THE IMPORTANCE OF A PH.D. IN THE DEI SPACE

Business Ph.D.s are specially trained to understand not only how organizations work, but more importantly, how to make them work better.

BY OSCAR HOLMES IV, PH.D.

There are many smart, accomplished, experienced, and battle-tested people in the world. Without a doubt, Ph.D.s make unique contributions to DEI spaces and all of us in DEI spaces are better as a result. This rigorous training accounts for why the Ph.D. is often considered the most prestigious and exclusive degree one can obtain. Ph.D.s are awarded across multiple fields, but let’s focus particularly on the contributions that business Ph.D.s can make to DEI.

Attorney and diversity consultant Vernā Myers famously said, “Diversity is being invited to the party and inclusion is being asked to dance.” Admittedly, business Ph.D.s came much later to the “DEI dance” to offer our contributions with respect to other disciplines like psychology, sociology and education. More importantly, the effect of our tardiness would be felt more acutely had it not been for The PhD Project, where the mission is to increase diversity in corporate America by increasing faculty diversity in business schools. There are approximately 25,000 business professors in the U.S., but in 1994, when The PhD Project was founded, there were only 294 African American, Hispanic American and Native American business school professors. In a “Diversity Matters” podcast episode, I interviewed The PhD Project Founder Bernie Milano and we discussed how in only 25 years, The PhD Project was able to quintuple that number to nearly 1,500 business school professors.

Despite our late arrival to the dance, business Ph.D.s are impressively taking the lead in reinforcing the unique contributions that Ph.D.s can make in DEI spaces. Quite frankly, DEI efforts are often carried out in organizations across various departments and frequently have financial implications. Business Ph.D.s are best positioned to make unique DEI contributions as we acquire expertise at these intersections by studying disciplines like management, accounting, finance and economics, marketing and information systems. We can do this because like other science-based Ph.D.s, business Ph.D.s are trained in the scientific method whether we employ quantitative or qualitative analyses, or a combination of them both, to answer our specific research questions.

Yes, anecdotes and storytelling have their place in DEI spaces, but knowledge creation and extension heavily depend on hypothesis testing and theory building. It is important to know whether one’s personal experiences can reliably be generalized to others in the population. Likewise, we need to know what are the conditions under which we would expect similar or different outcomes. Answers to these questions are some of the types of unique contributions that Ph.D.s make in DEI spaces. Research findings are often disseminated to the public. However, these findings are not always concise or definitive. Although research always answers some question(s), many times it elucidates more questions than it answers. Yet, it is no surprise that journalists and editors want to write attention-grabbing headlines and stories that excite the public to read the stories they publish and provide concise and definitive answers. As a result, research findings are often misunderstood, or worse, exaggerated or misrepresented in the popular press.

People who solely rely on these articles, stories, or other video briefings on DEI “research findings” and who are unable to scrutinize the original research studies and understand their designs, analysis choices and assumptions, sample selection, study limitations, etc. can make significant errors when they attempt to integrate their new DEI “knowledge” into DEI practice. Not surprisingly, I have seen this happen numerous times by well-intended DEI professionals and the public. Again, because of our training, Ph.D.s are uniquely able to contribute to DEI spaces by publishing, correcting, and clarifying DEI research findings.

The DEI tent is large enough to welcome and appreciate the contributions from people of all educational and functional backgrounds. However, it is important to note and appreciate complementarity. As highlighted above, Ph.D.s make unique contributions to DEI spaces and all of us in DEI spaces are better as a result.

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https://www.phdproject.org

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