

**ESSAY ON THE THEORETICAL IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY ON A UNIVERSITY**

Antwan Jones  
Duke University

Final Copy  
3 March 2004

Please do not quote or cite without permission from the author.

“If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.” - John F. Kennedy

Diversity has infiltrated American political ideology, and it is also deeply rooted in our institutional concept of education. For instance, in American society, there exists public and private schools, urban (large) and rural (small) colleges, and two-year and four-year universities. This collective diversity within our education system is arguably one of the great strengths of America's institutions of higher learning and has assisted in making our institutions outstanding in the global eye. Preserving this diversity is thus essential in providing a quality education for all individuals seeking higher learning. However, at the university level, diversity is influential on both the individual as well as the university's community. Oftentimes, diversity is approached using a unidimensional perspective, that is, how diversity affects a person or how diversity affects the composition of a place. However, it would be more effective to use a multidimensional perspective to incorporate how diversity affects the individual and a university's community as well as how it affects the interaction between the two. I will explicate on the value of diversity on the individual and a university's community. I will conclude with the social consequence of diversity on the individual and a university's community is increased empathy in the world.

At the individual level, diversity is central at a university because it allows individuals to reexamine their fundamental assumptions about people who are unlike themselves, and it enriches the educational experience. People reexamine their most fundamental assumptions about people who are unlike themselves by exposing one's self to a diverse group of people. The individual can then learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. Because diversity allows people to challenge preconceived notions, diversity also encourages critical thinking and promotes intellectual growth. Interacting with different individuals allows individuals to address the relation between education and a developed sense of self and responsibility toward others. Thus, diversity has positive effects on tolerance in addition to civic and social attitudes towards other individuals.

Diversity is also important for the individuals attending a university because it enriches the educational experience. We learn best from those whose experiences, beliefs and perspectives are different from our own. Therefore, we are taught best in a richly diverse intellectual environment (by means of academic curricula) as well as a diverse social environment (by means of association and interaction). In addition, diversity is tied to individual academic success for both students and faculty of a university. In which case, it is necessary that everyone involved in a university be addressed in discussing diversity. It is essential that everyone have the privilege to be in contact with all kinds of diversity, whether it is cultural, sexual, economic or intellectual diversity.

At the community level, diversity is fundamental in helping to strengthen a university's community, and it increases a university's ability to cope with sociodemographic changes in society. Conceptually, a community is a fraternal group of people living in the same locality, having common interests and being a distinct segment of society. Hence, a university's community is comprised of students, faculty and administration. As a means of comparison, one can think of a university as a work force, an establishment that embodies a work ethic along with a supply of workers. Diversity has been anecdotally shown to contribute to productivity and both staff and faculty retention. This result could also be seen in the university setting. There is an implicit value in diversity; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork, as well as community consciousness and empathy. These are all characteristics that are valuable in both universities and in the world outside of college. Furthermore, diversity helps build and maintain communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character in addition to their academic contributions. Collectively, all are forces that help strengthen a university's community.

Diversity is also significant for the university's community because it increases a university's ability to cope with change. In recent years, the United States has been transformed by sociodemographic changes. In particular, increased immigration of various ethnic groups, superimposed with the current ethnic diversity in American society, has help mold the composition of this country in the last decade. Consequently, more students of diverse backgrounds are making up American society, and by various means such as affirmative action, these students have the opportunity to further their education. In addition, more persons of diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to fill university positions. The composition of universities will therefore change because of these demographic transitions. Society's diversity somewhat forces a diversity of a university's community. Diversity may be quantitatively present at a university; however, it may not be fostered. There may not be diversity in the subsectors that make up the university. For example, minority students may be housed together or minority workers may predominantly work in one sector of the university. Thus, the community's interaction will be primarily with those within their respective groups. To combat this institutionalized group isolation, universities must educate all groups in its community and provide meaningful exposure to others different from themselves. In essence, this is the heart of diversity.

I have outlined psychological outcomes of diversity (reexamination of assumptions) and social experiences of diversity (educational experience) upon the individual. I have also discussed how diversity strengthens a university's community and how diversity prepares a university to deal with the sociodemographic changes in American society. While diversity influences the individual and the community at a university, the end result of this diversity should be increased empathy for the world. One of the assumptions about diversity is that it allows people not to be sheltered by their

own self-existence and self-realities. If we as humans are exposed and involved with others, we gain a better sense of self and the other person. Jerome Nathanson stated, "The price of the democratic way of life is a growing appreciation of peoples' differences, not merely as tolerable, but as the essence of a rich and rewarding human experience." Nathanson implied that empathy would transform this world from being a place of stark divisions based on class, gender or power to being a place where everyone is valued as an individual. In the end, this is all needed to make the world a more compassionate place.