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Up for Debate: Acknowledging Diversity at the School of Education

Clare Merlin

A classmate recently expressed concern to me that The College of William and Mary does not always adequately address diversity at the School of Education (SOE) and on campus. “I understand that William and Mary claims it celebrates diversity,” she commented, “But I’m not sure if it’s consistently working to support that claim” (J. Doe, personal communication, January 1, 2014). These sentiments are certainly up for debate across campus, and their accuracy regarding the SOE at William and Mary can be particularly controversial.

The first part of my classmate’s comment is arguably confirmed in the William and Mary SOE’s diversity statement. This statement asserts that the school “values inclusiveness and equity of opportunities for diverse learners,” and “promotes attitudes and beliefs that foster faculty members’ and students’ understanding of self and diverse others through specific experiential learning activities” (William & Mary School of Education, 2014, para. 2). The statement further claims that those values also guide internal governance and partnerships with other educational institutions and community agencies. It concludes,

“Advocacy for diverse learners informs instructional, clinical, and policy decisions in order to impact our students and the constituents they will serve” (William & Mary School of Education, 2014, para. 2).

In an effort to better understand student perspectives regarding how the SOE promotes diversity, in Fall 2013, the SOE Faculty Diversity Committee hosted a media review evaluation event titled, “One Tribe. Many Voices?” Eighteen students participated in a six-hour-long evaluation of SOE media, and four additional students contributed evaluations asynchronously. The media reviewed included the SOE website, the physical SOE building space, and SOE print materials (Barber et al., 2013).

As one might expect, student perceptions of the SOE media and its alignment with the SOE diversity statement were complex. Although some students reported that website photographs of students were “inclusive” and included “a fair amount of pictures with people from diverse backgrounds,” other students stated that the websites did not represent diversity at William & Mary. “I did not see one non-White person in ANY of the pictures no matter how many times I refreshed,” one student said (Barber et al., 2013, p. 9, 11). Overall reactions to print media included similar concerns. Some students claimed that print media photographs appeared generic and not representative of actual William and Mary students. Others stated that the language used in print media was not inclusive of all kinds of diversity, including geographic diversity and the

role of the SOE in an increasingly globalized world (Barber et al., 2013).

Student reactions to the physical SOE space were more positive regarding its alignment with the SOE diversity statement. Participants reported that artwork in the building was “fairly universal” and showed diverse student perspectives. For example, one student wrote, “Images are welcoming and help people to feel connected to the physical space without placing undue emphasis on any one particular program or student group.” (Barber et al., 2013, p. 16). Despite these positive reactions, some students still voiced concerns about disability access in the building and a lack of representation of Native Americans (Barber et al., 2013).

This brief sampling of student feedback from the SOE media review highlights the complicated debate that the topic of diversity brings on college campuses. Although the Faculty Diversity Committee’s efforts to facilitate this dialogue warrants praise, their actions moving forward will be even more important. For example, the Faculty Diversity Committee concluded in their media review report that future actions should involve revising the SOE website and print media based on student recommendations. Such revisions may take place by forming interest groups that lead the charge in advising website

and print media designers.

In addition to these recommendations, students ought to play a key role in improving SOE media alignment with the SOE diversity statement. If faculty interest groups form, per the recommendations of the Faculty Diversity Committee, students should serve in significant roles in these groups.

In the past year, it appears that a conversation about diversity at the SOE has become livelier than ever before. The student media review played a large role in this conversation, as did the formation of Counselors & Educators for Social Justice in August, a student diversity panel in April, and a faculty diversity research panel, also in April. Moving forward, no single event like these will celebrate and address diversity at William and Mary sufficiently. But a combination of events, supported by meaningful feedback from students and faculty, may one day lead to an inclusive culture of diversity at the SOE.

References

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About the Author

Clare Merlin is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Counselor Education program at William & Mary. She is currently the GEA Diversity Committee Chair, Faculty Diversity Committee Student Representative, and Counselors & Educators for Social Justice Co-Leader.