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### My Journey to Understanding Diversity: Becoming a Critical Thinker

I grew up in what one might consider a diverse setting. I was born and raised in San Francisco, California. The city is bustling with culture, art, and social activism. My neighbors came in all different shapes, shades, abilities, sizes, and spoke many different languages. One of my favorite parts about going home is the different smells that seep out of my neighbors' kitchen windows from the amazing dishes they prepare.

Another huge part of my idea of diversity has come from within my own family. My mom is Japanese-American and was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. My dad is Spanish from a small city near Barcelona called Terrassa. This intersection of culture and language has played a huge part in my life. I speak Spanish fluently and am learning Japanese and Catalan. I can make flan, sushi, paella, and soba noodles. Such an experience gave me a strong sense of self and a huge amount of confidence.

Sadly, I believe I took such a culturally diverse situation for granted. I guess it's true that you learn the value of something once you no longer have it. When I got to Syracuse University, there were a lot of things that were starkly different than what I was used to. Weather aside; there was a big difference in the culture of the campus in comparison to San Francisco.

I sought out a cultural organization that I could relate to. I attended various student organization meetings, but didn't feel that my identity was reflected completely in any of them. I met up with some other students of mixed race backgrounds and we decided to revive a student organization that had folded a few years back. The organization is Multiracial Experience. The goal of the organization is to bring students together regardless of race. We seek to be critical of the racial boundaries that have been formed within our country and to have discourse on such issues. In the past, we have had forums on interracial dating, transnational and transracial adoption, multiracial people in the media, and modern India. For this coming semester we are planning a forum on multiraciality within the Latino community, a one-day workshop on white privilege, and our 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Multiracial Awareness Week where we will bring in both a professor to speak about multiracial identity development and a slam-poet.

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What has made this such a successful organization is our openness to understanding issues within many different communities. For the events mentioned above we have worked with many other cultural organizations as well as the LGBT resource center and LGBT studies program along with the women and gender studies department. Through these co-sponsorships we have been able to discuss issues within these various communities, and more importantly, understand the similarities in experience and oppression.

Another experience that has made Syracuse a little more like home is the Wellslink Leadership Program sponsored by the Office of Multicultural Affairs. The program is for un-sponsored students of color and it was just what I needed. The program was there to support students in their transition to college. I also had a peer mentor, Winston who was there as to advise me academically and socially, and soon became a friend. Two years later I had the privilege of being a peer mentor in the Wellslink Leadership Program. I was able to relate to what my first year, student of color mentees were experiencing and guide them in the right direction.

A great opportunity came along when my mentor and supervisor for the Wellslink Leadership Program nominated me to be a NASPA Undergraduate fellow. It has been such an amazing experience. I was able to speak with student Affairs professionals about their positions, learn about the past and future of student affairs, and was even give the chance to present to a group of student affairs professionals and students. I chose the topic of student of color retention in higher education. This issue is definitely of importance to me and I truly enjoyed learning about the different theories that exist and seeing how they actually apply or relate to my experience and the experiences of my peers.

Although many of my experiences at Syracuse University have centered around racial diversity, I have also been challenged to look at the many other variables in our lives. I have been working with a woman from Liberia for the past year and a half, teaching her English and working on pronunciation. This experience has given me the opportunity to learn about a completely new country, culture, language, and the immigrant experience. This has been eye opening in understanding the challenges she

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encounters and how much I take for granted. I am currently taking a class about the LGBT rights movement and experience. Thus far, I see many similarities in the discrimination that LGBT people face and the movement for rights as in many other rights movements I've studied.

In being critical of the many sources of diversity, I believe it is important to understand how these issues become a part of ones life. Many of them have traditionally taken shape in the form of oppression, glass ceilings, or self consciousness. However, many of them also provide us with a great deal of privilege. Although some may see it as a disadvantage at times to be a person of color or a woman, I am privileged to be able bodied and heterosexual. Although these are overly simplistic ways of categorizing our differences, I believe that recognizing the historical past to these issues makes it clear why we must be worldly, open-minded people.

I have always been proud to be from San Francisco and from an amazing, mixed race family. What has made my college experience so life-changing, is that I have been challenged to not just appreciate diversity, but to understand it. I have learned to be compassionate towards the experiences of others and to better understand my own experiences.

In going forward as a student affairs professional I hope to utilize my great wealth of knowledge on diversity to challenge my students to step outside of their comfort zones and look at life from a different perspective. I am also eager to continue my journey to understanding diversity with colleagues, mentors, family, and the very students I'll be working with.