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Visible For Jefferson, Invisible To Jefferson

I have attended three universities to date. Two of those were in the deep South; Alabama to be exact. I had never felt the support, capacity, or desire to challenge norms at my previous institutions. Knowing what I know now and seeing how one moment, one event, one voice, or one thought can change the course, I cannot afford to stay silent.

While in graduate school now, I navigate discrimination and microaggressions regularly. Though I am aware of the changes my current University is creating, there is still a lack of acceptance from some individuals. It is my hope that change will arise from sharing these experiences and insight.

Diversity. Inclusion. Equity. When I think of these words, I think of the framework required to cultivate environments where all voices are heard and valued. I also think of these words as the newest trend sweeping across our nation. After experiencing one of the most poignant years, I reflect on what these words mean to me and to this institution.

Diversity:

This concept has varied meanings across mediums. For me, it once meant representation of different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. I have learned through this program that differences of thought and expression can be supplemented to my definition.

When I think about what diversity means to me and how it looks, I also think about representation. Having 4 out of 80 students representing a specific racial identity - on a good year - is not the representation or diversity efforts I am referring to. Having my face alongside other underrepresented individuals on pillars in the main library showcasing "diversity" in programs is not what I am referring to. Showcasing my face and other ethnic and racially underrepresented students on my department's student run Facebook page is also not what I am referring to. What I am referring to is the idea that entire cohorts are comprised of much more than just 5% of one specific racial/ethnic background. We need more than a few outliers to call a program diverse.

Inclusion:

For me, inclusion is the sheer understanding that someone is a part of something because they bring innate value to it coupled with actionable efforts, not just forced interaction because society/classmates/universities are told to do so.

Many times, throughout my tenure as a college student, I have felt the impact of the latter. Unfortunately, this continues to unfold daily – even after the most recent social justice efforts. When my peers make remarks about "these people" when discussing marginalized groups, or when they discuss how zip codes and individuals who comprise them are exempt from our OT Code of Ethics, I become more and more excluded from the conversation. To be transparent, I have run out of cognitive capacity to count the amount of times I have been inherently excluded just this semester. I often find myself to be invisible to many in my program, but visible only when the reality of my ascription to a specific group is needed. This is damaging, especially when the basic tenants of inclusion require individuals to be

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heard and seen at all times. True safe spaces aren't automatically deemed that because we want them to be; they must become them through intentional efforts.

Equity:

When I think of true equity, I think of impartiality. Everyone is on the same playing field. Though it may take leverage of affordances from some individuals, true equity is ensuring everyone has the opportunity to have the same level of engagement or resources. Equity is often overlooked and undermined, but it is equally as important as the rest.

With this, I know that in all its forms, Academia was not designed for me. I know this because many individuals who look like me had to sacrifice blood, sweat, and tears, just to be recognized and granted the rights to obtain higher education. I know that I have only been navigating Academia for a short seven years but with each passing day, I am reminded the system, programs, and curricula is not set up for me. But it could be.

Moving forward - after four months of sadness, anger, frustration, and fear, I realize that I must speak up if I ever wish to help implement change. I have curated a list of actionable items that I believe are integral pieces in moving forward.

1) Complete a Needs Assessment:
   We cannot truly meet the needs of individuals until we discover what they truly need; not what we think they need. Without this fundamental step, sustainable change will not be met.

2) Diversity:
   Recruitment and retention efforts are imperative. Homogeneity stunts efforts to change and grow as healthcare professionals and as an institution. If we never, or only on occasion, have different ideas showcased, it leaves little room for innovation.

3) Inclusion:
   Allow for more trainings for students and faculty. It starts with our rhetoric and continues through our actions. Becoming versed on how to make teachable moments in conversations is imperative to move forward. There is an implicit rule that someone or some group must be at the expense of the majority- especially in classrooms. This cannot persist. Universal design is possible not only in terms of physicality, but also in terms of thoughts. Differences in backgrounds, opinions, and thoughts can coexist in safe environments; we just need to cultivate them.

4) Equity:
   As mentioned previously, sometimes affordances must be leveraged to ensure equity is met. This can be done by allocating funds for recruitment efforts and incentives to ensure that representation and diversity is achieved throughout the university and more specifically through the OT program.

All in all, these are small attainable steps that we can make to achieve some change within our sphere of influence. While pursuing my MPH, a theory that resonated with me was the Diffusion of Innovation Theory. This theory specifically discusses "adopter categories" and explains that there are five distinct categories of where the population falls for changing behaviors– Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and Laggards (Rogers, 2003). Where does Jefferson want to fall in changing these behaviors?

Sincerely,

An Invisible Student
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References:

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