8-28-2013

The Shortcomings of a "Diverse" College Campus

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The Shortcomings of a "Diverse" College Campus

Keywords
Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, diversity, college, Diversity Officer, race, ethnicity, minority, Diversity Peer Educator

Abstract
"What is the diversity like at Gettysburg College?" As a tour guide, I get asked this question a lot. It’s a tricky question to answer: On one hand, I know that this is probably the family’s way of inquiring about race on campus without having to use such a taboo word, but on the other, my Diversity Peer Educator training chimes in and I want to challenge my questioner’s assumptions about what diversity even means. [excerpt]

Comments
Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

This blog post is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/86
The Shortcomings of a “Diverse” College Campus

August 28, 2013

“What is the diversity like at Gettysburg College?” As a tour guide, I get asked this question a lot. It’s a tricky question to answer: On one hand, I know that this is probably the family’s way of inquiring about race on campus without having to use such a taboo word, but on the other, my Diversity Peer Educator training chimes in and I want to challenge my questioner’s assumptions about what diversity even means.

In a piece published last September, President Riggs cited the AAC&U definition of diversity as “individual differences and group/social differences.” Simply put, diversity is variety. Having students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds does indicate differences, and therefore diversity in those areas, which is crucial to having a diverse campus. Students of color undeniably experience the world very differently than me. I don’t worry about being mistrusted, harassed or dismissed because of my race. People don’t regularly assume I am unreliable, incapable or dangerous. This freedom, this invisible privilege, inevitably shapes the way I interact with and view the world. For those often targeted because of their race, the resulting views of society will be quite different.

Yet, even with these differences, racial and ethnic indicators alone are not enough to demonstrate true diversity, and such thinking can be harmful to our understanding of what diversity really means.

Reducing diversity to a matter of race implies that race is inherently the most important factor in any individual’s identity. While being white is the aspect of my identity that has most heavily influenced my life, I am also afforded the right to identify as a 21-year-old, a queer individual, a philosophy student, a writer, and a friend. If we aim for equity, why should this change for people of other races?

Each person has multiple identity markers: Some we choose; some we are born into; some are thrust upon us by others. Race can be a major part of a person’s identity, but being of the same race does not mean that white people or people of color will all have congruent experiences, or even think about race in the same way. A person’s academic interests, skills, geographical origin, traditions, familial arrangement, religion, socio-economic...
background, medical circumstances, gender identification, sexual orientation, age, and countless other identity markers interact with each other and with race and ethnicity to compose any individual’s identity.

The collegiate microcosm offers a good example of how diversity is typically approached, as it is discussed frequently and almost completely deliberate in composition. In the college admissions process, to champion for a black or Hispanic or Asian student precisely because they are black or Hispanic or Asian is to reduce that person to nothing more than their race. Perhaps such an occurrence seems unlikely, but it’s hard not to speculate the focus is on race when I’m told of an admissions counselor who ended a phone call with an excited announcement that another student of color made a commitment to attend Gettysburg College. While her application surely demonstrated unique traits, talents and passions, the counselor referred to the student only by her race. Because we so rarely acknowledge diversity in other areas, they hardly seem worth getting excited about. Instead, we celebrate one fraction of the student’s identity that we know can be lumped into a statistic to show off the school.

Approaching diversity as merely a numbers game also implies that diversity is an act of charity—that only white students accepted into Gettysburg College are really deserving of the honor. I’ve heard countless stories of white students directly accusing black students of getting into Gettysburg only because of their race. These are students who have worked as hard as white students, if not harder, just to have their achievements completely undermined by the widespread assumption that they could not possibly have the same qualifications, unique experiences, talents, and intelligence.

All of this seems a bit counter to the intended goal of diversity, doesn’t it? To say that “individual differences and group/social differences” has been achieved because 324 of our 2,700 students are students of color dismisses the issue too readily. The more we try to quantify diversity and prove that we have it, the more we end up objectifying the students who fall into so-called “diverse” categories.

I want to say all of this to the prospective students on the tours I lead. I want to tell them, “We have 12% ethnic diversity on campus and, just like you and me, the students who encompass that statistic come from every part of the globe; they are writers, researchers, athletes, student leaders, activists, artists, musicians, volunteers, chefs, and comedians. Their contributions to campus life are too complex to be conveyed by a mere statistic.”

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