

Diversity in Evangelical Higher Education  
An Interview with Will Kratt  
By Glen Kinoshita, Director of Multi-Ethnic Programs, Biola University

Will Kratt has served as a student affairs professional at a leading university for twelve years until recently accepting his call into the ministry. Will recently completed his doctoral dissertation at Claremont Graduate University with a focus on diversity in Evangelical Christian Higher Education. He received a B.S. in business administration from Cal Poly Pomona, an M.S. in counseling from Cal State Long Beach, and a Ph.D. in education at Claremont Graduate University. This interview highlights Kratt's interview responses and published findings as he discusses diversity, Christianity, and Evangelical Christian Colleges and Universities.

**Glen Kinoshita: Tell us a little of your background as it relates to diversity in Higher Education.**

Will Kratt: I have had twelve years of experience working in Student Affairs and addressing diversity issues in Higher Education, all of them being at Cal Poly Pomona. I spent my first three years in University Housing Services and the past nine years in the Office of Student Life and Cultural Centers. In addition to my work at Cal Poly Pomona I have served as volunteer and consultant with the Anti-Defamation League and the National Conference for Community and Justice. Just recently I have relocated to the Atlanta area, where God has led me to plant Trinity International Bible Church.

What got me started in diversity work was an incident that occurred at Cal Poly Pomona in the early nineties when I was an Assistant Residence Coordinator. One night there were about 20 African American students having a social gathering outside of one of the student apartment buildings after quiet hours and they were making some noise so I went to see what was going on. When I got there I told them it was quiet hours and that they needed to cease making noise and go inside. They were having beverages in red plastic cups which I assumed to contain alcohol, and so I also said to them, "you need to throw it away." This caused a reaction with the students since they were having Coke and Sprite and the students felt I had made an assumption based on racial stereotypes that wasn't accurate. Despite attempts to resolve the situation that night, the incident ended up in several issues of the campus newspaper and resulted in a series of meetings with the Black Student Union and the Vice President of Student Affairs. The students had made a list of demands regarding reform and awareness needed related to diversity in the on-campus housing program, and also that I resign from my position. The whole incident thrust me into a process of discovering my own identity as a white male and issues of diversity that I had given very little thought to previously.

**GK: Can you give us a brief synopsis of what you were looking for in your research? How did you collect your data?**

WK: Despite Biblical passages that would suggest that Christians emphasize love, justice, compassion, forgiveness, and unity, the Christian church and Evangelical colleges and universities appear to be far behind secular institutions in addressing diversity issues, multiculturalism, and many of the injustices that exist in society, including racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. The purpose of my study was to identify the factors that support or inhibit diversity at predominately White, Evangelical, Christian colleges and universities. Empirical research indicates that these institutions are behind their secular counterparts in advancing diversity initiatives related to the multicultural awareness of their students.

My study examined several questions relating to diversity at predominately White, Evangelical, Christian colleges and universities: How is diversity understood at these institutions? Are diversity efforts of these institutions enhanced or hindered by the Evangelical mission of the institution? Are there motivating factors that compel these institutions to support diversity? What are these institutions currently doing that supports diversity? What inhibits progress toward diversity among these institutions? What perceptions do students, faculty, staff, and administrators have of their institution's commitment level to diversity?

My methodology essentially was to do a case study analysis, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Interviews, focus groups, direct observation, and document analysis from two Evangelical Christian colleges and universities were used for in-depth analysis of several dimensions related to issues of diversity that the literature suggests should be addressed in higher education.

**GK: Being that you are a Christian but have served in secular institutions, what are some of the vivid contrasts you see in regards to dealing with diversity in secular and Christian higher education?**

WK: Between secular and Christian institutions, diversity is defined very differently. Diversity is understood in Christian circles from a Biblical perspective and there is much interest in learning more about diversity, although it seems that not all biblical principles related to diversity are being given the same level of attention (I'll reflect on what I mean by that later). There is some effort and a sincere desire to see an increase in diversity but based on my research findings there still seems to be more talk than action in Christian institutions. In regards to secular institutions that I am familiar with there seems to be much more of a comprehensive approach to diversity and they walk the talk more. It is clear that secular institutions have been working in this area a lot longer.

**GK: Did anything surprise you?**

WK: As I just mentioned, I think Christian institutions have looked into Biblical principles such as unity and reconciliation, but the aspect of justice seems to get less attention. This may be because it takes considerable effort and resources to really act with a sense of integrity and justice. Institutions have competing priorities as to where

their resources need to go, and so adequately addressing the issue of justice seems to be a major challenge.

There was an emphasis on being one in Christ that I heard often among respondents at both Evangelical institutions. However, there seemed to be a lack of willingness to address some of the obstacles that hinder being one in Christ, such as the serious inequities in our society. There are injustices that hinder oneness that the Bible calls us to address. We seem to be willing to discuss unity and there is some discussion about reconciliation in Christian Higher Education, but again, there is less discussion and certainly action about biblical justice. The word justice is used 142 times in the New International Version of the Bible. The New Testament depicts Jesus as passionate about justice. Several scholars suggest, and I agree, that unity without justice is unlikely to occur and is even hypocritical. We need all of these components to be genuinely one in Christ.

**GK: What are some of the strong points in Christian Higher Education and what are some of the weakness?**

WK: The strongest thing I found with Christian institutions was the current effort to want to address this issue. I found that many senior administrators who hold the power were willing to address these issues. There is an interest and growing number of individuals who want to see something happen. The two institutions I studied seemed to reflect some top-down support from the administration to address diversity, but this did not automatically mean that it translated into action. For example, one college seemed to have taken more steps at top levels of the institution to promote diversity, but student and faculty data suggested that these steps amounted to more talk than action. Results suggested that there needs to be more intentionality about the recruitment and hiring of faculty of color, financial assistance to students of color and other underrepresented groups. Again, in addition to a desire and intention to address diversity, the findings suggest that an increase in the allocation of financial and human resources was needed in this area as well. Research related to diversity in secular higher education suggests that it needs to be at the heart of the institution's mission, teaching and scholarship, its efforts to improve campus climate and intergroup relations, and its recruitment and retention programs.

With respect to campus climate and intergroup relations, for example, again, the biblical principle of being "one in Christ," appears to have been misinterpreted and either overtly or covertly utilized to pressure students of color to assimilate to the dominant culture, rather than allowing students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds the opportunity to freely express their cultural uniqueness.

Missions trips and weekly chapel services are a strength, and a unique opportunity for the Evangelical mission at Christian colleges and universities, and could be used to explore biblical principles related to diversity in greater detail. There seems to be great potential for applying diversity training techniques used in the secular arena while maintaining biblical principles of love, compassion, justice, unity, and reconciliation.

**GK: What are some of the recommendations that you have for Christian institutions?**

WK: One of the difficult issues that seems to be “the elephant in the middle of the room” related to true reconciliation and justice in the Body of Christ and Christian institutions of higher education is power and privilege related to whiteness. This includes the difficulty people of color have in a campus culture that is rooted in White Evangelical cultural norms. These are very difficult topics that need to be addressed more openly and honestly at these institutions. While some scholars, educators, trainers and activists are addressing the issue, whiteness is still not receiving the attention it demands. Far too often, the impact of whiteness and White privilege gets lost in conversations about racism, and solutions become either to ‘celebrate our differences’ or to decide that ‘we are all one in Christ.’ Both of these concepts are valid to some degree, but they do not really eliminate the underlying problems and attitudes that sustain racism in America and continue to be one of the greatest challenges within the Body of Christ. We need further research and best practices related to diversity that focus on how to engage white Christians to respond biblically with a sense of justice, reconciliation, and personal responsibility, rather than a sense of entitlement, guilt and anger. Those of us who are White Christians can’t deny that there are injustices related to diversity and cover them over with the biblical principle that Christians are all “one in Christ.”

Perhaps the greatest challenge in diversity work in Christian Higher Education is identifying how we should move forward to effect positive change. Paraphrasing the book of James, it is my hope that in our work to promote biblical principles of unity, justice, and reconciliation in the Body of Christ and specifically in Evangelical Christians colleges and universities, we will continue to strive to be “not just hearers of the Word, but doers also.”

References: Kratt, Will. (2004), Diversity in Evangelical Higher Education. Claremont Graduate University. Quotes used with permission from author.