

Myths and Realities about the Concept of Diversity
Developed by the Diversity Committee
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A commitment to diversity means a commitment to inclusion, welcome, and support of individuals from all groups, encompassing the various characteristics of persons in our community. Among these characteristics are race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, age, socioeconomic background, religion, sexual orientation, and disability.

From an educational perspective, we consider diversity to include all kinds of differences and dissonance that constructively strengthen the educational experience. With respect to the Texas public and legislators we are especially concerned about improving racial and ethnic diversity at Texas A&M University.

Achieving a diverse faculty and student body presents challenges that include the debunking of prevailing myths about diversity. A first strategy for recruiting and retaining a diverse student body must be to confront misconceptions about diversity using high quality research data. We provide the following data-driven responses to selected myths that may impede Texas A&M University's efforts to achieve diversity.

Myth: The quality of education at a university has nothing to do with diversity.

Developmental psychologists have long contended that human cognitive growth is a result of adaptation to situations of "disequilibrium," or discrepancy from routine.¹ The salutary disequilibrium created by a diverse environment adds educational value just as expansion of traditional curricula broadens the scope of content-driven learning.

In 1997, William Bowen and Derek Bok (former presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities respectively) published a compelling analysis of survey data collected from 30,000 former university students over a 25-year period. On a 5-point scale, the predominant response from both white and non-white students was that interaction with multiple demographic groups made a significant contribution to their ability to function in the workplace. Furthermore, out of 192 social variables isolated in a campus environment, Bowen and Bok determined that interracial interaction was one of the top 3 most important factors in determining fulfillment of future civic responsibility and success.²

In a similar study by Sylvia Hurtado, the 1987-1991 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data showed positive partial correlations for all 20 self-reported factors of student growth in civic, occupational, and learning outcomes after studying with someone from a different racial or ethnic background (N=4253; controlled for college selectivity, student abilities, and academic habits). Other positive correlations were present in students who had enrolled in an ethnic or women's studies course. Hurtado comments in her article:

...although diversity is linked with student development in theory, educators must create certain conditions to maximize the potential for learning...In other words, placing students of diverse backgrounds in a classroom is a necessary but insufficient condition for learning...Particular pedagogical techniques promote the type of interaction necessary to create equal status conditions and, thus, learning in diverse environments.³

Therefore diversity has concrete educational benefits for students in a university setting; these benefits are activated and enhanced by faculty commitment to and encouragement of the diversity effort.

Myth: To promote diversity we must lower important standards.

A common misconception about diversity efforts in admissions is that standards for individual consideration of applicants must be lowered or distilled to an impersonal quota system. Analysis of the complementary Michigan affirmative action cases clarifies the legal safeguards against “dumbing down” the admissions process. In *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Supreme Court upheld the importance of affirmative action policies as worthwhile and educational according to basic sociological data and principles.

The Grutter opinion offers a ringing endorsement of the value of student body diversity in promoting numerous benefits, including: concrete educational benefits, assisting in the breakdown of racial and ethnic stereotypes; and the development of a diverse, racially integrated leadership class.

However, in *Gratz v. Bollinger* some important guidelines were laid down to preserve justice and “narrow tailoring” in admissions.

First, an admissions policy must not rely on separate tracks or quotas that insulate racial minorities from competitive review. Second, race must be employed...as only one of many factors being weighed in a competitive process that evaluates the particular qualifications of each individual applicant.⁴

The dual Michigan rulings affirm both the value of proactive diversity policies and mandate that such policies do not unconstitutionally lower University standards.

Myth: University resources are being inappropriately diverted from high priority areas to fund campus diversity efforts.

Since 1997, A&M has been guided by the Vision 2020 report which provides recommendations to elevate the university to world-class standards of academics and educational environment. Imperative 6 under Vision 2020 is to “Diversify and Globalize the A&M Community.” President Gates has singled out this imperative as one of the most important in the coming years. In effect, diversity has become one of the highest priority areas for university development and is fiscally treated as such.

Myth: Post-graduate success of TAMU students depends only on their expertise and is independent of campus diversity.

A compelling analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) shows that a positive effect on wages exists for *non-black* men who attended a school with at least 5% black students. Further investigation proved an even larger positive effect for this group if they attended a school with 8 to 17 percent black students. Overall, a "hill-shaped pattern" fit the trend for wage benefits related to black/white diversity, peaking at this 8 to 17 percent. These benefits were evident in the black students themselves, but the compelling detail in this case is that of non-black success.^{1,5} This study offers concrete data to support the following theoretical assertions of Vision 2020:

The time has passed when the isolation of the Texas A&M University campus served a compelling utilitarian function. Information, communication, and travel technology have produced a highly connected global society. *The ability to survive, much less succeed, is increasingly linked to the development of a more pluralistic, diverse, and globally aware populace* [emphasis added]. It is essential that the faculty, students, and larger campus community embrace this more cosmopolitan environment. The university's traditional core values will give us guidance and distinctiveness, while preparing us to interact with all people of the globe. Texas A&M University must attract and nurture a more ethnically, culturally, and geographically diverse faculty, staff, and student body.⁶

Myth: The ideal outcome of diversity efforts at TAMU is a campus that is "blind" to individual differences such as color or ethnicity.

The term "colorblind" has acquired many confusing nuances since it was first coined in reference to racial and ethnic equality policy. On an interpersonal level, being "blind" is ideal if it connotes an ability to ignore arbitrary aspects of ethnicity (skin color, dialect, hair, clothing, etc). However, colorblindness in a social sense is often a damaging excuse to undervalue cultural richness. Moreover, in a political sense, it provides a reason to ignore demonstrated discrepancies in basic circumstances across races. No effective diversity effort can be based on colorblindness.

...research suggests that race plays a strong role in determining where you live, what kind of school you attend, what job options you have available to you--even your health. A cursory review of arrest and incarceration rates, home-ownership rates, the siting of toxic dumps, childhood poverty and dozens of other indicators reveals that, even after accounting for geography and income, race very much matters...⁷

Victor Goode goes on to say that "[The] 'one size fits all' approach simply won't work in the more nuanced world of college admissions,"⁸ and Daniel HoSang advocates the promotion of "a new understanding of how racism is exercised and enforced--one that goes beyond a framework of legal discrimination towards an understanding of endemic racism." Recognizing the empirical ineffectiveness and essential shortsightedness of

colorblind policies, as well as the stipulations for individualized review in *Gratz v. Bollinger*, the TAMU system seeks to avoid the oversimplification inherent in the "colorblind" approach.

¹ P.Gurin, E.L. Dey, S. Hurtado, G. Gurin. *Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes*. (<http://gseweb.harvard.edu/%7Ehepg/gurin.txt>). pg 3.

² D. Bok and W. Bowen. "Effects of Diversity on Campus Life." *The Shape of the River*. pp 266-268. Princeton: 2000.

³ S. Hurtado. "Linking Diversity and Educational Purpose: How Diversity Affects the Classroom Environment and Student Development." *Diversity Challenged: Evidence on the Impact of Affirmative Action*. ed G. Orfield. Harvard: 2001. pp 187-203.

⁴ Joint Statement of Constitutional Law Scholars. *Reaffirming Diversity: A Legal Analysis of the University of Michigan Affirmative Action Cases*. The Civil Rights Project, Harvard: 2003. (<http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu>).

⁵ K. Daniel, D.A. Black, J. Smith. "Racial Differences in the Effects of College Quality and Student Body Diversity on Wages." *Diversity Challenged: Evidence on the Impact of Affirmative Action*. ed G. Orfield. Harvard: 2001. pp 221-231.

⁶ Online. "Imperative 6: Diversify and Globalize the A&M Community." *Creating a Culture of Excellence*. Vision 2020 Resolution, TAMU: 1997.

⁷ D. HoSang. "Hiding Race." *ColorLines* online magazine. Applied Research Center: 2001. (http://www.arc.org/C_Lines/CLArchive/story4_4_03.html)

⁸ V. Goode. "Crisis on the Campus." *ColorLines* online magazine. Applied Research Center: 2003. (http://www.arc.org/C_Lines/CLArchive/story6_1_01.html)

Related Reading:

Smith, D.G. "Diversity Works: the Emerging Picture of How Students Benefit." Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities: 1997.

Smith, D.G., Wolf, L.E., Busenberg, B. et.al. "Achieving Faculty Diversity: Debunking the Myths. A Report of a National Study." Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities: 1996.