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Regional

Diversity more than race, gender in higher ed

Most people when talking about diversity think of matters revolving around race and gender, and while those are obvious and important topics, the fact of the matter is that the definition of diversity is much larger.

Today diversity is seen in two dimensions. The first one is what is called inherent diversity, the diversity that is beyond people's control. Obviously, these issues include race and gender, but also include national origin, age, sexual orientation, disability, religious affiliation and socioeconomic status. Certainly, you can change your religious affiliation or socioeconomic status over time, but being raised in a particular religion or under certain economic conditions does give one a different perspective in life.

The second dimension may be less evident, but can be equally important when it comes to job performance. It is called acquired diversity and consists of aspects of one's life such as cultural fluency, generational savviness, gender smarts, social media skills, cross-functional knowledge, global mindset, language skills and military experience. These are characteristics that are the result of both formal education and life experiences.

Imagine for a moment that you run an engineering firm that has four white males who all graduated from Georgia Tech, one of the top engineering schools in the country.

All those four engineers came from a middle-class family whose parents had gone to college. Now you have the opportunity to hire another engineer who happens to be a minority

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candidate. Yet, that candidate not only is male, but also comes from a middle-class family and is the son of college-educated parents who also graduated from Georgia Tech. Even if you choose to hire him, you are adding little diversity to your team because that new person is likely to think in very similar ways to the rest of the people already in place.

You may think that such that this really doesn't matter. After all, you are bringing in a qualified person who most likely will get along well with other people and also brings in racial diversity. What is wrong with that?

Most people don't realize that a lot of big progress made by humanity has come about by people who think differently from one another – not just look different. That is true even in fields that seem pretty straight from academic viewpoints, such as science. Here are some good examples.

Gregor Mendel is recognized as the father of genetics. He entered the Augustinian order because his family was too poor to afford an education for him. Because the Augustinians supplied teachers to the Austrian schools he was sent to the University of Vienna to study mathematics and physical sciences. While he obtained a very good education in both broad fields, he never trained specifically in biology. Yet, when he started to do

his experiments with peas at the Brno monastery in what is today the Czech Republic, his mathematical training allowed him to visualize ratios in the characteristics that were being inherited by the plants he was cultivating. That led him to present and publish in 1865 the hereditary laws for which he is famous today.

Despite the fact that the journal in which he published his ideas was well known at that time (*Transactions of the Natural History of Brno*) and that he sent his papers to prominent botanists of his time, these naturalists had no training in mathematics and did not understand what he was trying to demonstrate.

It wasn't until 1900 – 35 years after his research was published – for his work to be recognized by the scientific community. Here is a very good example of someone with an entirely different intellectual toolbox making a revolutionary contribution to science in an area that was not his.

Another similar example involves plate tectonics. Alfred Wegener was a trained meteorologist who could not avoid, while looking at a world map, noticing that the continents fit together as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Using some meteorological data, he proposed in 1912 the idea that all the continents were originally just one that had broken up in pieces, generating the shapes of today's landmasses. His idea was ridiculed by most fellow scientists of his time, and it took more than a half century to be recognized as correct and acknowledged as one of the most important findings in geological sciences of the 20th century, and all

brought by a meteorologist.

Another case is that of Emily Martin. For many decades, biologists believed that sperm competed among themselves to be first to reach the female egg. Martin was not biologist, but rather a social anthropologist who was trained to discover how culture influences our beliefs, even our scientific beliefs.

She challenged the idea of the egg being passive and the sperm being aggressive, which is part of the cultural bias we have toward gender generally. And she was correct. Later research proved that sperm are actually weak, necessitating the need for hundreds of millions of them to fertilize the egg.

The conclusion? We need people with different backgrounds – let's call it "intellectual diversity" – to produce important breakthroughs. So, yes, many times it takes an outsider to generate progress for humanity.

Those of us in higher education should learn from history and use these examples as a precautionary tale. When hiring new faculty for our college departments we should look carefully for people who are different from those who are already at work, people who are not intellectual clones of ourselves. And that goes far beyond the obvious issues of gender and race.

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