

# Diversity

## A Corporate Campaign

DIANA D. AKIYAMA

THE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE requires some explanation. The current trend is to use terms like “multiculturalism,” “global citizens,” or “interactive pluralism.” This shift toward different terms reflects changes that have taken place as a result of the civil rights movement. Where once the focus was on racism, it has now been widened to include other forms of discrimination and, most recently, religious difference. I welcome this move toward

greater awareness of all those who are mar-

ginalized because it helps expose the very narrow worldview that presumes to exclude. I have no argument with changes in the lexicon that sharpen how we talk about the full inclusion of all people. Yet I stick with the word “diversity” as a way to remind us that the work started years ago under that rubric is far from finished. This may be an obvious point to make, but I often hear it said that diversity initiatives have achieved their goal and that to go any further would be to go too far.

I call for a “campaign” because I believe we need to build upon the successes of diversity initiatives with renewed commitment, in much the same way as capital campaigns build upon past successes and refocus campuses on their work. Just as a capital campaign invests in financial stability by stimulating commitment to the future of the institution, a “corporate campaign for diversity” also would invest in a particular vision for an institution. And

just as there is never a final capital campaign in the life of a college or university, a corporate campaign for diversity would remind us that, at this moment in history, the work is far from done. Diversity work requires a cycle of recommitment and planning that includes, every so many years, a campaign that takes stock of the work currently being done, builds on its successes, and focuses on the horizon of new and more ambitious goals.

Finally, in calling for a “corporate” campaign, I hope to draw attention to the Latin root of the word: *corpus*, meaning “body.” This work—this campaign—is undertaken by the community, a living body that strives to be healthy, functional, and dynamic. A corporate campaign for diversity would renew our commitment to the well-being of the community as a whole.

Of course, the achievements and initiatives related to diversity vary from campus to campus. Some campuses are working to attract a diverse student population; others have achieved a level of numerical diversity and now seek to address new challenges that have emerged from this success. Yet regardless of the status of diversity work on our individual campuses, we all would benefit from a corporate campaign that creates the space to step back, reflect, and reimagine our vision for success.

A corporate campaign for diversity ought to begin by rethinking the common assumption that religious belief and persons of faith are anathema to liberal learning. The moral reasoning motivated by religious faith can move communities toward becoming more fully functioning, diverse communities. I refer here to intelligent religion, which I am confident is not an oxymoron. By “intelligent religion” I mean faith that is always and already informed by reason. Faith without reason is a cult. But faith informed by reason has produced leaders

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who have helped us overcome ignorance, injustice, hopelessness, and despair. Faith informed by reason has given us figures like Martin Luther King Jr.—whose birthday we, as a nation, recently celebrated.

I do not propose to replace the secular humanism that is so highly lauded within the academy but, rather, to invite discussion and consideration of the fact that secular humanism has not done so well in shaping ethical leaders or articulating a way forward for diversity work. While it has succeeded in challenging the destructive assumption that blind faith has epistemological value, secular humanism has not given us a viable alternative to the kind of moral reasoning that is informed by faith.

Many colleges and universities with diverse populations now face the complex challenge of community formation. Decades ago, I held a simplistic view of diversity and how it would contribute to community formation. It was all about power sharing, I believed, and our task was to wrest power away from those who held it. We had only to convince those in power that the cultural change we had in mind would be good for them.

The power is shifting, and we have witnessed some benefits from this shift. The tensions that have surfaced on many campuses are not just about power sharing, however; they are also about inability to dialogue, unwillingness to show respect for others, holding grudges, and distrust. These problems are surfacing not only in the residence halls where students live, but also in classrooms, faculty meetings, boardrooms, and searches for new faculty and administrators. In other words, the challenge of forming healthy diverse communities is pervasive. But these tensions and challenges are not cause for despair; they are signs that the culture is changing. Sociologists tell us that when major shifts occur in the culture of a community, the tendency is to defend against change and to argue the reasons why it was better the way it was.

Detractors of diversity—whose voices seem to be louder now than ever before—assert that diversity is tearing apart the fabric of historical bonds. The breakdown in civil society, they believe, is the result of too much difference—the result of diversity. Their alarming assumption is that *sameness* builds community and that *difference* destroys it. This assumption idealizes the homogeneity of the past as benign

when, in fact, it was shaped by oppression and exclusion. Diversity is not the cause of our current problems with forming and sustaining communities. But when things are not working out, people tend to blame others. This tendency erodes communities through fear and distrust, as the fearful retreat into a world of self-protection. The fear expressed through hyperindividualism is deadly to communities.

Healthy communities are among the most important pillars of democracy. In order to be effective and to make significant investments in democracy, we must be able to participate in generative forms of community. Democracy does not thrive in the absence of healthy, vibrant, generative communities. Our ability to build, nurture, and sustain community is also a critical challenge facing efforts to embrace diversity. If democracy is about our rights as individuals, community is all about how responsible we are to each other.

Churches, synagogues, and temples used to play an important role in sustaining communities. In the last few decades, however, fundamentalist expressions in each of the major world religions have encouraged the faithful to retract from civil society and to either convert or reject nonmembers. This approach encourages the creation of communities motivated by fear, distrust, and blind faith. It rejects anyone who engages in critical thinking. This is not intelligent religion. Intelligent religion has much to offer the formation of healthy diverse communities—not because there is an easy or clear answer available, but because intelligent religion frames fear and distrust as opportunities for spiritual development.

### **Trust and courage**

In addition to the rational strategies we can apply, there are profound nonrational or spiritual qualities that can be recruited to sustain communities. These spiritual resources are not creeds or statements of belief; rather, they are resources like trust and courage. Framed by a spiritual perspective, trust and courage are generated by an awareness that we are not, ultimately, in control, that there is an element of transcendent wisdom that can sustain us as we struggle to do the right thing. Acting with trust and courage is extremely difficult because it is not always immediately rewarding. To be courageous and trusting can often be painful.

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My father, who was interned along with 120,000 other Japanese Americans during World War II, felt betrayed by the democracy he had trusted. “Don’t trust people,” he would say to me when I was growing up. I heeded his advice, even though there were times when I inherently trusted people. When we are young, our instinct is to trust. It takes extra energy to distrust people all the time.

As an adult, I realized that what I thought was my father’s advice against ever trusting people was not reflected in the way he pursued his own relationships. He often entered into arrangements and agreements based only on a handshake and a gut instinct. He would size up someone and determine whether they were trustworthy. His experiences with racism had sharpened his ability to detect insincerity. Those in our community who were racist against the Japanese were specific individuals my father would not trust. But he knew that, in

order to participate in civil society, his distrust could not become a blanket judgment on all white people. The people he trusted did not have to look a certain way, nor did they need to be a certain race or to have attained some

level of professional status or education. He was looking for what he and my mother often described as “decent and honest people,” trust-worthy people.

When I reflect on the people whom I have trusted over the years, I can count some really good calls and some horrible ones. A particularly bad experience with misplaced trust took place at a job I had quite a few years ago. This experience was one of the worst, for me, because the person that I trusted was a minister, like me, who, like me, was very committed to diversity. We shared many of the same goals grounded in similar theological thinking. I still remember the staggering realization that this colleague was systematically setting out to



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sabotage my work and my reputation. I was deeply hurt, bewildered, and then angry. I was angry not only at my colleague but at myself for having trusted so quickly. As I considered how to deal with this situation, and with the help of wise and seasoned colleagues, I found my way through the fog of disappointment. I did this by realigning important areas of my work and by continuing to work with integrity. I did not gossip about this colleague; I did not seek to malign or otherwise strike back.

In order to attain the clarity required to employ these rational strategies, I had to go deep inside and allow my faith to buoy and replenish me. I did not pray for my colleague's demise; I prayed for the strength and wisdom to continue my work with goodwill, trustworthiness, and courage. And it took an enormous amount of courage to hang in there. Even though this was one of my worst experiences, I learned a lot from it; I did succeed in my work, and my commitment to diversity remains steadfast. Most important, this bad experience did not cause me to retreat from trusting people. The human desire to trust is good, and it should be nurtured.

When we decide we cannot trust someone, we become wary, cautious, guarded, defensive, and sometimes even paranoid. We may be vigilant and suspicious about every action taken and every word spoken. If circumstance or job requires us to partner with those we do not trust, we proceed with caution and low investment in the outcome. Environments of distrust are disconnected, hostile, and lacking in creativity. Partnerships are often brittle and easily shattered. Individuals in these environments feel isolated and stifled. Conflict resolution is often a cycle of blaming the other with unsatisfactory results. The stress created by distrust can be devastating. All of this, of course, is the antithesis of building community.

To trust someone is to experience a feeling of expansiveness, assurance, generosity, even safety and security. We look forward to and enjoy being with those whom we trust. We think of them when something happens that we want to share. We reach out to and confide in the people we trust. Relationships of trust stimulate feelings of optimism, hope, and goodwill. Problem solving is more creative and generative, and it often accomplishes more than resolving the identified problem.

Perhaps surprisingly for those of us who work in colleges, this type of trust is not the

product of a rational calculation or academic study; it is accessible even to those who never darken the door of a lecture hall. It is the result of so-called irrational or intuitive qualities like self-assurance, a positive outlook, and a sense of overall well-being. Families and communities instill some of this, and so too can a spiritual center from which one can draw strength.

When we foster and achieve trust in our lives, we are establishing a vital piece of the foundation upon which transformative, courageous diversity work can be built. If prejudice is rooted in fear, and fear fuels distrust, a cycle of hopelessness forms. Building relationships of trust allows us to hope. When hopeful people come together, we begin the process of transforming fear and distrust into courage and trust.

Courage is often present when we establish and maintain trust—whether we are the givers or receivers of that trust. My own observations about diversity work on college campuses make me reflect on the collateral damage we do to our students, ourselves, and our institutions when we give in to our fears, when our personal courage deserts us as we yield to fear or ease or conformity.

If we teach students to advocate for their rights without also teaching them the concurrent need to meet the responsibilities that accompany those rights, we betray a lack of courage as educators. If we fail to speak to our colleagues about diversity because we fear rejection from the “club,” we are not demonstrating courageous leadership. And if we cannot muster the courage required to admit being wrong when we are, we are demonstrating one of the worst obstacles to learning. Courage and leadership can be lonely. But I would much rather be lonely for being a courageous leader than to be a popular member of a fearful and distrustful community.

Students learn from what we tell them, but—make no mistake—they learn more by watching us. If we behave in ways that are callow, opportunistic, selfish, and fearful, our students will likely follow. If we complain about a lack of community but behave in ways that erode community, then we are teaching how to be toxic to the community and fearful. Courage is not simply tamping down one's fears in the face of danger. To quote Anne Lamott, an exemplar of intelligent religion, “courage is just



fear that has said its prayers.” The best form of courage is wrestling with one’s fears while reaching to uphold a bigger moral principle.

Marion Jones, the Olympic gold medalist recently in the news, is, for me, an example of this principle in action. Courage and its cousin, trust, can carry us from triumph to loss to redemption—and, perhaps, to another kind of triumph. I am a fan of Marion Jones even after reading about her recent confession to the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Her career is at an all-time low right now; why should I still be a fan? I admire her because she decided to do the right thing amidst huge controversy, scandal, and risk. Knowing she was a role model and a source of inspiration to others, she decided to confess to lying. It takes courage to admit a wrong and then to take the steps—in this case painfully public

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steps—to make things right. It takes even more courage when you know there will be profound personal, family, and professional consequences. No doubt some rational calculations went into Jones’s decision, but I am convinced that she relied on an irrational and spiritual source in deciding to tell the truth.

Cultivating habits of courage and trust in our lives does not come easily. I do not care whether its source is spiritual or moral or personal. Courage is as courage does. It is actually surprising to reflect on how often we find refuge in fear and conveniently ignore an opportunity to step forward and be accountable. Indeed, it may be easier to seek our own self-interest and even to herald that as an inescapable human drive. Self-interest is relatively easy to calculate; it is a rational approach to motivating people toward a desired goal.



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## PODCASTS

[www.aacu.org/podcast](http://www.aacu.org/podcast)

The annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities was held in Washington, DC, from January 23 to 26, 2008. The following presentations were recorded and are now available as podcasts from the AAC&U Web site.

### Moral Development in College (Theirs and Ours)

By Elizabeth Kiss, president of Agnes Scott College and coeditor of *Debating Moral Education*

### AAC&U Public Forum: Scientific Literacy and the Beautiful Basics of Science

By Natalie Angier, Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer for the *New York Times* and author of *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

### Teaching Race: Engaged Scholarship Beyond the Classroom

By Melissa Harris-Lacewell, associate professor of politics and African American studies at Princeton University and author of *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*

### Global Citizenship and the Humanities

By Martha Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago and author of *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future*

### Diversity: A Corporate Campaign

By Diana Akiyama, director of religious and spiritual life at Occidental College

### It Takes a Curriculum: Preparing Students for Research and Creative Work

By David Hodge, president of Miami University

### A New Agenda for American Higher Education: Shaping a Life of the Mind for Practice

By William Sullivan, senior scholar, and Matthew Rosin, consulting scholar, both at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; Daisy Floyd, dean and professor of law at Mercer University School of Law; and Gary Downey, alumni distinguished professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

### Engaging Science: Bringing Creativity to the Undergraduate Classroom

By Peter J. Bruns, vice president for grants and special programs at Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI); Claudia M. Neuhauser, HHMI professor and head of the Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; Utpal Banerjee, HHMI professor and chair of the Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology Department at the University of California-Los Angeles; and Jo Handelsman, HHMI professor of bacteriology and plant pathology at the University of Wisconsin Madison



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### Promoting Interdisciplinarity? Aligning Faculty Rewards with Curricular and Institutional Realities

Cathy Trower, director and research associate at the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education

### Cultivating the Spirit: College and the Search for Meaning

By Alexander W. Astin, senior scholar and founding director, and Helen S. Astin, professor emerita and senior scholar, both at the Higher Education Research Institute, University of California-Los Angeles

### Academic Governance in the New Academy

By Neil Hamilton, professor of law at University of Saint Thomas, and Peter Ewell, vice president at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

### Reframing the Quality and Accountability Challenge: Employers, Educators, and the Quest for Meaningful Evidence

By Carol Geary Schneider, president of AAC&U; Wayne Johnson, vice president for university relations worldwide at Hewlett Packard; and Robert Sternberg, dean of arts and sciences at Tufts University

### The Special Promise of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Looking to the Past and to the Future

By Pat Hutchings, vice president, Barbara Cambridge, consultant, and Tony Ciccone, senior scholar and director, all of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

### Intentional Learning Requires Intentional Leadership: What Will It Take to Move to the Next Level?

By Carol Geary Schneider, president of AAC&U; Derek Bok, president emeritus of Harvard University; George D. Kuh, Chancellor's Professor and director of the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research; and Azar Nafisi, visiting fellow in the Foreign Policy Institute at Johns Hopkins University

But it does not feel inspirational, does it? The key to deep, transformational change in diversity work requires a less rational motivation: the willingness to do something because it is right and good for more than just oneself.

### Faith and reason

Prejudice comes from both deep and superficial places within the human psyche. The superficial ones generate stereotypical truths that can be disproved even if we are not inclined to confront them. “Asians are devious,” for example; “women are poor at math” or “men are not nurturing.” These ideas can be dispelled with new information and through critical thinking. They can be successfully challenged through reason.

The deeper places that harbor prejudice are more complex and well defended, even if they involve irrational beliefs based on fear. It does seem to me that fear trumps reason, at least some of the time. Fear is more visceral and more difficult to challenge. But to practice the habits of courage and trust, we have to wrestle with fear. To draw from the best of who we are, we need to understand the shared limitations of being human. It is just not the case that rational approaches alone will eradicate biases fueled by irrational fear.

We have to acknowledge that wisdom and truth and beauty exist beyond our full comprehension and control. In fact, these qualities call us to awareness of a source of knowing that transcends rational means. Humans need something greater than ourselves that inspires us or calls us to reach beyond our rational and irrational calculations. How else do we build communities of trust? How else do we take a stand for what we know to be right?

It is no coincidence that the civil rights movement was grounded in the spiritual values of courage, trust, love, forgiveness, compassion, and peace. Martin Luther King Jr.’s training as a minister and his unwavering faith provided the foundation for his work as a civil rights leader. While he and his supporters developed rational strategies to push for equality, spiritual values grounded and centered their work. Rational and spiritual values are complementary. How else could so many stand resolute in the face of organized hatred and press forward?

We, each of us, are in control of whether we build communities through courage and trust

or through fear and suspicion. We do this by example, by teaching and role modeling, and by drawing from our larger selves and, hopefully, inspiring others to do the same. We do this best when we acknowledge that we are not in ultimate control, not “masters of the universe.” We can each be great by being humble.

Human communities are imperfect organisms, but communities can create what no single individual can. What makes democracy so compelling, and what makes communities strong, is the freedom to control one’s humanity while consenting to cooperate with others in civil society. This is a political goal and a social contract enlivened by spiritual ideas and, for many of us, faith. Sustaining a robust, healthy, and diverse democracy is impossible without courage and trust—mine, yours, ours. These are foundational elements necessary to transform prejudice and bias, the enemies of democracy. Courage and trust are best expressed not as the result of rational calculation but as the result of faith or moral fiber or both. Communities sustained by courage and trust have the power to transform hate into love, isolation into community, disrespect into compassion, and divisiveness into unity.

Unlike a capital campaign, a corporate campaign for diversity cannot be measured by how much the endowment grows. Instead, the fruits of a corporate campaign for diversity are measured by the health of the community as it embraces its diversity. A corporate campaign for diversity will show its fruits in the degree to which we, individually and collectively, grow into our diversity. Courage and trust will be cornerstones. Courageous and trustworthy communities will accomplish more than any of us can by ourselves. Courageous and trustworthy campus communities will transform individuals, inspire leaders for tomorrow, and invest in our democracy.

Iconic leaders like Gandhi, Mandela, Tutu, King, Chavez, and Tubman all understood that faith and reason are not opposites; they are not mutually exclusive. Faith inspires reason; reason informs faith. A corporate campaign for diversity that grasps this fundamental truth will transform our communities and ensure the promise of democracy. □

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