A case for ‘diversity’ at RIT
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“Those who perceive diversity as exclusively a moral imperative or societal goal are missing the larger point. Workforce diversity needs to be viewed as a competitive advantage and a business opportunity.”
- Chubb Group of Insurance Companies

Overview/introduction. Google the words ‘moral imperative diversity’ and you get a list of some pretty interesting sites on the web. It seems every business, college, and non-profit has something to say about diversity as a value. RIT has a lot to be proud about because of the great strides the campus has made in embracing diversity. Yet we all know there is more to accomplish. In this vein and the desire to generate discussion on campus, I present some thoughts on what does diversity really means for RIT.

The case for diversity at RIT. Why do we have diversity as an institutional value? More importantly, how might our operations be intentional about diversity to support it as a value? There are a number of compelling points that make the case for why diversity should be embedded deeply into our daily work at RIT.

First, diversity is a driver for innovation. Innovation in simplest terms certainly involves serious problem-solving, which in turn often requires creative and inventive thinking. Moreover, such thinking is facilitated when people with different perspectives are working together toward this common goal. So a diverse group of people aids in creating an environment conducive for innovation to take place. In his book The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life, Richard Florida makes the case that communities that truly embrace pluralism and inclusivity are the ones that tend to have more intellectual property, technology transfer, start-ups and other components of an innovation economy.

Second, diversity is central to an environment that promotes global awareness. It is the case that students who are aware of cultural, racial, orientation, and gender differences are better prepared for working and living in that global society. And since the vision of RIT is to prepare students for successful careers in a global society, it certainly makes sense that we would foster a pluralistic student, faculty, and staff base to immerse our students in these differences and thereby enhance their global awareness skills. Can we leverage the diversity around us to teach global awareness? Of course we can.

Third, diversity is vital to our career-oriented brand. If we are true to our history and our brand around a career-oriented education, then we must model the diverse
world out there with our own diversity here at RIT. It is the case that students will be working in a diverse workplace, so why not prepare them for that by modeling that workplace at RIT? If students are to understand the workplace, they must understand that they will be working with people from all walks of life.

Finally, I cannot ignore the moral imperative for diversity – that RIT should and can be a place where equity is not only embraced but inclusivity is practiced. In other words, it is right, in my mind, that RIT deeply embrace diversity as an operational value.

**Best efforts.** Where might we best focus our efforts to build the pluralistic, inclusive, equitable environment we value? Based on the case made above for diversity, I’m lead to target three broad efforts we need to focus on:

- ♦ The curriculum;
- ♦ The academic success of our AALANA, deaf, and hard-of-hearing students; and
- ♦ Recruitment and retention of our AALANA, deaf, hard-of-hearing, and women faculty and staff.

It almost goes without saying that the curriculum is always the best opportunity to address student learning outcomes and diversity is one of those outcomes. How might we think about adding specific diversity components to our classes, our program objectives, and our discussions? Some may say that such topics are easy to include in liberal arts classes but impossible in the sciences. I disagree. In the various histories of the sciences, there are plenty of examples of racial and gender intolerance and these make for excellent teaching opportunities. I encourage our faculty, across the campus, to give good consideration as to how these topics might be folded into all academic programs.

What about our AALANA students? While RIT has made tremendous progress in closing the gap between the academic success of AALANA and non-AALANA students, the gap persists. AALANA students persist after the first year at a significantly lower rate than our non-AALANA students. Similarly, they graduate at lower rate. What can we do about this? First, we can better understand why this gap persists. Second, we can do a better job at tracking these students and reaching out to them when they struggle. I am pleased to report that the North Star Center will be primarily focused on the academic success of these students and will charged with the tracking and advocating for these students.

Finally, our AALANA faculty are vital to our community: “...research indicates the presence of faculty of color is strongly tied to successful recruitment and retention of both students and junior faculty of color”ii. Fortunately, our Office of Faculty Recruitment is a national leader in the recruitment of AALANA faculty. For over five years, the Future Faculty Career Exploration Program has led to the successful recruitment of a number of our AALANA faculty here at RIT. We will continue to
build and expand this program so that the recruitment of women faculty is served in an equivalent and robust manner.

Yet our efforts to retain our AALANA and women faculty lag behind our recruitment efforts. Salary, quality of life, time pressure/constraints, sense of community, marital status, institutional leadership and autonomy, distribution of resources, and tenure status are all critical factors in the retention of all faculty\textsuperscript{ii}. But specifically for our AALANA and women faculty, there are unique challenges – low numbers to build community, barriers to promotion and tenure, feelings of ‘otherness’, and experiences of bias\textsuperscript{iv}. The literature indicates that faculty mentorship programs are fundamental to the successful retention of faculty, particularly the underrepresented faculty. I am pleased to have Dr. Chance Glenn serve as a faculty associate for AALANA faculty mentoring and Dr. Margaret Bailey serve as faculty associate for women faculty mentoring. Already we are seeing some issues we must address:

- What messages – intentional or otherwise - do we send to these faculty?
- Do we recognize the obligations they have to serve as role models?
- Do we hold them to a higher standard?

Not easy questions to be sure but ones I believe RIT is up to the challenge to address.

**Conclusion: The case for optimism.** On multiple levels, the case for diversity at RIT is compelling and clear. We have made great progress but more remains to accomplish. But by focusing on the curriculum, the academic success of our AALANA students, and the retention of our AALANA, deaf, and women faculty, I am confident that we will continue to make great progress.

Each generation leaves a legacy, which the next generation builds upon. In a certain sense, my generation is still defining its legacy, particularly in terms of diversity. I am confident we will be proud of our contributions. But what really keeps me optimistic is how the next generation is already preparing to take over where we leave off. The students exhibit a new level of tolerance and acceptance that we live in a pluralistic society. This gives me great hope. As RIT faculty and staff, who are charged to help educate and develop these students, we have a responsibility to lead. Let’s not disappoint them.

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\textsuperscript{i} From Chubb Group of Insurance Companies.  
http://www.chubb.com/diversity/chubb4450.html


\textsuperscript{iii} Ibid.
iv Ibid.