A Message from the President

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Why Diversity Matters in Education?

“Leave your baggage outside the classroom and be prepared to learn when you enter,” is what I use to hear so many teachers tell their students. But, the question that I used to ask is, “Why?” Why should students be asked to leave what gives them a unique edge on life outside of the door? Or, why would that unique edge not be included in the learning process? Is it because the teacher found no value in child’s experience as it related to the content being taught? Or, is it because the teacher “just knew” that asking the student to utilize that experience would not be a skill needed in college or the workforce? That brings us to the big question of “why diversity is needed in education?”

Now, I know to some, diversity only includes race and gender, but the truth is diversity is defined as “a range of different things” (dictionary.com). In other words, diversity includes everything we are and are not…. race, color, language, sexual orientation, religion, gender, socio-economic status, age, disability and ability. These are the very things that make up each individual student in our classroom. And, these are the bags asked to be left outside our classrooms …each student and each bag is a minority with no voice in the classroom or the learning process, at least not one that pertains to their unique experience. The Census Bureau, however, projects that by the year 2060 the minority population will rise to 56% of the total U.S. population (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Thus, the bags will just keep growing to become a majority, but a majority means nothing if they don’t know how to interact with the minority. In other words, all students (both the minority and majority) will need to think beyond their own baggage and learn how to interact within each other. What does that mean to the educator? We as educators will need to allow students to bring that baggage into the classroom infusing it into both content and life lessons. Creating culturally aware students, who have a sensitivity and respect towards those that are not like themselves thus combatting cultural stereotypes.

And, if this isn’t enough, major organizations and companies not only appreciate diversity, but hire because of the unique perspective that individuals from diverse backgrounds bring to the company. Yes, diversity within an organization can lead to innovation and better market results (Why Diversity Matters | Education Pioneers, 2017). And, the rationale behind this is simple…we are not living in a one-dimensional world. We are living in a diverse world and the only way that a company or organization can grow is to hire a staff that reflects the market. So, it’s important that we as educators prepare our students to work in that market bringing their own unique perspectives and experiences to the table of innovation. Let’s put this into a two-point teacher preparation perspective.

First, as a college teacher preparation program we need to always think about recruiting with diversity in mind. Our students, and their future students, need to see someone like them “make it.” This is not just about race or gender, this is everything we are and are not…this is the community and the present with which our students currently live. Students identify and strive to work hard to live up to a role model that looks like them, that are from the same community, that have similar experiences and can
understand “their” struggle. Think about your own role model? Did they look like you? Did they understand your struggle? And, did you work to be just like them? This is something that we need to keep in mind as we recruit future educators. Recruit with DIVERSITY in mind! And in the process we are not only impacting students, we are also impacting the workforce.

Secondly, don’t fear teaching with culturally relevant content. As we prepare our educators we must be open to creating lessons that draw on each student’s personal experience with the world around them and those lessons need to be open for everyone to experience. Our job as a teacher preparation program is to prepare educators to view their students through multiple lenses. We want those educators to advocate on behalf of all students and families, and this can’t happen if they stay within their own baggage. This also means that we must train our educators how to teach lessons that highlight diversity and are open to difficult conversations. Again, we are in the field of always preparing the future and the future starts with our program.

“Bring your baggage in the classroom and be prepared to unpack it as we learn…because the future needs your perspective” is what every teacher should be excited to say when students walk into their classrooms.

**References**
