

The Difference Difference Makes: Assessing the Value of Diversity

Diversity: More than a buzzword.

Rutgers faculty members from across the university discuss diversity as an intellectual project within biology, business, education, and society at large.

How Diversity Transforms
Modern Education

Tradeoffs and Cautionary
Tales

Diversity as an Intellectual
Project

Panelists

Cheryl Wall (Department of
English)

Howard McGary (Department of
Philosophy)

Nancy DiTomaso (Business School)

Abram Gabriel (Department of
Molecular Biology and
Biochemistry)

Diversity -- in the business world, in academia, and in the natural world -- is about more than engaging in identity politics and political correctness.

On April 3 2009, Rutgers scholars from English, Philosophy, Business, and Molecular Biology gathered at the Center for Race and Ethnicity for a roundtable discussion that moved beyond polarizing discussion to focus on diversity as an intellectual project. Apart from having moral value, diversity in social as well as biological realms is essential for survival, productivity, innovation, the advancement of knowledge -- but diversity also entails risk.

“The project of diversity is not institutional housekeeping; it is intellectual work.”

~Cheryl Wall

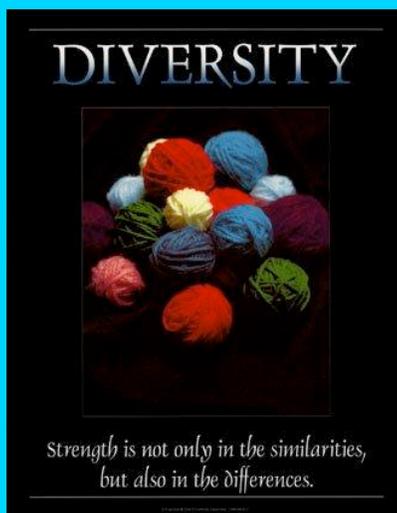
why diversity matters in the field of philosophy, McGary noted that, “philosophy begins in wonder,” and “our experience shapes what we wonder about.”

Prof. McGary described how he “began to think philosophically about slave narratives” at a time when, within philosophy, “there was real opposition to focusing on a particular culture or history. Many philosophers held the idea that [Analytical] Philosophy was above history and culture. Early on, people tried to squeeze issues of race into value theories about justice and rights, but they quickly bumped into metaphysics when they questioned the meaning and significance of race.”

Today, fields like Africana Philosophy have expanded the discipline of philosophy and exposed it to questions that it would never otherwise have considered. Speaking about her own discipline, English Professor Cheryl Wall noted similarly how with “the civil rights movement and the introduction of African-American scholars in the academy, long neglected texts began to be studied, leading to a reconceptualization of American history and literature.” As she pointed out, “Today those in American studies take for granted works by Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, as essential texts of American literature.”

How Diversity Transforms Modern Education

“Diversifying the field” is not about “placing different bodies in academic departments but rather about how we cultivate an environment that is open to different ideas, problems, and issues,” stated philosopher Howard McGary. Speaking to



Not only has diversity brought new texts and fields into the academy, such texts and fields have in effect radically reconfigured academic disciplines. Fields like Africana Studies, Queer Studies and Ethnic Studies “have changed the work we do,” Wall stated. The value of new ideas is not simply additive, then; rather, as Wall pointed out, “new knowledge from the margins reconfigures the relationship between the margin and center—and in doing so, reformulates the center.”

Tradeoffs and Cautionary Tales

Business School professor, Nancy DiTomaso, noted that diversity of thinking is essential for innovation in the business world. She also noted that innovation is critical for the long term competitive success of companies, but cautioned that diversity has both these positive effects and negative effects as well. Research in management has shown that diversity of thinking enhances creativity and problem solving abilities—spurring greater innovation—but diversity also contributes to conflict, reduced cooperation, and decreased job satisfaction.

Diversity, in other words, can be both an asset and an impediment. Within the academy, too, as Prof. Wall noted, diversity comes with risks: “While diversity has transformed disciplines and created new fields of study, at the same time, people pioneering changes in knowledge are vulnerable.” These risks and

challenges of diversity go mostly unacknowledged, however—both within businesses as well as in the academy. “In recent discussions of diversity within the corporate world,” DiTomaso suggested, “emphasis has been given to the business justification for diversity policies, while attention to the need to address conflict and communication within diverse groups has been underappreciated.”



Such benefits and risks also apply to diversity-related scholarship. Panelists agreed that while such scholarship benefits from cross-disciplinary inquiry, there are also problems associated with the migration across disciplines of ideas about diversity.

Biologist Abram Gabriel cautioned about the risks involved in applying lessons learned from biological diversity and variation to the realm of social diversity. Acknowledging the fundamental importance of the principle of diversity to biology, Gabriel stated that, “evolution and natural selection work because of diversity in nature – what most biologists call variation.

Evolution works by selecting variants that meet environmental needs in a certain population: the more variation in a population, the more it is able to survive changes in environment. If variation is limited, species become extinct.” Such biological knowledge about diversity has been deployed to both positive and negative ends. “On the one hand,” Gabriel noted, “medical experts use the information that disease frequencies differ among different populations to advance the field. We know that genetic variation has an effect on health and disease.” On the other hand, “taking biological concepts and applying these in social contexts, although appealing, has also been risky.” Social Darwinism, for instance, resulted from a problematic (mis)application of biological ideas to the social realm.

DiTomaso noted that – parallel to the biological world – businesses that are successful over the long run must improve processes by reducing variation, while fostering innovation by increasing variation. Efforts to increase variation by increasing labor force diversity, however, require intentional efforts. If not, well documented and usually unconscious cognitive processes take over. The challenge, DiTomaso argued, is “facilitating ways for people who are different from each other to work well together without losing the value of their different ways of thinking.”

Diversity at Rutgers

“Scott Page, professor of political science and economics at the University of Michigan, has shown, using mathematical modeling and case studies, that organizations with people from many backgrounds and life experiences perform more effectively and solve problems better than organizations whose members come from more homogenous backgrounds, even if they are intellectually gifted. The same dynamic holds in the classroom, where everyone learns more and better when a variety of viewpoints and backgrounds shape discussions”—RU President Richard McCormick

“Many institutions won’t talk about equity and have responded as though the Supreme Court outlawed Affirmative Action (which, of course, it did not).[Fortunately,] Rutgers tends to speak in terms of equity when discussing diversity.”— Professor Cheryll Wall

“[Rutgers Newark] ranks No. 1 in the nation for diversity in *U.S. News and World Report’s* annual college ratings, 12 years running....Statistical rankings themselves, however, are not an indicator of meaningful progress. If diversity at Rutgers...is merely a demographic happenstance, the institution has missed the enormous opportunity that diversity in higher education offers for transforming the lives of students, the effectiveness of the work force and the fabric of society...--RU President Richard McCormick

Diversity as an Intellectual Project

“We need to confront the dismissive opinions of some of our colleagues who deem diversity as service work or an afterthought, rather than an intellectual project,” asserted Prof. Wall. Wall noted how diversity promotion within the academy is often dismissed as “institutional housecleaning”—a concept that, in her words, “has a double-meaning when we consider that diversity work is primarily performed by women and persons of color.” As opposed to these dismissals, Wall encouraged us to think about diversity work as requiring “careful analysis” and as playing an important role in “transforming curriculum and changing the classroom climate to make it welcoming” to students of minority groups.

“You can’t tell the truth unless you bring in everyone’s truth.”

~Nancy DiTomaso

Both Wall and McGary spoke of the value of bottom-up programs and diversity initiatives such as the [Rutgers Summer Institute for Diversity in Philosophy](#) (run by McGary), the [Rutgers English Diversity Institute](#) (redi.rutgers.edu) and the [Rutgers’ Future Scholars Program](#) (futurescholars.rutgers.edu) These programs are especially valuable because they give space to students who might often not “look good on paper” but who show signs of promise and eventually “appear much sharper

in interaction.” Wall noted that what such programs teach us is that “we need to think beyond ‘merit’ – we need to think in terms of life experiences as well; we need to consider the obstacles people have overcome.”

In the end, all the scholars agreed that diversity work has the potential to impact and transform both educational institutions as well as the larger society to which these institutions contribute.

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- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.