

Diversity Statement

My current research group consists of five people: a European advisor, and four international students. The team has five different religions, five different first languages, and five different countries of origin. It is amazing to me the government and the school happily funds our research team without a single American present. On the flip side, I did not apply to schools in Europe. They were not willing to fund post secondary work for citizens from outside the EU (with rare exceptions). This European policy is clearly their loss; there is no shortage of evidence that diversity can lead to increased productivity for a workplace. Measurable benefits include an increased bottom line, better business performance, higher employee satisfaction and loyalty, and a better relationship with multicultural communities (1). When those from different upbringings are at the table, more opinions are suggested. Even if not every opinion is incorporated, they are hopefully still considered.

I don't think diversity is particularly controversial. However, I think it remains a buzzword. While many workplaces may have a policy to aim for a diverse workplace, that policy does not go further than the paper it is written on. While many midsized companies, and nearly every Fortune 500 company has mandatory diversity training, results from a ten year period show almost no meaningful change of workplace management makeup. It seems outlawing bias, forcing behaviours, and blaming employers does little to motivate them to change (2). It makes sense that workplaces do not want an external hand forcefully rearranging their current workforce. It has come to my attention that there are several meaningful ways to increase inclusion and equity, without "telling others what to do".

1. Knowing how to apply to university, especially graduate school, is almost like being in a secret society. I had the privilege of being told how to reach out to a prospective advisor. I was told what questions to be asking future advisors and their students. I was told how the application process works. Those of a different background, (socioeconomic as well as national) often do not know the process in place. They may be rejected up front as they did not reach out to an advisor before applying. They may not be able to visit campuses and talk to current students at the university. Having a clear document posted that explains the "secret steps" of a university application would go a long way to increasing applications of talented students, and retaining them. Through my work with GeoFORCE, it has been clear to me that information is power; when people are given the tools they need to succeed, they can thrive.
2. Those who serve on diversity/equity/inclusion or hiring committees put in a lot of time and service to the school. This may result in less research or teaching being produced by those serving. This service to the school should be recognized for what it is, and not count against anyone when merit is being tallied up come promotion time.
3. Imposter syndrome is a recognized phenomenon when a person attributes their achievements and successes to external factors, even if they are presented with evidence to the contrary. Studies have shown this is more prevalent in post secondary education among minority students, and that "not being part of the dominant group" is a significant stressor (3). This is a clear strain on student emotional well-being. One remedy that has worked well in the corporate world is a mentorship network. Studies have shown that white men tend to find mentors on their own, while others struggle. White managers report being interested in mentoring, but being uncomfortable reaching out informally to young woman and minority workers (4). An emplaced network clears this hurdle, and allows equal footing for all students. I have been a senior mentor during my PhD, and it has been meaningful, fun, and at times challenging. I would do it again in a heartbeat.

At times, everybody has not fit in in one way or another. Right now, most members of the faculty or student body are not from a visibly diverse background. To an extent, there is no reason for anybody not to be sensitive to the needs of others. My research group succeeds because we treat each other like people. Sometimes, it really is as simple as that.

References

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