

Diversity

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Dr. Joseph White, a renowned “diversity consultant” and professor emeritus of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of California at Irvine, came to the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) recently and told us that we lack diversity. Dr. White was hired by the university, in response to the Legislature’s decree that the University of Nebraska has to change to “look more like America.”

In order to attract more minority students, the first thing Dr. White thinks needs to happen is more diversity in the faculty:

I would like to see a faculty on this campus that looks more like America. Then changes will occur.

In order to “look more like America” UNK also needs to actively engage in the recruitment of minority students from other states.

Dr. White spoke the truth; we do lack “diversity” when the diversity of students and faculty is measured by the classification of ethnicity using national population figures. However, when using Nebraska’s 1995 population figures (91.4 white, 3.8 black, 5.7 Latin American), it is not surprising that the faculty and student body at my Nebraskan university do not look more like the America that Dr. White is accustomed to seeing in California, New Mexico, or Texas, where there are a larger number of Asians, blacks, and South and Central American students.

The reason Dr. White, and the people who support his recommendations, think UNK ought to look more like America is so our students and faculty will have a better understanding of the diversity of people in places more diverse than Nebraska.

Nevertheless, Dr. White surely understands that the reason Nebraska doesn’t look more like America is because this is Nebraska and not America, a part of the whole but not the whole.

Let us not forget in all of this that UNK is open to everyone who meets the criteria for admission regardless of sex, race, or religion. So, while we may lack the “diversity” of Dr. White’s America, it is not the case that Nebraskans lack “diversity,” unless you think that all people of a common ethnicity are the same because they share the same skin color.

Dr. White was judging solely by the eye when he stated that we lack diversity. But surely it is an intellectual error and morally wrong to judge people by the

accidental qualities of race. In this respect Dr. White is prejudiced in assuming that because we Nebraskans don't "look more like America," we are all the same.

It is always important when judging people to distinguish between the accidental qualities and the deliberate qualities.

I am accidentally a white, freckled, middle-aged, near-sighted, A-positive, six-foot-six American male. My accidental qualities could be viewed by Dr. White as birth defects, as I did not have a choice in being any of these things. On the other hand, I do have a say in my deliberate qualities of being a husband, a father, and a teacher.

There are some characteristics of a person which may be both accidental and deliberate: I am accidentally a citizen of America, but I am deliberately a patriotic or an unpatriotic citizen.

The surest way not to see a person for who he is as a person is to classify him by his accidental qualities. When you think of your neighbor as a short, freckled, white man or a tall, middle-aged, black woman you may well overlook the person who is Benjamin and the person who is Angela, both of whom are unique individuals unlike any other person who is, or ever was, a child of God.

The diversity of the students and the faculty at a university transcends the accidental qualities of sex, race, and height. The diversity at UNK can also be measured by what each member of the student body or faculty is capable of doing with his various intellectual and physical talents.

A student's diversity is magnified through his ability to comprehend biology, history, mathematics, literature, psychology; to play a musical instrument; to act in a play; to write a couplet, a sonnet, an essay, or a research paper; or to speak a language other than his own. In short, a student's diversity is measured by his ability to actualize his potential, to be, as the Army advertises, "All You Can Be."

In all of this it is best to remember that a teacher worthy of the vocation is not concerned with the accidental qualities of a student, what he looks like or his nationality. A teacher is concerned with a student's attendance, whether he is or is not prepared for class, can speak and write logically to the point at hand, whether he ask questions and accepts criticism. In short, a teacher judges students from the inside out and not from the outside in.

In order to judge the diversity of the student body at UNK beyond the level of appearances, I wish Dr. White would have used more than his eye. He should have attended classes and engaged students in the language of their studies to see if they displayed the diversity of understanding the various subject matters expected of a student with a university education.

In other words, it is time to stop categorizing people by their accidental qualities and become deliberate in measuring people as Martin Luther King hoped:

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Ω