

Diversity


at the University
of Michigan



Office of the President

DIVERSITY AND EXCELLENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

hroughout our long history, perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the University of Michigan has been our commitment, as President James Burrill Angell noted in 1879, to provide “an uncommon education for the common man.” This aspiration contrasted sharply with the goals of the nation’s earliest colleges, which traditionally served only the elite. The journey from this early ambition to real diversity at Michigan, however, has often required intense struggle. Our current successes did not come quickly, easily, or without detours along the way.

Our slow but continuous advancement has come from the efforts of thousands of courageous individuals and groups who followed a vision of equality in the face of great opposition. 

PROLOGUE: A HISTORY OF PLURALITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

The history of diversity at Michigan has been complex and often contradictory. Yet, unlike many other universities, wide access and equality have always been a central goal of our institution. We can be proud that, buoyed by committed students, faculty, staff, and the citizens of our state, the University of Michigan has consistently been at the forefront of higher education, grappling with the difficult issues of plurality and promoting equality.

From our earliest beginnings, the University of Michigan focused on making a university education available to all economic classes. For many years tuition and fees remained minimal, making a University education affordable for all. We keep this tradition alive today, when even in an era of severe fiscal constraints, the University still meets the full financial need of every Michigan student we accept.

In the early-nineteenth century, higher education was primarily a religious enterprise. Although some institutions, like Harvard, were originally more open, nearly all eventually succumbed to the control of a single religious denomination. Envisioned by the people of our state as truly public, Michigan became the first university in America to successfully resist sectarian control.

At our founding, we attracted students from a broad range of European ethnic backgrounds. In the early 1800s, the population of the state swelled with new immigrants from the rest of the country and across the European continent. By 1860, the Regents referred “with partiality,” to the “list of foreign students drawn thither from every section of our country.” Forty-six percent of our students then came from other states and foreign countries. Today more than one hundred nations are represented at Michigan.

In contrast, our record regarding Native Americans has been disappointing. In 1817, in the treaty of Fort Meigs, local tribes became the first major donors when they ceded 1,920 acres of land for “a college at Detroit.” A month later the Territorial Legislature formed the “university of Michigania,” and accepted the land gift in the college’s name. Today, although the number of Native students enrolled is low, they continue to make vital cultural and intellectual contributions to the University.

The first African American students arrived on campus in 1868, without official notice. In the years after Reconstruction, however, discrimination increased. Black students joined together to support each other early in the century and

staged restaurant sit-ins in the 1920s. It was not until the 1960s that racial unrest finally exploded into campus-wide concerted action. Although the University had made efforts, both black and white students, frustrated by the slow movement, organized into the first Black Action Movement (BAM) in 1970. The administration building was occupied and students boycotted classes. Many positive advances came from this outpouring of student solidarity. The number of African American faculty and students on campus increased; new programs were initiated and old programs were funded. Yet only a few years later, enrollments began to fall and funding waned. Although black enrollment began to increase in the 1980s, two more student uprisings (BAM II and III) occurred before the University again took a systematic look at the difficult problems of race on campus. The BAM movements are an important part of Michigan's proud history of student activism and commitment to social justice and have helped place Michigan at the forefront of the struggle for equality in America.

Michigan was the first large university in America to admit women. At the time, the rest of the nation looked on with a critical eye, many certain that the "experiment" would fail. The first women who arrived in 1869 were true pioneers, the objects of intense scrutiny and resentment. For many years, women had separate and unequal access to facilities and organizations. Significant progress has been made over the past few decades through the creation of the Women's Studies Program and the Center for the Education of Women. During this time, the University also took a number of steps to recruit, promote, and support women staff and faculty, modifying University policies to better reflect their needs. True equality has come slowly, driven by the efforts of many courageous and energetic women.

Encouraged by President Angell's service as minister to China in 1880, the University played a major role in expanding the opportunities for students from the Pacific Rim. In the late 1800s, Michigan became one of the first universities to admit Asian students. We were the first university in the United States to award a doctoral degree to a Japanese citizen. Michigan eventually became a major center for Asian education with the creation of our centers for the study of Asian languages and cultures. The number of Asian American students has grown more quickly than any other group of people of color in recent years.


More recently the number of Latino students has been increasing. Over the years, students have formed a number of vibrant organizations, including the recently renamed Alianza, The Puerto Rican Students Association, Los Hijos De Aztlán, and others. In 1988, Latinos, who had been involved in the BAM struggles from the beginning, raised their voices as a separate group to demand greater visibility and attention. Latinos face exceptional challenges on this campus, and the number of Latino faculty remains low. ↪

REVITALIZING OUR COMMITMENT

ven with our long-term commitment to broader representation, serious obstacles have hindered complete success. Many groups in the United States suffered and continue to suffer from social, cultural, and economic discrimination. Simply opening doors—providing access—has not been enough.

Despite our efforts, as we reached the end of the 1980s, the University had made little progress on many fronts in its goal to reflect the rich diversity of our country among its faculty, students, and staff. Furthermore, people from underrepresented groups who did manage to find their way here faced serious barriers to their success and advancement in a University (and national) culture still largely dictated by a white, male majority. Clearly, more was necessary. The University would have to change dramatically if it were to remain faithful to its heritage.

In the wake of the third BAM in 1987, after meetings with hundreds of people throughout our community, the University initiated the Michigan Mandate. This plan has become a model for other universities, committing the campus to a long-term process of self-evaluation and change. We have made progress in the past seven years. The numbers of underrepresented students and faculty of color on campus are at an all-time high and increasing every year, and we have initiated a long-term study to examine student attitudes about race and difference. Insightful programs all across campus are part of a broad and creative effort to grapple with the difficult issues of racism and separation.

Recently, the University launched a second, parallel effort to renew its commitment to equality for women. The Michigan Agenda for Women is a wide-ranging plan to transform the University into a place where women can succeed and excel as students, faculty, and staff. We have made a commitment to examine all areas of the campus, shifting resources, adjusting promotion and tenure policies, hiring more women faculty and administrators, and finding ways to make the University the institution and employer of choice for women across the country. 

THE REASONS FOR DIVERSITY

People sometimes ask why the University has made this commitment to change, why diversity is the cornerstone of our efforts to achieve national excellence and leadership during the 1990s. The reasons are simple:

First, the University cannot achieve excellence in teaching and scholarship unless it also benefits from the varied intellectual perspectives and experiences of America and the world in every aspect of our community.

Second, the America of the twenty-first century will be a nation without a dominant ethnic majority; it will be truly pluralistic. To serve America's rapidly changing population, institutions such as the University of Michigan must provide the educated people and ideas needed by our society both to understand and to build unity out of diversity.

And third and foremost, it is the morally right thing to do. Plurality, equal opportunity, and freedom from discrimination are the foundations upon which the University is built. It is more than what we do; it is what we must be if we are to call ourselves a truly public university. ↪

DIVERSITY AND CHANGE

Diversity is essential to any university as we approach the new century for a fourth reason. Unless we draw upon a vast diversity of people and ideas, we cannot hope to generate the intellectual and social vitality we need to respond to a world characterized by great change.

In the midst of lively debate, the scientific community has begun to realize how central diversity can be to the survival of many groups. Homogeneous populations are often much less able to respond to change in their environment. A field of monocultural wheat, for example, can produce explosively under relatively controlled conditions. But it is in great danger from climatic change or new diseases. The wheat has a very limited library of genetic material, giving it few options with which to respond.

Universities, of course, are not fields of wheat; they are much more complex. Yet the analogy in many ways is apt. While we may, in general, be able to control the conditions in a wheat field, this is much less true for a university. In fact, our world today is characterized by a burgeoning complexity and a rapidly increasing rate of change. Perhaps (and I say this advisedly), our society could tolerate singular answers in the past, when we could still imagine that tomorrow would look much like today. But this assumption of stasis is no longer plausible. As knowledge advances, we uncover new questions we


could not have imagined a few years ago. As society evolves, the issues we grapple with shift in unpredictable ways. A solution for one area of the world often turns out to be ineffectual or even harmful in another. Academic areas as different as English and sociology have found their very foundations radically transformed as they attempt to respond to these dilemmas.

For universities to thrive in this age of complexity and change, it is vital that we resist any tendency to eliminate options. Only with a multiplicity of approaches, opinions, and ways of seeing can we hope to solve the problems we face. Universities, more than any other institution in American society, have striven toward a vision of tolerance and intellectual freedom. We must continually struggle to advance this heritage and to become places where a myriad of experiences, cultures, and approaches are valued, preserved, discussed, and embraced.

This need for multiple points of view is easier to establish in the social sciences and the humanities, but these different “ways of seeing” are also critical in the “hard” sciences. As one of our colleagues perceptively explains:

Finding solutions to certain [scientific] problems may be regarded as being akin to finding the narrow path through a labyrinth leading to a chamber within one of the ancient pyramids; one's hunch as to where the path begins can be pivotal to the discovery. Many solutions to key science problems turn out to have beautiful symmetry. Indeed, tremendous progress can be made in identifying solutions by simply demanding that the solutions be beautiful But what is beautiful to members of one culture may even be ugly to members of another [This raises] the prospect of the increase in the sheer depth of understanding to be gained by tapping various cultures. By so doing, we draw upon the wealth of human experiences accumulated over the centuries in the development of numerous distinct cultures. That just has to be a powerful weapon against the unknown.

—Homer Neal, Vice President for Research
and Professor of Physics


But diversity alone is not enough. While we must celebrate differences between people, we also must make every effort to find common grounds around which to unite. The multicolored skein that is Michigan must be woven together, becoming a tapestry, with each thread retaining its unique character. 

SEEING DIFFERENCE DIFFERENTLY

We must work diligently to create a welcoming community, encouraging respect for diversity in all of the characteristics that can be used to describe humans:

- age
- race
- gender
- disability
- ethnicity
- nationality
- religious belief
- sexual orientation
- political beliefs
- economic background
- geographical background

We must move in two directions at once. We all must stop assuming that people from groups different from ours necessarily have the same needs, experiences, and points of view that we do. Yet, at the same time, we must not succumb to the equally pernicious assumption that “they” are all the same. Real barriers, experiences, and culture may be shared by many in a group, but that does not give us permission to treat people as though they conform to some stereotyped image of “white,” “gay,” or “Latino.” We must create a community where various cultures and ethnicity are valued and acknowledged, but where each individual has the opportunity to find her or his own path.

At the same time, we must recognize that not everyone faces the same consequences for their differences. The experience of an Asian American person on this campus is not the same as that of an African American person or a white woman or a person with a disability. We cannot forget that issues of difference are inextricably intertwined with issues of power, discrimination, and with the specific histories of groups and of each individual. As we pursue a pluralistic campus, we must remember that equality will require effort, resources, and commitment to both structural change and education. We must learn to see difference differently. 

MOVING FORWARD

As we move into the future, it is becoming increasingly clear that the University’s excellence and national leadership will be greatly determined by the diversity of our campus community. Different ways of conceptualizing and addressing intellectual issues give new vitality to our education, scholarship, and communal life. Excellence and diversity are not only mutually

compatible but mutually reinforcing objectives. We draw great strength from our extraordinary multiplicity.

True diversity means accepting new members not only into our classrooms, but into dialogues about how classrooms are structured and what is taught there. Diversity is not just about "numbers"; it requires profound structural change. As we have learned to be more open to different ways of seeing, we have discovered that there has always been more diversity on campus than we ever accommodated. Many of the new programs that were created to support students of color or women have actually improved the opportunities for success for all students. We will not succeed until all who come here feel a sense of ownership, until the experiences and points of view they bring are reflected in every aspect of our communal life.

We are far more diverse today than we were twenty years ago or even ten years ago. Our commitment has increased our recognition, world-wide, for academic excellence in every field. We cannot know beforehand where this journey will take us. Progress toward plurality will involve many different actors at multiple points in our community. The University is not monolithic and neither is discrimination; both are shifting constantly. We move ahead, knowing we can never simply rest. ↪

Thank you to the many faculty, staff, and students who generously shared their experiences and suggestions about how we can best achieve diversity and excellence. They made a significant contribution to this monograph.

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Fall 1995