Section III:

Redefining the Academy
for the Public Good

Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education

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Abstract: Advocates of diversity in higher education claim that it benefits all students, while critics argue that public rejection of affirmative action reflects a rejection of diversity efforts. In-depth interviews with white college students about their experiences with diversity reveal that they value diversity but do not understand the connection between diversity efforts and racial inequality. This disjuncture leads students to enjoy and support only certain types of diverse encounters, rejecting those that emphasize issues of power and inequality. These findings help us identify future directions for diversity efforts in higher education.

The revival of debate over affirmative action in higher education surrounding the Hopwood decision and the two cases against the University of Michigan has refocused scholarly attention on how campus diversity affects student learning, racial attitudes, and civic engagement. A substantial body of research demonstrates that a diverse faculty, curriculum, extracurricular program, and student body produces better educational outcomes for all students. Nonetheless, the vigorous debate over the value and implementation of diversity continues, as critics point to widespread public rejection of its principal policy manifestation in the form of affirmative action and of certain approaches to diversity. Their data, too, are valid. How can we understand these conflicting perspectives?

Much of the debate about diversity in education stems from a conflict between the original intentions of multiculturalism and the way multiculturalism later

developed. Early advocates saw multicultural education as a way to challenge racial/ethnic inequality. Controversies around curricular change toward this goal soon led to a watered-down multiculturalism in which the goal was mere exposure to diverse people and cultures. The goal become tolerance, not justice, and as racial inequality fell from focus, affirmative action measures stood out starkly, representing for many the only aspect of the tolerant world of education that still differentiated among students based on race.

In this chapter, I draw upon data gathered as part of a larger research project on how college students understand the meaning of diversity in American society. I argue that to reconcile the competing arguments about the impact of diversity, we must take a qualitative look at what students *mean* when they talk about the benefits (or costs) of diversity. To come to terms with this debate, we must reexamine the conflict between the initial goals of diversity and the ways it has been implemented—and understood by students—in the academy so far.

Competing Research on Diversity in Higher Education

A large body of literature demonstrates the value of diversity in higher education.[1] This research shows that both white students and students of color benefit from diversity in the student body, in the faculty, in the curriculum, and as a goal of the institution. In particular, studies have identified benefits in civic attitudes (for example, greater openness to cross-racial interaction and more desire to improve race relations), in intellectual growth (improving, for example, students' ability to think actively and solve complex problems), and in satisfaction with the college experience (Astin, 1993; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Smith, 1997; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parente, 2001).

Although there are many scholars and commentators who critique this research (and diversity measures in general), one recent and controversial article is emblematic of the sorts of critiques raised. Stanley Rothman, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Neil Nevitte (2003) correctly point out that a major weakness of some of the pro-diversity literature is its reliance on survey measures that may not tell the whole story about the effects of diversity. In particular, the authors note that students and faculty are virtually unanimous in the position that diversity has helped rather than hindered higher education. They suggest that this unanimity reflects a social acceptability bias—supporting diversity is now seen as the only socially acceptable position to take—and that the survey data therefore reveal little about the actual impact of diversity. In fact, using measures that do not ask directly about diversity, Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte find that students at more diverse campuses are less satisfied

with their educational experiences and with the work ethic and preparedness of their peers, and that students at diverse schools personally experience more discrimination than do students at less diverse institutions.

This discrepancy is interesting, important, and should prompt further exploration of the basis for the students' dissatisfaction. Perhaps Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte are correct that belief in the value of diversity is now the socially acceptable answer, leading students to report satisfaction with unsatisfying situations (or to be unaware that the diversity of their institutions is the source of their dissatisfaction). Rather than conducting further research to explore the possible meanings behind this discrepancy, however, Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte rely on a significant leap in logic to argue that students at diverse schools have a less satisfactory experience because the students of color admitted through affirmative action are less qualified than other students. This unsupported conclusion reveals the axe so many have to grind about affirmative action and how it can lead to conclusions far beyond the scope of the actual data.

It is also worth noting that Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte fail to consider a range of variables prominent in the rest of the literature on diversity in higher education. This literature consistently points out that the presence of diverse peers is a necessary but not sufficient condition for achieving the academic and civic benefits of diversity in college. A variety of institutional factors shape how diversity in the student body will or will not produce positive student outcomes (Smith, 1997). In other words, Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte's critique targets only a small part of the research evidence on how diversity affects higher education, and the evidence they omit might have fully explained the findings they consider a rebuttal of the pro-diversity literature.

In this chapter, I want to explore these discrepant findings from another direction, using qualitative research to examine how students actually make sense of the diversity they encounter on campus. Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte are correct that research reveals seemingly contradictory beliefs among college students—both support for diversity and rejection of affirmative action and other efforts that make diversity possible and meaningful. The best way to understand why students often hold these apparently conflicting views, and how they make sense of that conflict, is to hear from students directly how they experience and understand diversity. What do college students think "diversity" means, and how do they connect that abstract concept, which they overwhelmingly claim to value, with their larger set of attitudes, experiences, and understandings of how society works and their place in it? Understanding how students think about diversity in relation to their other views can help us clarify the source of the underlying tensions between advocates and critics of diversity efforts in higher education.

Data and Methods

The data reported here are part of a larger study examining how undergraduates respond to course curricula that challenge their positions of privilege in racial/ethnic, gender, and class hierarchies. This study involved semester-long observation of three introductory sociology courses at two research universities (one a second-tier, nationally-recognized university; the other a respected regional university) in a metropolitan area in the Southeast. I chose courses that made social inequality a central theme (spending at least half the semester on inequality issues) and that used different pedagogical approaches.

From each class, I recruited a sample of students to interview three times each, at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. Because my purpose in the larger project was to examine how students responded to challenges to their privilege, I selected students with various combinations of privileged social positions—for example, white men from both wealthy and working-class backgrounds, men of color, white women, etc. The students were mostly first- and second-year students, though a few were third-year students, and they reported a range of majors, including many still undecided. In all, the project involved approximately ninety-five hours of classroom observation and seventy-nine interviews with twenty-eight students. I coded the observational and interview data both inductively (looking for themes to emerge from the data) and deductively (identifying data relevant to previously identified themes).

In thirty- to sixty-minute tape-recorded interviews, I asked the students about their evolving thoughts about the course material as well as about their backgrounds and their college experiences overall. Although asking students about "diversity" was not a focus of the research, many of the interviews yielded comments that illuminate how students make sense of their experiences with diversity at college. In this paper, I examine the discussions I had about diversity and race with five of these students, all of whom are white.[2] I selected these students because their responses were the most revealing, but their views are also representative of common patterns among the white students I interviewed.

Student Views on Diversity and Race Relations

My data support the widespread finding that college students see "diversity" as a core part of the college experience. Some students, however, are more enthusiastic and curious about diversity than others. Further, as they talk about their views on diversity, it becomes increasingly clear that in their minds, in contrast to the views

of many of their teachers, "diversity" and its value are a very separate matter from questions of race and social inequality. It is students' views on this latter issue, I will argue, that tell us much more about how students really learn (or fail to learn) from the diversity they encounter in higher education. In this section of the paper, I will illustrate this point by analyzing students' responses to diversity, moving from students who are neutral toward diversity to students who excitedly welcome it, and examining how these views toward diversity correspond to their views about racial/ethnic inequality.

Matt[3] offers the most minimal acceptance of diversity possible. Explaining that he comes from an all-white community in the Northeast, he notes that college is much more diverse, but that the diversity doesn't bother him. Another student, Tom, expresses only slightly more positive feelings about diversity. He believes that diversity is preferable to the uniformity of his home town in the Midwest. It is not clear, however, *why* Tom has this preference. He shows little interest in actually exploring the diversity around him. The following exchange is the entirety of his comments on diversity:

> **JL**: So you enjoy having all the people around, or would you rather go back to a small setting?
>
> **Tom**: I like the smaller setting, knowing all the people, but everyone there was white, Christian, you know, small town. Here there's completely different diversity, which I like. Like my two roommates, one's Jewish, and the other's half…Persian, which is interesting.
>
> **JL**: Do you talk about that stuff a lot, like your different backgrounds?
>
> **Tom** (tersely): No.

This exchange begs the question: What does Tom see as the value of diversity? It seems that for Tom, its mere presence is enough. Tom's example might be the sort Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte would use to illustrate the social acceptability effect. Tom knows he is "supposed" to say diversity is good, but when pressed, he does not seem to have reflected on its value. On the other hand, Tom did raise the issue of diversity on his own (I had only asked him to compare small town to city life), which indicates more than a mere socially required nod at diversity.

Like Matt and Tom, Angela also sees diversity as a key part of the college experience. But while Matt finds it neutral (at best) and Tom sees it as a mildly pleasant background characteristic of the school, Angela finds the diversity, along

racial as well as class lines, somewhat uncomfortable. The first in her tight-knit Italian-American family to leave their New York City home to attend college, she says, "I felt like I was a very open-minded person back home. Then I came to college and see that I really don't know very much about the world." Like Tom, Angela is aware that diverse people and experiences surround her, but she is not interested in learning from this diversity. As she explains it, she prefers to "get around" the issue:

> I mean, my parents say that all the time, you know, "Don't be mean, we're all equal, but you can't marry one." That's something that—that's in a lot of my—I mean, I have friends whose parents are completely racist, completely bigots about everything. But then, we have my parents that like to get around it and I'm exactly the same way. I mean, I have friends from other cultures, but I would never think about dating them.

Angela's beliefs about racism support her "getting around" the issue approach as quite reasonable. She says:

> I don't know if it's something we can fix because I think it's in us. I think it's something that we've grown up with and I don't care what anyone says. Racism is in all of us. Ignorance about other cultures is in all of us. We grow up with it. That's just how I feel.

Given these comments, one could easily imagine Angela agreeing with survey items like, "Racism is still a problem today," and thus being considered a diversity "success story," whereas in fact, she has quite rigid beliefs about the intractability of racism (even though she seems to see it as learned) and the appropriateness of only surface cross-racial interactions. Although she originally saw herself as "open-minded," by which she seems to mean open to other cultures, she draws a very traditional line between friendships and acquaintances with people of color and romantic relationships with them. In Angela's view, there is a slippery slope from accepting people of color as equal to white people to accepting them as potential family members, so much so that she expresses her parents' lessons on the matter as one short sentence moving from "don't be mean" to "don't marry one."

Angela is also careful to separate her own views of race from those of people who are *completely* racist, seeming to recognize that her views *are* racist while at the same time claiming a non-racist status in comparison to others. She goes further by claiming that everyone is racist and that this racism cannot be eliminated, thereby explaining away any blameworthiness on her part—if everyone is racist, then her own views are unremarkable; and if these views cannot be eliminated, then she bears no responsibility for failing to reflect upon or change her views.

One noteworthy aspect of Angela's position is that her views on diversity (finding it a bit unpleasant and threatening) and her views on race (finding inequality and prejudice intractable) are consistent with each other. For many other students, in contrast, a positive view of diversity appears to conflict with more negative views of racial/ethnic "others." The students point out the value of diversity and express interest in engaging it in some way. The ways they engage with diverse peers or curricula, however, demonstrate that their general claims about valuing diversity do not fully reveal their views of racial/ethnic "others."

Abby seems to find her diverse interactions at college mildly interesting, but she disengages from them at the slightest provocation, and her views on racial inequalities, like Angela's, may help to explain her readiness to tune out. Sometimes, Abby describes the types of experiences we usually expect to come out of diversity. Although Abby's goal in choosing a college close to home was to minimize change and difference, once at school, Abby learned from and enjoyed her encounters with students different from herself. She says that her sociology class has helped her to notice social phenomena she did not see before, like "the hierarchy of people, things like that. And the stigmas that people place on others, like that. And things that—stereotypes that I put on people. It's like, 'Oh, I understand now.'" When I asked her for a specific example of a stereotype she had noticed in herself, she said:

> Um, I don't know. I sit with a person in class, and she was talking to me—it was funny, because she was talking about how she's in an accounting class. She's Vietnamese. And, um, she explained to me how usually people always think that Vietnamese people are very smart and very good in math. And, she goes, "It's not true because I stink at it." And, I was like, "Oh, you know, I kind of did think that." So, just little things like that, those little stereotypes that I always considered to be true, and now knowing they're not.

Abby seems to approach this new understanding as an interesting piece of trivia, one that provides the pleasures of self-discovery and worldly awareness. However, the pleasures associated with these new insights are, for Abby, contingent upon the absence of any negative pressures, including discomfort and any claims that might be "too extreme." For example, in the same discussion about new insights she gleans from her sociology course, Abby says that she has learned about "the different reactions of different people from different cultures," citing the split opinion between the Black and white communities in the city after Black suspects were named in connection with a major crime spree. Notice the way that her assessment of the difference shifts quickly from interest and understanding to rejection as she describes her reaction to the debate:

> **Abby**: Like, with the whole [crime spree] thing, when they were putting up pictures, and they showed that they were Black people, there was a Black girl who reacted and said, "Of course they're Black, they're going after the Black people." And, the white people were like, "It would have happened the same way if it was a white person." So, I don't know. That was interesting.
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> **JL**: Why do you think there was that difference in reaction between Black and white people?
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> **Abby**: I think because Black people have had more of a background of being accused when they're innocent.
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> **JL**: So, you think that's a justified reaction of that girl to feel that way?
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> **Abby**: I can understand why she would, but then again, you know, we have progressed. We're not back in those days still, so I think she did overreact a little bit.

Abby goes through several steps in making sense of this encounter. Her first response to the difference of perspective is to find it "interesting." Then she tries out the new perspective, (correctly) providing the reason that many African Americans fear and distrust the police. But she quickly follows this insight with a boundary-setting move, making it clear that her appreciation for that point of view is limited. In particular, she argues that such claims about inequality, while they have some reality, are rooted in a different time and are less relevant to today's situation.

Abby's views on racism and social change are also relevant to her interpretations of diversity. She believes that racism, which appears in the form of individuals' beliefs and behaviors, can never be eliminated:

> **Abby**: I think it's always been that way, but we've come a long way over hundreds of years. But, yeah, I think it's always been that way. I still think it will be like that, at least a little bit, pretty much forever. I mean, it shouldn't be. It should be equal, because they're all Americans, too. We all are. We all have our rights.
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> **JL**: Why do you think it's going to be like that forever?
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> **Abby**: Because there are those people out there who are stubborn and won't think any other way. Then, they, you know, influence

> others, and they influence others, and it just—unless you stop
> everybody from being stubborn, you know, it will never stop.
> There will always be one person out there who thinks that we
> should be segregated. I don't think that should be.

For Abby, we have made much progress with regard to race, and when we have not progressed, it is because some individuals are "stubborn" and spread their racism to others. Her views thus acknowledge that racism continues and at the same time compartmentalize it (it is the province of a stubborn few) and place it in the context of overall progress ("we've come a long way over hundreds of years"). She follows this same pattern in her analysis of racial bias during the crime spree. She notes that there is a history to the Black community's distrust of the police, then minimizes its contemporary impact by emphasizing that we are making progress toward racial equality.

Abby carries this understanding of positive change over time even further in her analysis of the class' study of the recent genocide in Rwanda. Her response to the book the class read on this topic also illustrates how little she is willing to endure discomfort in the service of greater awareness about diversity and inequality. Abby recognizes that the instructor included this book in the curriculum in part to educate students about diversity. Explaining what the professor wanted to them to learn from this topic, she says:

> Um, maybe to understand society and another culture. Like, that's
> so not like what's going on here, unless I'm completely oblivious to
> something going on in, like, Arizona or something. But, like, um,
> to just make us, you know, open our eyes and know that this is
> going on, because this is a huge, huge deal going on. I'm sure I'm
> not the only one who didn't know—or, maybe I am the only one,
> but—who didn't know this was going on. I think she just wants
> us to realize that there is another world outside of America and
> to pay attention.

Abby seems to understand a key part of the message of the curriculum, and the larger goals of a diverse education, in this statement. When we examine her views further, however, she reveals that she has learned little from the new awareness the book was supposed to bring her. Her major comment mid-semester, when we were just beginning the topic, was how much the subject made her want to "lose her lunch." After we had completed the unit and I discussed it with her again, even that level of "enthusiasm"—the shock and disgust at the horrors of a genocide— had waned, and she complained that it did not seem that important since it had happened so long ago. (The genocide began in 1994 and its results are ongoing; the book the class read was published in 1998, and the interview took place in 2002.)

She also complained that it was really sad. At this point, about a month after she had explained the topic's value in the curriculum, I had to prompt her to even say that she was glad to have learned about these events.

Abby thus began her approach to the material with an awareness that learning about it would teach her about people, places, and events she did not know about and increase her knowledge about the rest of the world. Most of what she learned seems to have stopped at the point of revulsion; her discomfort at what she heard became her main priority, and, in fact, led her to misunderstand the events that took place. In our final interview, she noted that she still did not understand why the two groups were "killing each other," when in fact, the curriculum described a genocide in which one ethnic group attempted to systematically eliminate the other. And in the end, Abby simply lost interest, withdrawing from the substance altogether and justifying her withdrawal by claiming that the material was outdated.

Abby's general approach to a larger set of issues may help explain her flip-flopping reactions to these two incidents. Abby is aware that she shows little sustained interest in anything she would consider "political." As she explains:

> I hate politics. If you talk politics with the wrong type of person you just offend them and they go off on tangents forever, and you're just like, "Shut up."…Um, I don't know, like when they say they want to change a stupid law, like a simple stupid law, I don't care. But, if it's a big, big thing, I'm like, "Why are you doing this?" and I start to get interested, but then, like two hours later, I'm bored. So, I stay out of it.

This lack of interest, including disinterest in sustained attention to even something "big," may explain why Abby changed her view on studying the genocide in Rwanda. In short, for Abby, "diversity" is interesting, but the political is not. The political is either unimportant (changing some "simple, stupid law"), unpleasant (from political people and their tangents to the discomfort of learning about genocide), or pointless (because these issues, like racism, will never be completely resolved).

This impulse to separate diversity from inequality and power is even clearer in Courtney's responses. Courtney feels more strongly than Abby about the value of diversity, citing it as one of the most important aspects of her college experience. At the same time, however, Courtney's discourse quickly and repeatedly shifts from pleasure in diversity to criticisms of people or behaviors that make racial *inequalities* apparent. When I ask her about her views on affirmative action, for example, she quickly shifts to discussing diversity:

> **Courtney**: I mean, [the college], I think, does a really good job of incorporating, you know, people of all types. I don't really think

[affirmative action is] right, but I don't really think it's wrong. I think that they need to find like a middle way. It should be, like mixed really well. I don't want to go anywhere that's all white. I mean, I didn't know anything about society. I live in a small white town and everybody was the same where, when I came [here] it was just like one of every kind. Like, it might not be something you can learn in a book, but being surrounded by that, it does teach you a lot of the cultures and it does make you—like, when I came here, I was prejudiced, you know? But, being here and seeing that just because they're *that* doesn't mean they're *this*, you know? Just being around it teaches you a lesson in itself. So, I definitely think they do need to work to make sure everybody is mixed—fairly, though. Not just because, "oh, well, you're white, so you get in, but not her."

JL: Do you have anything specific in mind that, you know, since you've been here, anything specific that really changed your mind or that you learned from?

Courtney: Well, my first, like, running into the situation—I came here with my best friend from high school, which was white. It was just the two of us. But, next door—I lived in the dorms the first year, so it was just a floor of 40 girls, once again, of every single—I mean, things I hadn't even heard of, you know, countries that I didn't even know where they were. And there was a girl next door from Ghana and she came in halfway through the first semester, and when I first heard she was coming—I mean, this is really bad. I feel really bad. Her name was Melat, and we were like, "Oh, God. What is she going to be like? What if she does this?"….But once Melat came in, one night, [my friend] and I sat down and we were just like, "So, tell us about Ghana." And, she was like, well, "Tell me what do you think of when I tell you that I'm from there." And, I was like, "Well, when I hear that, my perception is like it's just a small, old town, not very established, blah, blah, blah." Come to find out, like, she told us a whole different story. It just made me realize that my perception of different people's cultures and stuff, you know, is just nothing that it really is. So, just listening to her one on one, she really opened up my eyes to a lot of stuff. And, from that point on, you know—and, I still talk to her now. Her dad's here from Ghana and she wants us to go out to dinner with him. Before, I probably would have been scared

to death because she's different and it's not what I'm used to. And, when she sat down, I mean, she even told us, "Look, I was scared. I'm moving into a room with five girls and I'm the only one from another country, directly from another country." She's like, "But, you guys are awesome. You all taught me so much already." And, we always kid her, "Can you put our hair in cornrows?" Like, it's just like, by living in close quarters like that, like, I just learned stuff from being around her. So, she was the first person that really opened up my eyes, and then from there on, I just let myself see other things where before I was just like my way is the only way.

Courtney's comments are sincere, and it is clear in talking with her that she values this experience a great deal. Nonetheless, her understanding of the experience addresses only one part of the value of diversity. Courtney values diversity mainly as a change of pace, an engaging variety, and an opportunity for enjoyably (if sometimes somewhat nerve-wracking) "eye-opening" experiences. She states her preference for a campus that is not "all white" in much the same tone as one might praise a dining hall for offering variety rather than hamburgers every night. There is no sense that diversity on campus might be related to inequality or social justice, even though the issue arose in relation to the question of affirmative action. She thus expresses the watered-down multiculturalism that has predominated the educational landscape since the 1980s—the idea that diversity means the pleasure of learning some (surface) details about other cultures, not (as advocates originally intended) the difficult grappling with deep cross-cultural communication and the effort to make our interactions and institutions equally accessible to all.

Courtney's cross-cultural encounter with her Ghanaian hallmate is also a quite common way of engaging with the peer who is "other." To Courtney, this peer is slightly scary, a subject of curiosity, and, when she is found to be willing to play along by answering their questions, a friend with whom Courtney can make a joke of the idea of being in some way like the "other" (as, for example, in wearing her hair in cornrows). Although Courtney does seem to learn some valuable lessons from this cross-cultural encounter, her comments reveal some important remaining assumptions about racial difference.

A key part of the Ghanaian student's legitimacy to Courtney, what made her ultimately so interesting, was that she was successful in conventional American ways Courtney could make sense of. She feels guilty about assuming that countries she is unfamiliar with are poor and underdeveloped, but no compunction about celebrating how very similar she and the Ghanaian student are in their possessions and in certain values and aspirations. In other words, part of what makes this "other" safe and acceptable to Courtney is that she does not challenge the system in any way—she does not raise the specter of inequality, which, as Courtney's further

comments reveal, shaped her fears and expectations about her new hallmate. When I ask her where she got her ideas about what Ghana might be like before meeting her hallmate, she says:

> Um, I don't really know. I mean, I was never really exposed to anything different. You know, in high school I just remember hearing, you know, there's all these countries that aren't developed, you know, and they aren't up with technology. And, I guess I just thought Ghana is really far away—and, that's really bad for me to say that, but I'm being honest. But, I was just like, "It's kind of poor, and it's far away." And, I told Melat this, you know, like dirt roads, you know, not houses like we have, not buildings like we have, not cars like we have. And, she's like, "Oh, my God." Come to find out both her parents are doctors and they have two houses and Lexuses and Mercedes. I'm just like, "You're kidding me?" You know, and she's like, "Yeah, but I just don't like to talk about it or else, you know, I would have told you before." It was kind of like a smack in the face, because inside, I was like, "Oh my God, I judged this girl to be some poor black girl coming from this far away country who's not going to know anything." She was like a biology major, 4.0, you know, it's just like a totally different person. And, I told her and she's like, you know, "Why did you think that?" And, I was like, "I guess because I had never been educated on anything different." I mean it's not like my parents were ever like, "Black people are bad." They were never like that, but they—not them, but just my school and the town. We're not exposed to anything at all. Like, it's very—like I said, it's very white. So, I was never told that's how it was, but I just put all the tidbits of information together and came up with that for myself.

Courtney makes some interesting and quite telling connections in this statement. She is clearly now aware that her ideas about Ghana were based on ignorant assumptions. But she also articulates a central part of the basis for those assumptions—her images of impoverished African Americans. She does not describe Melat as a poor immigrant who won't know anything; she describes her as a poor *Black girl* who won't know anything. And in reflecting upon where she got her ideas about Ghana, she notes that her parents never told her, "Black people are bad." She does not mention what her parents did or did not tell her about Ghanaians, Africans, or immigrants. Apparently, for Courtney, a Black person is a Black person—and it is amazing if she drives a Lexus or gets straight As.

Attending a diverse college also gave Courtney other opportunities to interact with students of color, sometimes with trepidation, and sometimes enjoyably. She gave me some examples:

> At first, [diversity on campus] really intimidated me. Like, an example, it might be really stupid, but I'm trying to get into this pre-med honors society and I just got an email about it and I went to the website and I was looking at pictures on line and the majority of it is like Indian, you know, other people, and I was like, God, you know, this is kind of intimidating. But, I was like, if they were to come to [my hometown]—like now I see how it feels to be, like, on that other side. So, it's intimidating, but it didn't make me—I'm still going to hopefully get in, you know, and I'll just mix in and don't make it awkward. It's only going to be as bad as I make it. So, that's just an example of one thing here. Um, like, my sorority, um, there's a bunch of different—there's six sororities, but mine happens to be the most mixed. Like, it's over half Asian, and I'm glad—like, that's just a small example, but I'm glad that I picked that one because, you know, like, the stereotype—you know, it's a bunch of different kinds of girls, and just from being with them, I've learned like all different kinds of things. They're like, "Oh, the Asians are over here," you know, at an event, they're like, "white people picture. Asian picture." I'm like, it's good that we can joke around with it and it's fine, you know, we don't have a problem. There are like dark-skinned people, white people, Asian. That's just a small example, but things I did at home—you know, there's no mix, nothing. I think in a way it really like shut down the way I saw things. Then I got here and was like, "Oh." It's good, though. I'm glad.

Courtney finds the prospect of joining a group of people of another race/ethnicity "intimidating," but also feels some control over it, noting that "it's only going to be as bad as I make it" (a statement which implies that she does not consider it likely that the interaction might be *good*). She clearly desires diverse interactions and values the fact that she belongs to what she believes is her college's most racially mixed sorority, and, as with her Ghanaian friend, she values the opportunity to joke about the presence of difference.

Again, however, Courtney's willingness to see (or perhaps simply her understanding of) racial difference is limited to the pleasurable aspects of that difference. Although she says that her experiences have shown her how a person of color might feel uncomfortable surrounded by white people, she does not extend

this understanding to connect it to racial inequality, or how people of color might feel the need to band together at times for mutual support. Only a few minutes after laughing about her sorority sisters calling for an "Asian picture," Courtney shifts to frustration at racial separation. I asked her what she thought about our class discussion about the privileges white people experience in everyday life as a result of their whiteness,[4] and she quickly reveals the boundaries of her definition of "diversity."

> **Courtney**: Um, I thought [the discussion] was interesting. Some of the things that [the professor] read [from McIntosh's list of white privileges], I didn't really agree with. Not trying to be prejudiced, but I think it goes both ways a little bit. I understand that it's never going to be perfectly, um, equal. This may seem stupid, but one thing that really bothers me is, okay, like we have Black History Month, but if we ever tried to have a White History Month, oh, my God, it would be a disaster. Like, that's one thing that bothers me about, you know, they're like, "white people have all these privileges," and stuff, but yet, in the same way, you know, there's Black History Month, there's Black Counseling. Why can't it just all be history month and highlight different people? You know, are we going to have like every ethnic counseling? Just small stuff like that, like in a way, I feel like they want it all to be equal—I mean, white and Black and every other culture, too—but it still always gets separated. Like, if we want it to be equal, then we all need to act as one and stop all this, you know, "This is for whites, this is for Blacks, this is for so and so." It creates a line, you know? You can't just go to a counselor, you know, you have to decide to go to Black Counseling, you know, and stuff like that. I mean, I agree. I think that white people do have more privileges and those need to stop, but as well as, you know, all these small things on the other side that keep adding up. Because, like, you know, one group does one thing and the other group has to retaliate and feel like they've accomplished just as much. I don't know. That's just a personal picky thing. Even when I was little, I asked my mom—I remember watching Nickelodeon and it popped up on the screen, Black History Month, and I'm like, "We don't have White History Month at all, you know?" And, she didn't really know how to explain it because, you know, there's no explanation for it really. That's just how it is. So, I mean, even as a kid, those kinds of things do cross your mind. And, even

here, you know, I know here at school there's Black counseling and there's white counseling. You know, if we're all the same and we're all equal, then why do they have to have different—I know we have different issues, but you know, why not have a counseling office with Black and white people working where if you need to go to a Black person to talk about how you feel like you're being discriminated against, do that. Don't make it like separate. I don't know. That's just one of my things.

JL: Can you think of any arguments for why they should have it separate? Or, can you not think of any good reason?

Courtney: Well, I mean, I can see how they need it separate for the fact that how I said if a Black person, or even a white person, feels like they're being discriminated against, you know. Like, affirmative action, like, "Oh, so and so got in because she's Black." I wouldn't want to go to a Black counselor and say, "Oh, they got in because they're Black," or "They got an A just because they're Black." Like, that would be hard for me, because it's like saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. I mean, so I could see having it separate for that reason, just to meet the needs of everybody. But, if it was all under one roof, like one section, like student counseling, and if you wanted to specify, like, "I want to see so-and-so." You wouldn't have to go in and say, "I need to see a Black counselor." Say, "I need to talk about this issue and it would be great"—like, when you go to the doctor, "I'd like a woman." You know? Nothing against men, but that's just my personal thing. I want a woman. Like, I think if it was just all under the same, you know, roof, that it might—that's just one example. I'm sure there's other things. I mean, I guess I can see it being separate, but that could be changed under one roof and just branch that off from there. You know, all one, still, but to meet the needs of all the kids or whatever.

In these comments, Courtney struggles with the difference between acceptable and unacceptable racial separation. On the issue of White History Month, she cannot come up with any substantive difference between it and Black History Month, a confusion that indicates a shallow understanding of the motivation behind Black History Month, which is intended to compensate (in small part) for the systematic exclusion of Black contributions from the history studied during the rest of the year. On the other hand, Courtney does have some understanding

of what might motivate a person of color to want to speak to another person of color for support, but she resists making that preference too apparent, making too much of a "line." Although she sees a parallel to her own preference, as a woman, for a female doctor, and believes that preference means "nothing against men," she wants to be sure, for a not fully articulated reason, that such choices are not institutionalized or overt.

It is also telling that the other example Courtney can come up with relevant to her own experiences is that she might want to complain about African Americans receiving extra privileges, and she would not want to "say the wrong thing to the wrong person." In this example, she reiterates her underlying resentment about the benefits building up on the "other side," and reveals a fear of certain types of encounters (also evoked in her claim that having a White History Month would be "a disaster") in discussing race and ethnicity. This fear is a common theme in the students' responses. Abby wants to avoid political discussions where people go off on frustrating tangents, Angela wants to "get around" the issue, and Courtney feels that certain types of views will result in uncomfortable turmoil.

All of the students I have discussed here might have been used as evidence, in one way or another, of the success of diversity in higher education. All but Angela say that they value the diversity of college life and prefer it to the racial/ethnic homogeneity of their hometowns. Even Angela, at least on the surface, believes in racial equality. For the students who most enjoyed and valued diversity, Abby and Courtney, opportunities to meet classmates and friends from different racial/ethnic backgrounds was exciting.

On the other hand, the further we explore the students' comments about race, the more evident it becomes that the diversity they value is limited to the pleasurable and non-threatening aspects of racial difference. Further, the students fear or reject most consideration of race issues as questions of inequality, injustice, or even debate. It is the students' approval of diverse encounters that the advocates of diversity value, and the students' rejection of questions of power and inequality that the opponents of diversity emphasize. To understand the impact and status of diversity in higher education, we must examine both of these impulses at the same time, rather than considering only one part or the other.

Diversity and Social Justice

Critics like Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitt (2003), although they strongly underestimate the breadth and depth of the literature in support of diversity in the student body, the faculty, the curriculum, and institutional goals, do point to an important problem. There is an apparent disconnect between support for diversity and hostility toward the programs and efforts that create and sustain it. Because diversity *has* become

such a socially desirable value, many students who report experiencing the benefits of diversity may not, in fact, be gaining the tolerance of difference and concern for racial equality that many educators and researchers intend.

In this paper, I have argued that a full understanding of the impact of diversity requires engaging students on how they make sense of their diverse college experiences. As we examine this sense-making, it becomes clear that along with believing in the value of diversity, white students have a variety of complex reactions to their ensuing encounters with students of color and with race-based curricula, including a range of emotions (pleasure, fear, frustration, curiosity) and a confusing mixture of attitudes about the place of racial and ethnic minorities in college and in the society at large.

It should not surprise us that students have internalized the value of "diversity" in its most general, abstract sense without seeming to connect that value to broader social questions of intergroup understanding, power, and inequality. The division between these two types of understanding and approaching racial difference has been built into multicultural education since its beginnings. Curricular changes originally intended to be systematic interventions into an entrenched dominant culture in education were soon watered down to a "celebration of diversity" model wholly divorced from questions of power and privilege. Today's college students grew up in these schools, where diversity means an annual "diverse" holiday assembly or a day for tasting ethnic foods. If this is the meaning of diversity, why wouldn't they value it?

At the same time, the college-level curriculum retained much of its focus on inequality (albeit still not as systematically as most advocates had hoped) through racial and ethnic studies programs and by other faculty bringing these concerns to traditional departments. As students arrive at college, often excited about the opportunity to experience greater diversity than they have ever been exposed to, they thus encounter a conflict. In college, diversity often no longer means the pleasures of entertaining discovery. It may, instead, mean painful misunderstandings between roommates, bewildering "self segregation," heated classroom discussions, and inexplicably angry and militant student activists.

Much of the literature on the benefits of diversity demonstrates that diverse curricula and social interaction produce in students a desire for greater racial understanding, a greater "awareness" of race issues, and a desire for more cross-cultural interaction (see Smith, 1997). But the meaning of these preferences is not always entirely clear. In my own classrooms, when I teach students about multicultural education, they find it self-evident and blasé (*of course* we should learn to interact with people of all cultures). But when we discuss issues of race and ethnicity, the apparent consensus suddenly disappears. Does this mean that their support for diversity is just the socially acceptable answer? I do not think so. Instead, I think that the gap we see between their two sets of views is not a gap

to them at all, and our failure to understand why these views seem compatible to students is a key barrier to the future success of diversity efforts.

In the end, we need to face up to the fact that multicultural education is not simply about passing along a benign skill set ("the ability to function in a diverse workplace") like teaching students teamwork skills or writing. Too often we have relied on this claim to justify our efforts to those who resisted all such changes as "reverse discrimination" and weakening the canon. To a certain extent, this justification has worked. But Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte, and other critics like them, are correct that a deep undercurrent of frustration and resentment remains about issues of racial and ethnic division, and to truly educate our students, we must address these feelings head-on rather than sweeping them under the rug.

Critics of diversity suggest that if we see student support for diversity but rejection of affirmative action and other attention to inequalities, this inconsistency reveals their true feelings about the diversity measures we have taken. And, the discrepancy indeed shows just that, but not in the way critics claim. The critics of diversity efforts in higher education believe that students reject these efforts because the efforts are unfair and because they degrade the quality of higher education. In fact, students have learned well what we have taught them. We have taught this generation, through multicultural education in primary and secondary schools, that "everyone is equal" and that differences (such as clothing and food preferences) should be occasionally explored as an enjoyable break from the everyday work of education. We have devoted far less attention to teaching them about the ongoing impact of racism in the United States today—about residential segregation, about the racial wealth gap, about environmental racism, about discrimination against people of color in hiring and in many everyday interactions, about race bias in the criminal justice system, about the ways teachers' expectations affect the academic performance of students of color.

Given these messages, the findings of the critics are completely predictable. The conclusion, however, should not be to indict diversity efforts, which clearly influence students positively when they are correctly implemented. Rather, the words of these students must prompt us to reconsider what we mean by diversity and what our goals are as we educate about race and ethnicity. The student voices heard here show a significant disconnect between what students see as "diversity" (read: good) and "race" (read: uncomfortable, overblown). If it is our goal as educators to teach students to merely celebrate diversity and desire more cross-racial interaction and dialogue, our current approach suffices. But if we want our students to do more—rather than just *desiring* cross-racial contact, actually working to integrate their peer groups, workplaces, and communities; or rather than only engaging the fun parts of diversity, also struggling with the inequalities of power and privilege that the equal sharing of ethnic foods covers up—we must reevaluate our approach.

It is much easier politically to paint diversity efforts with a broad brush (as we do when we describe them as preparing students for the diverse workplace), and to leave it to individual faculty in the trenches to broach the more difficult subjects. But while the easier road has earned us much progress in integrating diversity into higher education, it also leaves us at the impasse I have described in this paper. It is time for higher education to once again stand up boldly for a racially just future.

Endnotes

1. Although "diversity" may be defined in many ways, for the purposes of this chapter, I use the broadest possible definition, understanding diversity in higher education to include any measures to include people from all races/ethnicities, people of different nationalities, both men and women, people of different social class backgrounds, and a range of other forms of difference. "Diversity" includes both the physical presence of diverse people among the students, faculty, and staff of the academy, but also the inclusion of diverse points of view in the curriculum and in the policies of the institution. Empirically, however, this chapter focuses more narrowly on racial/ethnic diversity, as it is the form of diversity that has been the most heatedly debated in higher education.

2. This focus on white students is not meant to suggest that we should not examine how students of color view and experience diversity at college. Students of color, however, necessarily come to the experience of racial/ethnic diversity from a different perspective than white students do, and examining both of these sets of experiences is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. All student names have been replaced with pseudonyms, and a few identifying details have been changed to conceal the identities of the students and their universities.

4. This discussion was based on the list of white privileges in Peggy McIntosh's (1988) classic article "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies."

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