

Why Diversity Matters

By David Rosowsky



Universities and colleges are constantly being challenged to define a diversity agenda, speak to the ever growing importance of ensuring diversity in their organizations, build culture and community that both reflects and fosters diversity, and demonstrate progress towards measurable diversity goals. Academic institutions seek diversity in the broadest sense and across the broadest spectrum of definitions. We must embrace diversity not as a set of constraints, but as a *strategic priority* that has inclusiveness at its core. Doing anything less is not realizing the full potential of the University, and therefore not maximizing its impact, as an institution, on our world.

First and foremost, colleges and universities seek diversity of ideas. This is the very foundation on which the modern college or university is built. Founded first as places of higher learning, discourse and mentorship, the first colleges sought to bring people together¹ (often to a sanctuary or some similarly inspiring locale) for the common good of learning. As these institutions evolved and grew, whether humble or noble, the core of common knowledge across a range of disciplines also grew, giving rise to the arts and sciences curriculum we know today. We added agriculture and mechanical arts (which later became engineering), medicine, education, law, and a range of professional schools, as well as colleges dedicated to lifelong learning and continuing education. The result has been exponential growth in knowledge and diversity of ideas. I believe this is the "best destiny" of the University.

We live in a society that is increasingly diverse. Therefore it is logical that we seek diverse representation within our universities. In the case of gender, the historical graduation rates by gender in some fields of study have limited the rate at which a balance can be achieved. But with very few exceptions, those rates are trending upward and we are seeing greater balance in our universities. Gender and orientation-related classifications are greater in number today than they were in years past. This has created new challenges but also new opportunities related to inclusiveness and accommodation. In all cases, an academic community must seek to minimize - if not remove - barriers to learning and discovery, creativity, and social interactions, if it is to become truly inclusive.

Colleges and universities also seek diversity in background, what some call "cultural diversity." This includes race, color, gender identity of expression, sexual orientation, national and ethnic origin, socio-economic status, cultural and/or geographic background, religious belief, age, disability, and veteran status – in other words, diversity in "where a person has come from" when he or she arrives at the University. The simple explanation people give for why this definition of diversity matters is that we live in a global society. Our students will work in an increasingly interconnected world, they will have overseas assignments, work with people from many different cultures and backgrounds, and have to be sensitive to, aware of, and informed about differences in cultural mores – possessing what is often called *cultural competency*. These points are all valid, and important, but this is not the most compelling reason the University should seek cultural diversity. That reason is far more nuanced: We must seek cultural diversity in all forms because it maximizes our highest goal of *diversity of ideas*. More than just the ideas brought forward individually by

¹ There is no denying that some in our society were initially denied access to colleges and universities. Some notable universities, including the University of Vermont, were among the earliest to break through barriers. UVM was the first institution of higher education to declare public support for freedom of religion, and was the first university to admit women and African-Americans into the honor society Phi Beta Kappa.

people of different backgrounds or experience sets, we posit that the learned discourse that takes place within and amongst these diverse groups will give rise to *new ideas*. This is the University's "best destiny."

I believe our cultural diversity supercharges our academic community, accelerating knowledge generation and creativity. It is clear that our collective diversity of backgrounds, experiences, cultural mores, value systems, and personal beliefs helps to inspire entirely new thinking. And we know this new thinking will be needed to address the grand and complex challenges we face as a planet today and will face tomorrow.

Diversity and inclusiveness go hand-in-glove, but they are not the same. Diversity goals are set to maximize the potential of the University, as stated above, and therefore realization of these goals benefits the University. Inclusiveness refers to making those from different cultures, backgrounds, experience or capability sets feel welcome in the academic community. Thus, achieving inclusiveness goals benefits (first) the individual. But a diverse University benefits its individual parts (students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni/ae), and an inclusive community of welcomed individuals benefits the University. Indeed, diversity and inclusiveness are complementary and synergistic: one enhances the other and each is necessary to truly realize the other.

Our thinking on diversity continues to evolve. Our concern is no longer just about ensuring access (which itself has many dimensions, cultural and financial). Our focus now is also on building a diverse academic community to maximize the potential for new ideas. This is accomplished not just by increasing numbers, but through a transformation of campus culture, one that potentiates innovation, discovery, and success. Diversity is not a set of goals imposed by social pressures or government programs, but rather a set of goals established to elevate the University and push out further in scholarship, creativity, and knowledge creation. We seek diversity not only because it's the right thing to do, but because it's the smart thing to do.

--/--

David Rosowsky is the Provost and Senior Vice President at the University of Vermont located in Burlington, VT.