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Diversity

A university is a microcosm of society and its composition should reflect the diversity of races, origins, genders, creeds, and identities extant in the general population. Institutions engaged in the generation and transmission of knowledge should recognize the variety of experiences and ways of being in the world that a diverse population brings to the table, actively promoting their inclusion in every aspect of academic life. A strong, robust research community must have all the information, thus every voice must be present; otherwise innovation becomes stagnant and cannibalistic, failing to reinvigorate itself with new ideas, attitudes, and/or perspectives.

It is perfectly clear that there are systemic deterrents to the full and complete participation of certain populations in our colleges and universities, where the predominant voices are white, male, and coming from privileged institutions and backgrounds. Far from being an indictment of any one individual, this is a critical observation that something is terribly amiss within the social framework. Compounding this is the growing list of overt legislation by state governments to quell the voices of black, brown, LGBTQ++, Native American, and impoverished communities. This is a targeted attempt to dehumanize and disabuse people of their power, their history and identities. These populations are under siege.

As a straight, white, cis-gendered male, the most immediate action that I can do is acknowledge the problem and pay close attention to the needs of minority and at-risk students in my classes, two populations that typically overlap. In my studio I create an atmosphere of acceptance and sharing, such that students have been comfortable in letting me know that I mistakenly misgendered them, needed to include more people that "look like me" in a survey of practitioners, and inform me they are having difficulty with the material because they happen to be living out of their car.

My gut reaction is to feel incredibly guilty, but then I need to center myself and understand that the student is confiding in me and teaching me about themselves. In the above situations, I apologized immediately to the student, affirming their chosen gender/pronouns; reached out to colleagues for assistance in compiling a more inclusive practitioner list incorporating black, Hispanic, and trans artists; and worked with the student to find a peer mentor that aided in her successful completion of the course.

As Paulo Freire suggests, oppressed individuals – even when removed from the source of their oppression – incorporate the oppressor into their personalities. Besides the systemic oppression that is actively being legislated, there is a lineage of oppression that these populations maintain in their psyche. Thus I must continue to listen, be vigilant in my awareness of the system, accept my mistakes, and strive to create an accepting and safe atmosphere for faculty, staff, and students to be liberated.