

No Diversity? No Excellence.

[Phyllis Wise](#)

Chancellor at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This week I have the privilege of welcoming Lee Bollinger, the president of Columbia University, to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Bollinger is well known among people familiar with issues of affirmative action and diversity in higher education. Ten years ago, when he was the president of the University of Michigan, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld that school's affirmative action admissions policies in two landmark decisions. And his presence reminds me that when it comes to creating diverse communities, the process is never going to be easy, and it will require constant effort.

As it turns out, landmarks are apparently transient. Last year, affirmative action in public university admissions was again before the court, in *Fisher v. Texas*. Creating diverse communities may never be settled with finality in a courtroom.

“ As universities,
businesses and
people we are at
our best when we reflect
the environment around us.
If we don't, it becomes
difficult to remain relevant.

But it is essential that we resolve these conflicts in our classrooms and beyond. We can debate the best ways or policies to build diversity, but we must have a universal understanding that diversity – in its broadest definition – is inextricably tied to excellence.

Diversity is not merely bound to race, but extends to culture, religion, geography, sexuality, age, gender, beliefs, values and experience. Historically, diversity has been linked primarily to considerations of fairness, but we have moved beyond that – and beyond just numbers or quotas.

The challenges today are simply too complex and too massive to resolve without everyone being at the table when we brainstorm and make decisions. When we leave bright individuals out of the discussions, we are leaving wisdom and innovations behind. That is a risk we cannot take.

And while the definition of success may differ, there are some fundamental elements of excellence that are universal.

Diversity = Knowledge

The very definition of learning requires acquiring knowledge about something new. Learning new things requires one to approach new experiences, new situations, new people. Anytime we are given the opportunity to interact with someone different from us, it is an invitation to learn. It isn't always comfortable or easy. Try having a conversation with someone who doesn't look like you, sound like you, or share your beliefs. You walk away with a different perspective and with an experience that you can apply in another situation at another time.

Diversity = Personal growth

Many people say travel is essential for opening one's eyes to the world. While that may be true, oftentimes we can have that same kind of exposure by interacting with people in our own neighborhood. My own experiences - meeting students with varied life experiences or befriending neighbors with very different professional backgrounds - have helped to widen my perspective. And though this doesn't often directly translate into quantitative advantage, it makes people more compassionate and empathetic. As we see in the virtual shrinking of the world – where linguistic, geographical and political boundaries are being blurred by social media and communications technology – networks of relationships are beginning to define personal and professional success. Those who are culturally agile have a leg up on the next generation of leaders.

Diversity = Solutions

Similar people tend to produce similar solutions. When attempting to solve complex societal challenges, if the people around the table are more diverse, the conversation is richer, the solutions better. At the university level, if we have a “product,” it must surely be the creation of ideas. And ideas aren't limited by skin color or by the language you speak or where your parents come from. They are born out of life and educational experiences. The more experiences to draw from, the more likely it is that a creative solution emerges.

Diversity = Innovation

In the same way that diversity enhances our chances to find the best answers, it also creates an exciting environment for breakthroughs. After all, sparks of innovation can only come from novel thoughts and ideas. And these are most likely to emerge when one is in a stimulating and unconventional environment. As chancellor of a public research university, I can't help but think about this in terms of cross-disciplinary research. I have heard repeatedly that often the most innovative ideas came from two people coming together at a lunch spot or at the bus stop. Cultivating a diverse community creates more opportunities for those serendipitous interactions that lead to great innovations.

Diversity = Competitive advantage

Diversity is a competitive imperative. Let me give you an example from where I sit. In Illinois, historically underrepresented populations make up more than 50 percent of the students in our K-

12 classrooms. That means within a decade the majority of our freshman class will likely not be white. If we ignore this and do not accelerate our efforts to be more diverse and more inclusive and welcoming, we will not be fully prepared to welcome the class of 2025. This population trend extends far beyond the university sector. The nation is becoming increasingly diverse. As universities, businesses and people we are at our best when we reflect the environment around us. If we don't, it becomes difficult to remain relevant -- whether you are competing for the best students or the best managers or for new customers. And if you aren't relevant, you certainly cannot be competitive.

All of these ideas come together to create excellence. And without diversity, there is no excellence.