

Diversity statement

"The white establishment is now the minority... The demographics are changing: it's not a traditional America anymore."

Bill O'Reilly, FOX News Election Coverage, 11/6/2012 [14]

I was born and raised in Singapore, a former British colony that, like the United States, is renowned for its multicultural, multiracial society and long history of pluralism. Living in Singapore necessarily means interacting with people of different sociocultural backgrounds, taking into account aspects of race, religion, class, and ancestral clanship. My father was a self-made accountant from a working-class, Buddhist, Singaporean-Cantonese family with some South Indian ancestry. My mother is Hokkien-Taiwanese with an admixture of Dutch, who ran away from an adopted family. My brother and I grew up in a middle-class family with a Filipino domestic helper, and had neighbors and classmates from Burma, Germany, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, England and Italy.

It was only when I left Singapore to study at the University of Illinois that I appreciated how the diversity of home was considered unusual elsewhere. This is perhaps nowhere more stark and in plain sight than it was during my time in middle America. In Singapore, the nuances of Chinese clanship and dialect group shade social discourse, with terms like "American" or even "white" routinely used to encompass the entirety of Western civilization. In the United States, by comparison, much attention is paid the divisions created by the Rockies, the Appalachians, and the Mason-Dixon line. In contrast, few Americans appreciate the diversity hidden in labels like "international", "Asian", or even "Chinese" or "Indian". Each of these labels rightfully describe more people than live in the entire United States, and yet little attention is paid to the nuances within each label.

I have been asked on multiple occasions which part of China (or even which US state!) Singapore is in, and it is easily to understand how impatience with such ignorance leads to international people not wanting to interact with Americans, particularly those who are less cosmopolitan. Whereas Champaign-Urbana brought together students and faculty from all over the planet, the surrounding counties were predominantly Christian, mostly conservative Republican, and almost purely white. The divide between town and gown was a microcosm of the sociocultural evolution of an increasingly diverse America. It manifested in small things like a person storming out from a university performance of Hamlet because "it's so elitist to perform it in old English", or shoppers at Wal-Mart complaining about the new signs in both English and Spanish there. There were also more sanguine manifestations of the challenges of multiculturalism in academia. During my graduate studies, I was asked to take part in a special tutoring session for a Hispanic-American graduate student who came in with what the department had deemed an inadequate preparation in undergraduate physical chemistry. He eventually decided leave graduate school with a Masters' degree and is now pursuing a successful military career as a lieutenant in the U.S. Army. From talking with him, I learned about the politics of affirmative action in the United States and began to appreciate how awkward and challenging positive discrimination policies can be in a higher education setting. The affirmative action lawsuits at the nearby University of Michigan in 2003 seemed particularly relevant toward his feelings of how affirmative action may have set him up for unrealistic expectations of graduate school. I have also mentored women from mainland China who were ethnic minorities, and have had interesting discussions about their schooling experiences in China and the U.S. as women and as members of non-Han races from remote provinces.

My experiences interacting with Americans and non-Americans have let me realize how international students in particular have a challenging time with their studies and research. This goes far beyond English proficiency: In large research universities with many international students and postdocs, people with similar national origins tend to hang out together. While there is nothing worrisome about this *per se*, there is a very real danger of non-Americans interacting little with Americans or others of different nationalities. Being uncomfortable with speaking English or with social aspects of interacting with Americans in school and in the local communities can result in ghettoization of international students and postdocs where they can live their entire schooling lives without ever needing to speak English, or interact with Americans, beyond the minimum necessary for their research and studies. As a native bilingual speaker of both English and Mandarin, I have seen firsthand how many of the students and postdocs from mainland China that I know personally often end up forming insular cliques that resist attempts to invite them to campus and eschew even department mixers and happy hours. This insularity appears to be particularly endemic even at places like MIT, where the naturally competitive environment can be inimical toward helping others. Unlike undergraduates, whom feel no barriers to participating in campus events run by the university or student organizations, graduate students and

postdocs often have few opportunities to socialize outside the lab. Such inwardness has dire and concrete consequences - the lack of practice with speaking English as well as a fundamental indifference toward American culture and sensibilities disproportionately hinders non-native English speakers when they seek jobs in the United States, both within and without academia. [5, 12]

As fewer Americans decide to pursue careers in STEM disciplines, [10] there is an even greater need to encourage students of all backgrounds and nationalities to work in the sciences. The challenges of multiculturalism are important to acknowledge in order to improve the quality of education for minorities and non-Americans. In this regard, departments and colleges can often provide more intimate, approachable resources than campus-wide initiatives.

First, departments can organize mentorship programs that are cognizant of the particular challenges faced by diversity, such as women in science, minorities, or nationalities. This will particularly benefit international students who face unique challenges such as visas, housing, and finding things to do outside lab. It is not enough for departments to simply refer international students to the university International Students' Office; while the latter can offer concrete advice on specific technical procedures, having an mentorship program for students can have benefits for women, minorities and international students alike. In particular, mentorship for international students and postdocs can give incoming people an informal channel to ask about the complexities of the US visa system and their implications for their families, conference travel, and possible employment after school. Such departmental initiatives could be carried out in cooperation with International Students' Offices as well as international student organizations, perhaps even reaching out directly to the latter and sponsoring seminars by faculty, alumni or other speakers on the challenges of living and working in America.

Second, departments can help incoming international students and postdocs with financial resources for housing and family care. This has been a huge problem at MIT, where housing options for postdocs are extremely limited and the local housing market in the Boston area is diverse and extremely expensive on a postdoc's salary. Incoming postdocs are often unprepared for the challenges of finding a suitable apartment that offers reasonable commuting options to work. International postdocs and students with families are particularly vulnerable: few of them are aware of assistance programs such as WIC or Section 8 housing subsidies in Massachusetts, and they often find it challenging to cough up the large security deposits demanded by landlords because they have no credit histories. International students and postdocs with families also face unique challenges. Spouses usually enter the United States with visas that do not allow them to work. This makes it all the more difficult to raise a family on a single income, particularly when it is from a graduate stipend or postdoctoral appointment. Postdocs in Boston face the challenge of finding and affording daycare, where the wait times are measured in years, and programs can often be unaffordable. These issues are not unique to the Boston area. Departments can offer relocation allowances, salary advances, interest-free personal loans, daycare scholarships, or possibly even subsidize or hire realtors to help with these logistical matters. These initiatives need not be particularly expensive, but can significantly reduce the challenges of moving to the United States by helping international students and postdocs tide over the initial few months when rental deposits are needed and spouses are seeking work. Such programs could also help with the financial challenges of paternity and maternity leave for both Americans and non-Americans, especially for those who come from backgrounds where it is the norm to start a family before or immediately after finishing college.

Third, departments can organize activities for non-Americans to practice speaking and writing English, both in informal as well as professional settings. Such activities have already been shown to be effective for women and minority students, [1] and similar opportunities can help with the unique challenges of educating non-Americans in American schools. For example, regular meetings can be set up for internationals to speak with Americans to practice the English language. Such initiatives at the department or discipline level would offer a unique place for students and postdocs to practice both conversational English and technical English. [7] Another thing could be to organize seminar series for internationals to present their work. This would be particularly valuable for international students and postdocs, as presentation skills are often not emphasized in teaching outside the United States, and oral skills are often the most difficult to refine for non-native speakers. [3, 4] An intimate, nonconfrontational setting would be ideal for dealing with issues of accents, colloquialisms and gaining confidence in the command of the English language. Also, departments can organize writing clinics whereby Americans and non-Americans can have a place to sit down and write, as well as helping each other with writing issues. In such activities, it is important to appreciate and discuss cross-cultural nuances to raise awareness of possible conflicts and help non-Americans work more closely with Americans. For example, non-Americans are often uncomfortable with the frankness of most Americans, even when it is well-intentioned, constructive criticism. [9, 15] This often frustrates American faculty and senior students who



do not appreciate the nuances of giving and receiving criticism, and in particular the notions of face [2, 13] that are ubiquitous in East Asian cultures but can be particularly frustrating for non-Asians. Another important issue is that of potential plagiarism and scientific ethics, [6, 8, 11] especially when committed by students coming from cultures where imitation is considered to be an integral part of education. [11] Having environments where such issues are made aware to Americans and non-Americans alike can greatly improve the experience of international students and postdocs, and also allow Americans to develop a greater appreciation of how to interact with other cultures and societies.

My upbringing in a multicultural society, as well as my experiences in studying abroad in the United States, have together helped me appreciate the importance and challenges of working in pluralistic organizations. Academic departments can provide many opportunities for increasing awareness of cross-cultural nuances in Americans and non-Americans alike. Departments can facilitate mentoring of new international students and minority students with more experienced students and/or faculty, and provide financial resources aimed toward easing the challenges of relocating to the United States and going on maternity/paternity leave. Furthermore, department initiatives can promote greater socialization between Americans and non-Americans, as well as offer activities that explicitly encourage non-native English speakers to practice speaking, presenting and writing in English. These efforts can go a long way toward improving multicultural awareness and the quality of education for minority and international students and postdocs, and can help Americans understand how to work in international settings.

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