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Minority & Friends Network

Travel Grant Essay

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Growing up in rural Kansas, there were never positive discussions about diversity in my home. The people in my hometown all seemed very homogenous and this was “normal” to me. When I moved to Wichita, Kansas, the largest city in Kansas, to attend college I was in for quite a shock. People were different from each other! Not just the color of their skin, but their values, upbringing, and other attributes. I became hooked on diversity and have never looked back!

To me, diversity is more than just the color of someone’s skin, their sexual orientation, or other easily categorical attributes. To me, diversity is about appreciating someone for who they are and not for the stereotypes that they fit into. Appreciating the diversity around me has had a huge impact on me, and I enjoy helping spread the message to others. Below are some of the techniques and tools that I use to help educate students about diversity.

### **Meet them at their level**

For some students, much like myself, they have never heard of diversity, or may have never heard anything positive about diversity, when they enter college. It is important not to judge them or treat them poorly because of their lack of knowledge. It is my belief that most people are not intentionally mean-spirited, but may be offensive to others because of a lack of understanding. There are also students who come to college with an already healthy appreciation for diversity. As student affairs professionals, it is important that we understand that our students all come from different places and we will need to find out where they are so as to not overwhelm them. Starting out somewhere that is too far for students may make them shutdown and become resistant to future conversations.

### **You must accept yourself before you can accept others**

When talking about diversity, students will challenge you. They will question you about your beliefs, and they will ask questions about your own personal characteristics. As a student

affairs professional, it is important that you are aware of who you are and what is important to you. You must be in a place where you are comfortable with yourself before you can advocate for others.

### **Talking about diversity can be uncomfortable**

Talking about diversity is not always easy to do. There's not one correct way to address it. Sometimes people's egos get bruised. Sometimes people ask questions that are not easily answered. As student affairs professionals, we must understand that talking about diversity can sometime be uncomfortable – and that's okay. When students are challenged to think beyond their current frame of reference, this is when learning happens.

### **Pop culture can be your friend**

One great tool that I have found as I work with students on diversity issues is pop culture. Today's media is beginning to address issues of diversity and it can be a great conversation starter. For example, the new television series "Glee" has addressed topics regarding sexual orientation and disability. Movies such as "Crash", "Higher Learning", and "But I'm a Cheerleader" are also great ways to address diversity topics. Using the pop culture references makes talking about diversity a little less intimidating and lot more fun for students.

### **Being an advocate for something that you are not can be powerful**

One thing that I often hear from students is something similar to "She's only for gay rights because she's gay." I believe that being an advocate for a group that you are not a part of can send a very powerful message. Standing up for something that you are passionate about is always the right thing to do. It has been my experience that students feel especially supported when you advocate for them in an area that they don't believe you have vested interest in.

**Sticks and stones may break bones, but words can hurt too!**

Things that people say can be very hurtful whether it's meant that way or not. As a student affairs professional, it is important that we role model to our students the type of language that is appropriate from an educated person. Phrases such as "That's so gay" or "That's retarded" must be wiped from our vocabulary. Names for racial groups are also not appropriate. I believe that it is my responsibility to educate others on the offensive nature of the words that they use, and I am not afraid to pull a student aside and have a conversation about their word choice. This is usually a positive experience as they usually just do not understand how their words can be hurtful. Remaining silent is like condoning their words.

**Being an advocate is rewarding**

Perhaps my favorite part about being an advocate is when I can see the returns. Watching a student have that "aha moment" when they finally understand is all that I need to know that the work I do is important. This year, I had a resident assistant come and talk to me about a personal issue with diversity. I was not her direct supervisor, but she chose to speak with me because she knew that I would support her. I was so flattered that she trusted me to help her, and I felt that I had been rewarded for doing something that I love!

**Educate yourself**

One of the most important aspects of diversity and multiculturalism is that things are constantly changing. There always new theories being created and new training tools. As student affairs professionals it is important that we continue to educate ourselves. Attending professional conferences, sharing tips and techniques with colleagues, and talking with our students are all ways that we can achieve this. We must continue to educate ourselves to be the best advocate that we can be for our students!