your institution's history and early mission provide the foundation for establishing a diverse institution today?
8. Is diversity something that is talked about at your institution, and/or is it emphasized in mission or vision statements, strategic goals, and objectives?
9. What is distinctively Christian about your institution's approach to diversity?
10. What are some of the fears or obstacles standing in the way of your institution becoming more diverse and inclusive?