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Minority and Friends

Oshkosh Placement Exchange

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Different does not mean Diverse

The concept of “diversity” is a topic of great discussion in the field of higher education. There are many institutions in which diversity is a social construct that is welcomed, and encouraged among student populations. Several schools post advertisements to present their diverse student body, or what they aspire to be. A beautiful picture showing people from different walks of life, living in perfect harmony; there is a student of color, a student in a wheel chair, another student with a rainbow t-shirt, and so on. I am often puzzled by these photos, not because I am against a harmonious world, but because this is not an accurate representation of most of the colleges and universities in the United States. I hope that someday we live in a nation where diversity is not a concept, but rather the social norm. However, I do believe that it is important that we recognize that we do not live in a diverse nation. Being in a setting that merely has different people does not make us diverse. In order for diversity to flourish there needs to be connections among people. When we come to the realization that diversity is not amongst us we begin to question why, and as we dig through history to understand why, we unravel great opportunities for academic growth. Throughout this essay, I aspire to dissect the meaning of diversity, and illustrate why its presence is necessary in higher education.

As I explore the question of why we do not live in a diverse nation, I realize that my answer is biased in nature. It is because of my personal experience in higher education that I have developed such bias. When I came to college, I was unaware that I was a symbol of diversity. I was given several labels that allowed me to be a representative of diversity- Latina, first generation, and female. Although I have always known that I was a Latina, and that I was among the first in my family to attend college, I did not understand why other people needed to make light of it. I was well aware of how much college meant to my family, and how privileged I

was to be the first to experience it. I understood that I was among the first major wave of Latinos to attend college, and that I was adding to the number of women obtaining a college degree. What I did not understand was, why I was reminded of it every day my first year of college. It became clear to me that I was attending an institution that prides on being one of the most diverse schools in the nation, and I was fulfilling their image.

Through my observations I believe the reason that we do not live a diverse nation, is because for much of our history we have separated ourselves based upon our differences. We have been separated by class, sex, gender, language, nation of origin, race, ethnicity, able bodied, religion, sexual orientation and more. To my understanding many of these separations are differences that still plague our nation.

The field of higher education serves as the recruiter for diversity. It aims to not only have people of different backgrounds, but to provide a setting where educational development can occur due to these backgrounds. It encourages conversations about diversity to exist, and diverse relationships to be established. Higher education is always in the process of serving their student population to the best of their ability. In recent years the demand to attend higher education had altered the demographics of the student body significantly. In order to meet these demands, laws were implemented, and opportunities were created. Our nation is beginning to see a more diverse student body.

Although obtaining a diverse student body is a critical step in diversifying higher education, it is not the only step. There needs to be a level of acceptance among the things that make us different. For education to be effective there needs to be an interest in learning about differences. When we use higher education as a platform to dissect the meaning of diversity, we dismiss various stereotypes and break down barriers. Higher education holds the unique

responsibility to alter society's mentality, from the way things once were, to the way they should be.

I have utilized my education as a tool to explore the differences among people, so that I could become a diverse individual. While completing my undergraduate degree I have earned membership in many clubs, have engaged in several service learning excursions, and created many relationships that have allowed me to observe and learn from different situations. Now, that I am coming to the end of my undergraduate experience, I am realizing how much value there is to having a diverse education. I am also realizing how rare this diverse education experience is. The location of the school I attended greatly contributed to my diverse experience, but location should not be the main factor. I believe that a diverse educational experience begins with the professional staff in higher education. The staff of the university should be a reflection of the student body. It should reflect the students' needs, and create a space where the students can explore their identity. The personnel should also create avenues where diversity can be explored, whether by them sharing their experiences, or opening up a space where they can hear others.

I understand that by diversifying higher education, it requires diversity among the student body, and the professional staff. I seek employment in higher education so that I can represent the next generation of students who share a background and circumstance similar to mine. They are on the rise to success, and I will be there to help them open doors.