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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Thinking Beyond Access

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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Thinking Beyond Access

Abstract

Last spring I announced at a faculty meeting that a major theme for our campus this year would be diversity and inclusion. I'd like to add equity to that framework as well. This year I hope that we can develop a shared understanding of these topics and some goals to which we can aspire as a community.

Five years ago Gettysburg College established a set of four strategic directions to guide our planning and decision-making: Engagement, Distinction, Access, and Connection. At that time we described Access as our aspiration to "increase the diversity of the student body and create a campus environment that is accessible and welcoming to a diverse student body." Now is the time to ask the Gettysburg College community to engage in thinking and discussion about how we might update and expand our approach to this strategic direction.

I understand that some members of our community might wonder why this is important. The answer is simple: to be a premier liberal arts college, to deliver a truly excellent educational experience to our students, we must increase our focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. This focus is essential to preparing our students for professional and civic lives of impact in this rapidly changing, multicultural, globally interconnected world. [excerpt]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, diversity, Diversity Commission, equity, inclusion, accessibility

Disciplines

Disability and Equity in Education | Education | Educational Sociology | Higher Education | Liberal Studies

Comments

The text of the President's message is also available from the President's Office pages of the Gettysburg College website: <http://www.gettysburg.edu/about/offices/president/priorities-initiatives/diversity/sept2012.dot>

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Thinking Beyond Access

Janet Morgan Riggs

September, 2012

Last spring I announced at a faculty meeting that a major theme for our campus this year would be diversity and inclusion. I'd like to add equity to that framework as well. This year I hope that we can develop a shared understanding of these topics and some goals to which we can aspire as a community.

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I understand that some members of our community might wonder why this is important. The answer is simple: to be a premier liberal arts college, to deliver a truly excellent educational experience to our students, we must increase our focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. This focus is essential to preparing our students for professional and civic lives of impact in this rapidly changing, multicultural, globally interconnected world.

Some definitions

To facilitate our conversations, it is important that we adopt some common definitions. For guidance, I've gone to the Association of American Colleges and Universities for definitions that are clear and can provide a foundation on which we can build.

AAC&U defines diversity as individual differences and group/social differences. Individuals vary in personality, learning styles, and life experiences; any room full of people presents individual diversity. Group/social differences include race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, country of origin, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, etc. An important point is that diversity is a description, not an action. And that is why the creation of a diverse community is just a starting point. To move beyond description, we need an understanding of inclusion and equity.

AAC&U defines inclusion as the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity. This definition moves us from description to action. Inclusion ideally occurs in all facets of a liberal arts experience—in the curriculum, in co-curricular experiences, in everyday interaction with community members. With inclusion comes the opportunity for learning, for gaining insights into different perspectives, cultures, backgrounds, ways of thinking. A liberal arts education prepares students with the ability to approach problems and issues from multiple perspectives. An excellent liberal arts education requires inclusion.

And what about equity? AAC&U defines equity as the opportunity for historically underrepresented populations to have equal access to and participate in educational programs that are capable of closing the achievement gap in student success. It is here that social justice becomes a focus. Striving for equity requires that we advance our understanding of social and cultural injustices and work to address them. Our mission to prepare our students to be effective leaders who will work for the greater good requires a

focus on equity on our own campus; it also requires our students to take that focus with them into their communities and places of work.

The Gettysburg Context

A core institutional value underlying Gettysburg's mission statement is that "sensitivity to the human condition, and a global perspective... [are] necessary to enable students to realize their full potential for responsible citizenship." We acknowledge this in our curriculum through our informed citizenship goal. Gettysburg College students take at least one year of language and at least two cultural diversity courses. However, active engagement with diversity should not end there. Our students' education will be enhanced by multiple opportunities for engagement with diversity in other courses, in co-curricular activities, and in everyday interactions with other community members. This engagement is essential for the strong preparation of effective citizens and leaders who will be living and working in diverse communities. To prepare our students for productive lives in a diverse society, Gettysburg must imbed into the educational experience a clear focus on inclusion — actively and intentionally engaging its students with diversity.

Another core value underlying our mission statement is "the worth and dignity of all people and the limitless value of their intellectual potential." Acting on that value requires that we inspire our students to strive for equity, to work towards the removal of cultural obstacles that limit the ability of any of our community members to reach their potential. To fulfill its mission Gettysburg must help its students understand the inequities that exist in society and feel a responsibility to effect positive change.

I also feel compelled to say that creating a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable community is simply the right thing to do. A Gettysburg education should be available to all who are qualified, not just to those of a particular socioeconomic status. The Gettysburg College community should be welcoming to all of its members, not just those of a particular sexual

orientation or religion. And the Gettysburg experience should support the personal and intellectual development of all of its members, not just those of a particular national origin, race, or ethnic heritage.

A Campus Focus

This fall, I will ask our community to reflect on this theme of diversity, equity, and inclusion—and to consider what we need to do as a college and as a community to enhance our efforts in these areas. Along the way I think it's important to acknowledge the significant progress we've already made. We have increased the racial/ethnic diversity of our student body over the last decade. We have increased the number of international faculty. We have an active ALLies organization. We have a Judaic Studies program and an active Hillel. We have become the home for the Consortium for Faculty Diversity in Liberal Arts Colleges. We are in the process of developing new institutional policies related to bias incidents, and we are rethinking our approach to religious and spiritual life. These are all important steps, and we should be pleased with our progress. But we also know that we have much work to do.

I have asked each division head to incorporate a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion into their planning for the year, and our Board of Trustees will focus on this topic during their fall retreat. Our Middle States Self-Study Steering Committee has chosen diversity, equity, and inclusion as a theme for their work, and they will lead community conversation on this topic this fall. I hope that you talk with each other informally about this topic, in addition to participating in campus conversations hosted by our Middle States Steering Committee. These campus discussions and the work of the Middle States working groups and Steering Committee will lay the foundation for Gettysburg College's longer-term planning in this area.

These conversations will, no doubt, be challenging. We must be willing to talk openly, to listen carefully, and to allow each other to make mistakes. I also

hope that these conversations will be quite gratifying as we find new opportunities to engage and embrace difference and learn from each other. I urge your participation in this process, as these conversations have the potential to make us stronger both as a college and as a community.

<http://www.gettysburg.edu/about/offices/president/priorities-initiatives/diversity/sept2012.dot>